

Children and Young People's Participation During the Corona Pandemic – Nordic Initiatives

Edited by Alix Helfer, Sinikka Aapola-Kari, and Jakob Trane Ibsen



Children and Young People's Participation During the Corona Pandemic – Nordic Initiatives

Measures and strategies of Nordic countries to safeguard the rights of children and young people in school, leisure, and civil society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Edited by Alix Helfer, Sinikka Aapola-Kari,
and Jakob Trane Ibsen*



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VIVE

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Summary

Several necessary restrictions and measures were implemented across the Nordic region to protect the population during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many children and young people have suffered because of these restrictions. In most Nordic countries, schools and cultural and recreational activities have been entirely or partially closed for long periods, and many services related to healthcare and welfare have become less accessible. These activities and services are important for children and young people's quality of life. In some areas, however, the restrictions may have also made everyday life simpler for some. The experiences of the first few lockdowns seem to differ from those that came later. There are differences between children and youth based on their age, gender, ethnicity, and their socioeconomic status.

This report explores the situation of children and young people during the pandemic and their place within different Nordic countries' governmental strategies, both at the central and regional levels. The purpose is to gain new comprehensive knowledge on what strategies and measures the Nordic countries implemented during the pandemic to ensure children and young people's participation and influence in school and leisure time, consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 12). Another report will follow by the same research team on the current research being conducted concerning the participation in education and leisure of children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic (Helfer et al., forthcoming 2023). Both reports focus on school-aged children and young people up to 25 years of age.

The primary research question was: *What measures and strategies for ensuring the participation and influence of children and young people have been used in the different Nordic countries during the recent pandemic?* Several interviews were conducted to answer the research question, supported by collecting material, including official statements, online. The aim was to investigate the decision-making process during the pandemic to see whether children and young people were consulted and involved when the authorities implemented strategies and measures in connection



with the pandemic. Particular attention was paid to whether any assessment of children's rights had been carried out by the authorities and at what stage. Close consideration was also given to whether institutions representing children and young people's interests and rights in school and leisure were consulted and whether children and young people were directly involved in these discussions. The research timeframe was from the start of the pandemic in March 2020 until late spring 2022.

This report explores the relevant national authorities' measures and strategies concerning education and leisure during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nordic countries, including Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Iceland. In almost all countries, children's voices were ignored to some degree or another in decision-making processes. In many cases, children and youth were consulted, but only after decisions were made. To some extent, the institutions working for and with children and youth were unprepared for the crisis. The lessons learned for ensuring that the best interests of the child are highlighted at the end of the report, together with other issues arising from the research questions. Clearly documenting the challenges encountered and other hindrances can help to identify and address these problems more effectively in the future.

The Finnish Youth Research Society and VIVE, the Danish centre for Social Science Research compiled these reports. This report was commissioned by The Nordic Welfare Centre and financed by The Nordic Committee on Children and Young People (NORDBUK), and The Nordic Council of Ministers. The report is part of a four-year project that aims to increase knowledge and cooperation in the Nordic region concerning Children and Young People's Opportunities for Participation and Development During the COVID-19 Pandemic. The project falls under the Nordic Council of Ministers' Action Plan for 2021–2024. The goal is for the Nordic region to become the world's most sustainable and integrated region. A central objective of this goal is to ensure equal opportunities for the development and participation of all children and youth in the region.

Sammanfattning

Flera nödvändiga restriktioner har införts och åtgärder vidtagits i hela Norden för att skydda befolkningen under covid-19-pandemin. Många barn och unga har lidit av dessa restriktioner. I de flesta nordiska länder har skolor samt kultur- och fritidsverksamhet varit helt eller delvis stängda under långa perioder och många tjänster relaterade till hälso- och sjukvård och välfärd har blivit mindre tillgängliga. Dessa aktiviteter och tjänster är viktiga för barns och ungas livskvalitet. Inom några områden kan begränsningarna också ha bidragit till att förenkla vardagen för vissa personer. Erfarenheterna från de första nedstängningarna verkar skilja sig från dem som kom senare. Det finns också skillnader mellan barn och ungdomar baserat på deras ålder, kön, etnicitet och socioekonomiska status.

I denna rapport undersöks barns och ungas situation under pandemin och deras position inom olika nordiska länders regeringsstrategier, både på central och regional nivå. Syftet är att få ny övergripande kunskap om vilka strategier och åtgärder de nordiska länderna genomförde under pandemin för att säkerställa barns och ungas deltagande och inflytande i skolan och under fritiden, i enlighet med FN:s barnkonvention (artikel 12). En annan rapport kommer att följa från samma forskargrupp, avseende den aktuella forskningen som bedrivs om barns och ungdomars deltagande under covid-19-pandemin (Helfer et al., kommande 2023). Båda rapporterna fokuserar på situationen för barn och unga i skolåldern och upp till 25 års ålder.

Den primära forskningsfrågan var: *Vilka åtgärder och strategier för att säkerställa barns och ungas delaktighet och inflytande har använts i de olika nordiska länderna under den nyligen inträffade pandemin?* För att besvara forskningsfrågan genomfördes flera intervjuer. Ytterligare data inhämtades från bland annat offentliga organ och frivilligorganisationer. Syftet var att undersöka beslutsprocessen under pandemin för att se om barn och unga rådfrågades och involverades när myndigheterna beslutade om strategier och vidtog åtgärder i samband med pandemin. Särskild uppmärksamhet ägnades åt huruvida någon bedömning av barns rättigheter hade gjorts av



myndigheterna och i vilket skede. Man undersökte också noga om institutioner som företräder barns och ungas intressen och rättigheter i skolan och på fritiden rådfrågades och om barn och ungdomar var direkt involverade i dessa diskussioner. Forskningstidsramen var från pandemins början i mars 2020 till slutet av våren 2022.

Denna rapport undersöker de relevanta nationella myndigheternas åtgärder och strategier rörande utbildning och fritid under covid-19-pandemin i de nordiska länderna, inklusive Grönland, Färöarna och Island. I nästan alla länder ignorerades barnens röster i viss utsträckning i beslutsprocessen. I många fall rådfrågades barn och ungdomar, men först efter att beslut fattats. I viss utsträckning var de institutioner som arbetade för och med barn och unga inte redo för krisen. De lärdomar som vunnits för att säkerställa barnets bästa understryks i slutet av rapporten, tillsammans med andra aspekter som kommit fram från forskningsfrågorna. Att tydligt dokumentera de problem som uppstått, liksom andra utmaningar, kan bidra till att identifiera och åtgärda sådana problem mer effektivt i framtiden.

Arbetet med att sammanställa rapporterna har utförts av det Finska Ungdomsforskningssällskapet och VIVE, Den Danska organisationen för Samhällsvetenskaplig Forskning. Rapporten har beställts av Nordens välfärdscenter och finansieras av Nordiska barn- och ungdomskommittén (NORDBUK) och Nordiska ministerrådet. Rapporten är en del av ett fyraårigt projekt som syftar till att öka kunskapen om och samarbetet i Norden kring barns och ungas möjligheter till delaktighet och utveckling under covid-19-pandemin. Projektet ingår i Nordiska ministerrådets handlingsplan för 2021–2024. Målet är att Norden ska bli världens mest hållbara och välintegrerade region. En central del av detta mål är att säkerställa lika möjligheter till utveckling och delaktighet för alla barn och ungdomar i regionen.

Introduction:

Growing Up in the Shadow of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Although the world has faced several pandemics in recent decades, COVID-19 shaped the world in a completely new way. The restrictions that followed have been extreme and peculiar all around the globe. The response to the pandemic brought several new rules and procedures to our everyday lives. COVID-19 was not only a health crisis but also a social and economic crisis that made society's different structures and inequalities more visible. The pandemic has put huge strains on the health care sector, and the mental health impact of restrictions has been visible in connection with the congestion of services.

During the first phase of the pandemic, decisions were made under tremendous scientific uncertainty about the new public health threat. The COVID-19 crisis has been a multidimensional phenomenon, where government and state authorities were granted more powers, trying to find a balance between protecting the population, flattening the infection curve to keep the health system intact while protecting individual freedoms, and maintaining a functioning economic system. (Damşa et al. 2021). This balance has been difficult to find in many places.

While the pandemic has predominantly been a health crisis, it has had major – and sometimes dire – consequences for people's social lives, finances, and wellbeing. The wellbeing of children and youth has especially been a matter of concern. Restrictions on leisure and recreational activities may have significantly impacted children's ability to maintain social relationships and their mental and physical wellbeing. From the perspective of children and youth, even shorter periods of restrictive measures at school can feel very long-lasting and comprise a significant portion of the learning path. For older youth, distance education periods have often been longer. This may have long-time consequences for their educational performance, possibilities for further education and professional development, as well as for their social relations and wellbeing.



The restrictions have included, among other things, that children and young people have not been able to attend school or participate in leisure activities. In many instances, the state has interfered with children's rights to see their loved ones, or to form and maintain friendships that play an important role in youth development. Children and youth have been forbidden to play or get together in public spaces. Solutions were not always done in the best interests of the child, which goes against the principles of the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, Article 12, 1989).

In this report, it has not been our task to weigh the importance of protecting people's health during the pandemic against their participation rights, but we would like to point out that these two are not contradictory. It is of central importance that decision-makers weigh the consequences of their actions. In order to do that, different interest groups need to be heard and involved in the decision-making process, including children and young people. If their voices are not heard, the actions taken to protect them may be counterproductive.

As with many crises, it is the young generation that must deal with its consequences in the long run, whether economic or ecological. However, it is claimed that even the short-term consequences of the pandemic have been particularly harsh on children and young people, although the health risk presented by the COVID-19 virus has been less severe for them than other age groups. (e.g. [Duodecim 2022](#)).

The timeline of the pandemic and the measures to control it have varied in different countries and regions. For example, the Nordic region has been relatively more open than Southern European countries, and its welfare model has kept structures intact. Further, the generally high technical skills level and available equipment within the Nordic region have helped to deal with exceptional circumstances and find virtual solutions for communication compared to many other parts of the world. Nevertheless, even in the Nordic region children and youth's living conditions have been restricted. The specific impact on children was seemingly often forgotten under the weight of the unknown threat, even though the Nordic countries that the Nordic countries have all agreed to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (§12), which states that *the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration for all actions of administrative authorities concerning children*.



When studying the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the children and youth of each country, it is necessary to understand the context and policies within each system. Compared with the rest of the world and its Nordic neighbours, Sweden had a less restrictive COVID-19 strategy, spurring academic and political debate and making an interesting comparison within the Nordic context. Especially during the first waves of the pandemic, Sweden had the highest number of COVID-19 cases per 1000 population respectively, compared with the rest of the Nordic countries. In the later stages, however, the infection level has been high in some other countries as well. The first figure visualises the spread of the virus over time to provide a clearer context for our country-specific reports.

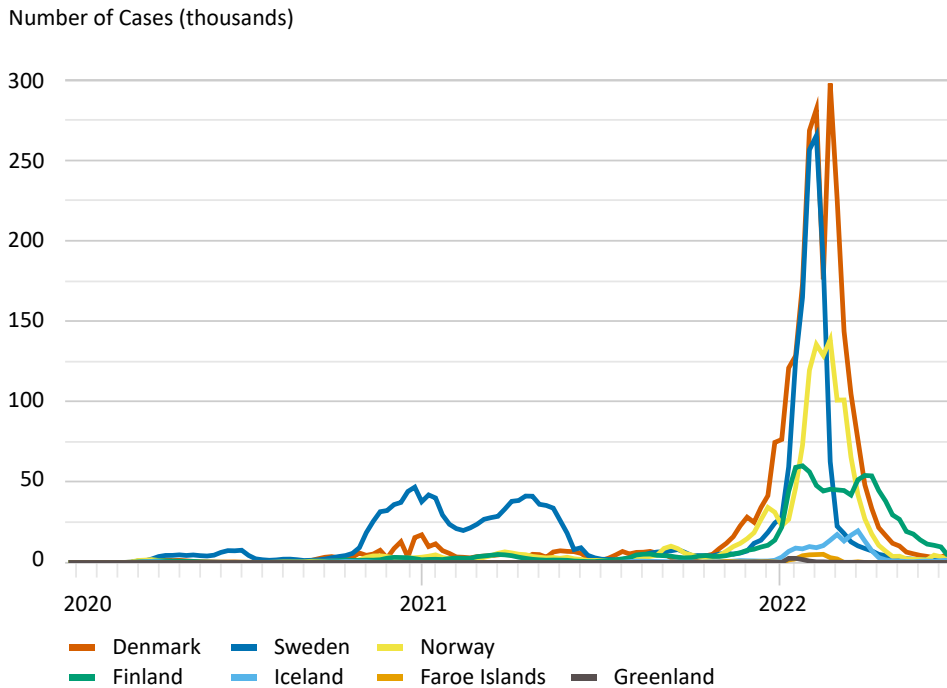


Figure 1. Weekly number of coronavirus (COVID-19) cases in the Nordic countries (2020–2022). Source: ECDC 2022.



During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the main strategy across the Nordic countries was to contain and reduce the spread of the virus while giving special consideration to protecting the elderly and other vulnerable groups. Iceland, Finland, and Norway invoked national preparedness acts, which empowered the government to impose country-wide restrictions and gave the regional/local authorities sufficient authority to quarantine or close public spaces. All in all, the Nordic governments have had the support of their respective parliaments as well as the public for handling the pandemic. Although citizens have generally been obedient in following the recommendations and showing solidarity with others, as well as health care workers and authorities, some inevitable criticism and political debate have emerged as a reaction to the restrictive measures, and certain groups have been more critical. (Saunes et al. 2021).

However, as we will see, there were important differences in the types of measures used and the extent of their usage across the countries. Some of the strategic differences can be explained by geographic and political-administrative structures.

The table below shows geographic and political-administrative differences across the countries covered in this report.

Table 1. Nordic country information			
Country	Population	Geographic area (square km)	Number of municipalities
Denmark	5,873,420	43,561	98
Faroe Islands	53,653	1,396	29
Finland	5,548,241	338,430	309
Greenland	56,562	2,166,086	5
Iceland	376,248	103,492	64
Norway	5,425,270	323,781	356
Sweden	10,452,326	447,435	290

Footnotes:
 Population as of 1 January 2022. Finland and Sweden as of 31 December 2021.
 Geographic area is a country's total area: the sum of land and water areas within international boundaries and coastlines.



As we will see in the following chapters, the geographic nature of the countries had a large role in the effectiveness of different measures in containing the virus. The extent of consequences for children and youth may also differ, but in the different countries we find similar types of consequences – both positive and negative – for children and youth.

Research questions

Groups of children and young people may have been affected in quite different ways by the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, depending on their age and education level. This study focuses on school-aged children and older youth up to 25 years of age. The report examines the following questions:

- 1. Priority of children and young people's concerns in relation to COVID-19**
The first part of the report scrutinises the country-specific chronology of the COVID-19 pandemic and asks, *what were the COVID-19 measures concerning children and youth, and how were they implemented?*
- 2. Involvement and inclusion of concerns and perspectives of children and youth.**
The second part of the report responds to the question, *what initiatives and strategies for ensuring the participation and influence of children and young people have been used in different countries?*
- 3. Lessons learned / promising practices**
The last part of the report examines, *in the future, how should we work to ensure the rights of children and young people to be heard in the future?*

Data and methods

To answer the research questions above, we have utilised multiple sources. We examined the information and materials provided by the Child Ombudsmen's offices, State Youth Councils, Chancellor of Justice, or equivalent institutions in the Nordic countries regarding children and young people's rights during the pandemic.



We located memorandums provided by state level institutions regarding children and young people's rights, for example press releases and webpages of various ministries and health authorities. We also collected materials produced at the regional and municipal levels and those produced by educational institutions and relevant NGOs.

While much of our data was gathered via internet searches, we conducted expert interviews for each Nordic country to ensure we got all the vital information. This was necessary because only some details were reported and published in public arenas. Further, there were also some barriers relating to language. All in all, we have conducted at least two to five individual or group interviews per country. Our researchers interviewed the Child Ombudsmen (in countries where they exist), various relevant officials working for the state, municipalities and/or ministries, and sometimes researchers and other experts, and representatives from relevant NGOs. These interviews were beneficial in our efforts to examine whether various participation schemes were used in connection with the planning and implementation of COVID-19 measures to ensure the best interests of the child, as these experts have a good understanding of the situation in their own country. A list of officials and other experts interviewed can be found at the end of the report.

The researchers had a structured guide for the interviews. The interviews focused on the experts' knowledge of the work conducted on children and young people's participation during the pandemic. However, there were also questions regarding children and youth's rights and how they were safeguarded in relation to various forms of restrictive measures, such as lockdowns, vaccination policies and other measures. The interviews were held from May to August 2022, and each lasting lasted approximately 20 to 50 minutes. They took place mainly on the virtual platform Microsoft Teams, but a few interviews were conducted face-to-face or by phone. Some questions were asked and answered by e-mail. Most of the interviews were recorded and notes were made during and immediately after the interview.

The interviews were not transcribed word-for-word; instead, summaries were made for each interview. The interviews were used as a source of information, and the interviewees were approached as representatives of certain institutions, meaning that we only gathered their names, positions, and contact information.



As the gathered data for each country has been compiled as a large set, members of the research team analysed the data thematically to create a summary of the most relevant information. While the research team conducted their work individually, they were in active contact with each other and jointly discussed the themes and what kind of issues to include or leave out from the report. Much of the data could not fit with this report, but it remains at the disposal of the research team in the future. Nevertheless, some relevant data may have escaped our notice and some information may become available later, only after this report is published.

The Finnish and Danish research team members covered other countries and areas for this report. We received invaluable outside help from our colleagues from the universities of the Faroe Islands and Iceland. The chapters covering the Faroe Islands were coordinated by Professor Firouz Gaini from the University of the Faroe Islands, and Associate Professor Kolbrún Þorbjörg Pálsdóttir and Assistant Professor Ragný Þóra Guðjohnsen from the University of Iceland coordinated the chapters covering Iceland. Their expert help was necessary because of the language barrier we faced, and we are very grateful for their thoughtful contributions.

Report structure

This report has been written by several people, who each had the responsibility for compiling information for a particular country or region or, in some cases, several countries. The writer's names are given at the beginning of each chapter or sub-chapter. Each writer looked for similar types of information, but the country-specific reports may vary due to national differences and available information.

Each country's situation is described here separately, starting from the largest country in terms of population. As a part of Finland, the autonomous archipelago region of Åland was included in the search but no separate chapter was written. According to our findings, the COVID-19 policy in Åland followed that of Finland, with some relatively minor local exceptions, which we did not have the possibility to explore fully. Besides the introduction and conclusions, this report consists of two



sections, each corresponding to a set of research questions, as previously mentioned (see page 6).

Firstly, we approach the questions concerning handling the COVID-19 pandemic, its progress, and its effects on children and young people's education, leisure, and participation. The study considers the different phases of the pandemic and how the processes have possibly changed over time, as well as differences between the countries in terms of the measures they implemented.

The second part of the report scrutinises the types of initiatives and strategies used to ensure the participation and influence of children and young people during the planning and implementation of COVID-19 countermeasures throughout the different Nordic countries. The initiatives discovered in our research have been regrouped thematically using content analysis. An emphasis is put on education, leisure (including sports and youth work), and participation (the right to be heard or political participation). We point out whether particular groups of children and youth have been affected more strongly than others. The lessons learned from each specific country and research question are presented at the end of each chapter and in the conclusion.

As a result of our inquiry, the report concludes with the promising practices in the Nordic countries concerning children and young people's rights and participation during the COVID-19 pandemic, which can act as models for future actions in crisis situations across the globe.

Part 1:

The COVID-19 Pandemic in the Nordic Countries



1.1 Sweden

Viola Särkiluoto, Finnish Youth Research Network

In contrast to the strict national restriction policies and lockdowns imposed in other countries, the Swedish Government applied a different strategy of infection control and public health work, largely based on recommendations by the authorities as well as the voluntary action of individuals. In a statement from April 2020, the Swedish Government stated that its strategy was to decelerate the spread of the virus and thus protect high-risk groups and safeguard people's lives, health, and jobs, as well as secure the functioning of socially critical activities such as health care, food and energy supply, communications, and transport. One of the key aspects of their strategy was stated as easing public concern through good communication with the public, for example by providing information about the strategy and why certain measures were taken. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020).

In practice, Sweden's crisis management system has been organized in three levels (national, regional local). Several authorities and actors at different levels of administration are connected to infection control, pandemic preparedness and management. In short, the Government's task has been to focus crisis preparedness throughout society, whereas the Public Health Agency (Folkhälsomyndigheten, hereafter abbreviated as PHAS) has responsibility for coordinating infection control at the national level in the form of providing national and local general advice and recommendations. (SOU, 2021: 89b). The operational work has been carried out by the regions and municipalities. Examples of some of the measures from municipalities and regions are collected on the [webpage](#) under "Kommuners/ Regioners arbete under pandemitid" (in Swedish).

In Sweden, three types of measures have been in force: regulations, general advice, and recommendations (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2022d) with an emphasis on the latter two. Regulations (*föreskrifter*) are legally obligating and based on legal decrees (*förordningar*), stipulated by parliament or governmental laws (*lagar*) (Ds, 1998: 43). An example of a national regulation was the limitation on the number of people allowed to attend public gatherings. The limit was first set to 500 persons



on 12 March (SFS, 2020: 114) and later to 50 persons from 29 March 2020 (SFS 2020:162). A detailed chronology of all regulations can be retrieved from the archive of the [Swedish Government Offices](#).

General advice (*allmänna råd*) are non-binding recommendations on how one can or should act to comply with an obligating rule in law, ordinance or regulation (Ds 1998:43). For example, the Swedish Communicable Diseases Act (2004: 168) chapter 2, sections 1§ and 2§ stipulate the person's obligation through attention and reasonable precautions contribute to preventing the spread of infectious diseases. The national general advice for this law, issued by PHAS on April, suggested that individuals maintain careful hand hygiene and social distancing. Businesses, organisations and employers were to rearrange furniture to create space to avoid crowding and postpone meetings or organise them digitally. (HSLF-FS, 2020:12). From 19 October 2020, PHAS began providing local general advice and recommendations in response to local outbreaks (HSLF-FS, 2020: 50). Local general advice was formulated after consultation with the region's infection control specialist and applied in a certain region or in part of it (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020j).

National and local recommendations are not legally binding, although encouraged and scientifically motivated by a relevant authority (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2022d). For example, regarding sports, the Public Health Agency was in dialogue with The Swedish Sports Confederation and issued a recommendation on 24 March 2020, encouraging people to exercise, preferably outdoors. For people over 70 years of age, the recommendation was not to participate in any indoor sports activities. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020f). Later, the sports sector was also affected by the regulations and general advice which limited the numbers of people in public gatherings and organising of cups and other sporting events (HSLF-FS, 2020: 12; HSLF-FS, 2021: 87; SFS, 2020: 114; SFS, 2020: 162). Another example is the current vaccination recommendation (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2022e).

The government appointed a Corona Commission with the task of evaluating the measures taken by the government, the administrative authorities, the regions, and the municipalities as well as the effects of the spread of the virus (SOU, 2021: 89a). The Commission published two interim reports in 2020 and in 2021, and a final report in February 2022. In its reports, the Commission criticised this decentralised



management, the slow implementation of measures to protect elderly and high-risk groups, and a one-sided reliance on assessments by PHAS. On the other hand, it stated that voluntary measures provided citizens with more personal freedom was thus the correct approach. (SOU 2022:10).

First Wave: Restrictions and Measures Between January and July 2020

In early January, the Public Health Agency of Sweden (PHAS, Folkhälsomyndigheten) announced the news about the first COVID-19 cases in Wuhan. A special working group, consisting of various competences from the authority, was formed on 21 January 2020. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, n.d.). The first case of COVID-19 in Sweden was identified on 31 January 2020 in the Jönköping region (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020a). On 1 February, as per the Public Health Agency's request, the Swedish Government classified COVID-19 as a danger to society, which enabled the government to issue legal regulations to use more powerful measures if needed (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020b). This classification also enabled the county medical officers to act locally, based on the Communicable Diseases Act (2004: 168). On 25 February 2020, PHAS announced that the risk of high travel-related, imported COVID-19 cases was high, but the risk of the virus spreading within the country was still low (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020c).

The first wave became increasingly severe within a few days at the beginning of March 2020. PHAS also shared information about the obligation of all individuals to contribute to the prevention of infectious diseases by paying attention and taking adequate precautionary measures. The Communicable Diseases Act (2004: 168) emphasises the individual's responsibility not to spread disease. As the coronavirus had been declared a danger to society, infected individuals were required to inform any persons they had been in close contact with of their infection (2004: 168). The virus was increasingly spreading in Stockholm and Västra Götaland regions. Thus, the considered risk level of the virus spreading within the country was increased to the highest level from 10 March onwards (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020d).



Consequently, several measures were applied to restrict the spread of the virus. On 17 March 2020, the government decided, based on recommendations from the Public Health Authority, that teaching in upper secondary schools, within municipal adult education and at universities would switch to remote and distance learning until the end of the spring semester 2020 (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020e; SFS, 2020: 115; SOU, 2022: 10). Public events and meetings were restricted to 500 participants, and the number was later decreased to 50 (SFS, 2020:114; SFS, 2020: 162). Sports and recreational activities should be performed outdoors alone or in smaller groups (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020f).

On 1 April, PHAS formulated general advice about how all authorities, companies, municipalities, regions, and religious communities should ensure that they take appropriate measures to avoid the spread of COVID-19. This advice included keeping a safe distance, avoiding crowds and social gatherings, staying at home in case of an infection or symptoms, restricting the number of customers in stores and malls, advising employees to work from home and postponing all sports events, cups and competitions, as well as meetings and activities of civil society organisations. (HSLF-FS, 2020: 12). In July 2020, the number of COVID-19 infections decreased steadily. PHAS stated that the virus was still spreading in various parts of the country and employees should therefore continue working from home if possible, and restaurants have occupancy limitations (Folkhälsomyndigheten, n.d., 2020h; HSLF-FS, 2020: 37).

Second Wave: Autumn 2020 and Winter 2020–2021

The second wave of the pandemic began in late autumn 2020 and peaked with over 6000 positive cases per day in December. On 1 October, PHAS recommended that persons who lived in the same household with a person who tested positive should stay at home, except for young children and employees in critical fields (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020i). During October, the number of positive COVID-19 cases increased from 500 to 2500 per day (Folkhälsomyndigheten, n.d.). In response, PHAS in collaboration with their local infection control specialists, issued local general advice for regions with outbreaks (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020j; HSLF-FS, 2020: 50, n.d.).



As the number of infections kept rising, earlier recommendations were made stricter. Public events and gatherings were limited to 8 people for a period of four weeks from 24 November (SFS, 2020: 1000). Young children in pre-primary and primary school (up to grade 6) who had family members who had tested positive were required to stay at home from 1 December. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, n.d., 2020k). A few days later, pupils of upper secondary schools switched to remote and online learning, with an exemption for pupils in vulnerable situations, who benefitted strongly from meeting teachers and peers onsite (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020l). Additionally, the recommendations and general advice for stores and the service sector were tightened on 22 December (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020o; 2020n). The general advice and recommendations included limiting the number of customers to avoid crowds and prevent infections. The vaccination program started on 27 December 2020 with high-risk groups, such as elderly people living in care facilities (Regeringskansliet, 2020e).

In January 2021, the number of confirmed cases decreased slightly, but in early February there was an increase again due to the spreading of a new virus variant. General advice regarding masks in public transport during rush hours in the morning and afternoon came into effect on 7 January 2021 (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020p). From January onwards, upper secondary schools were advised to gradually return to onsite studies until April 2021 (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021b). On 4 February 2021, older youth (born 2002 and later), whose participation in organised sports indoors had been limited since spring 2020, were allowed to participate again (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021c).

Third Wave and the Omicron Variant

On 2 March 2021, PHAS stated that based on its risk review, the nation was facing the risk of a third wave if the current recommendations were not followed. Additional restrictions regarding a ban on youth sports competitions, limited customer numbers, and opening hours at restaurants and stores as well as museums and concert halls were imposed. These regulations and advice were later extended until the end of May and finally partially lifted in July 2021. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021d; 2021f; 2021g; 2021k).



During spring 2021, the government's focus was on vaccinations and adjusting the existing regulations and recommendations for the whole population and those who had been vaccinated. In April, upper secondary schools could return to full onsite-teaching, and in May, small-scale graduation events were to be celebrated if sufficient measures to avoid infections were taken. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021i).

In May, PHAS suggested that society could return to a normal state in September 2021. The general advice regarding each person's responsibility to minimise the risk of spreading infection was valid until then. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021a; 2021j). In August, the number of infections increased along with the Delta variant, but in September the number of vaccinations increased, and regulations for the service sector were lifted. The recommendations of staying home for individuals who had fallen ill or who lived with someone who had tested positive for COVID-19 remained. Unvaccinated people were still recommended to avoid crowds and larger social gatherings. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021l).

At the end of November, a steady increase in infections could be seen. Along with the Omicron variant, the number of infected rose from less than 1,000 cases per day in November to a peak of 40,000 cases per day at the end of January 2022 (Folkhälsomyndigheten, n.d.). PHAS and the government responded to this development by requiring negative tests from incoming travellers, limiting the number of customers in restaurants and concert halls, and introducing a vaccination pass for events exceeding 100 guests. Events could be organised without vaccination passes, but in that case, there were strict restrictions on safety distances and the number of people in a group was limited. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021n; HSLF-FS, 2021: 87).

Lifting the Restrictions

In early January 2022, PHAS announced that to maintain the wellbeing, social encounters and daily routines of children and young people, schools would continue with onsite learning at the start of the spring semester. In schools, safety measures still applied, such as organising classes outside the classroom and limiting group sizes to avoid contact. Pupils with symptoms or sick family member(s) were recommended to stay at home. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2022a).



On 2 February 2022, PHAS filed an official petition to the government to revoke the status of COVID-19 as a danger to society, cancelling the local restrictions on crowd numbers and classifying COVID-19 as a notifiable disease in addition to diseases of general danger (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2022b). On 9 February, all restrictions on sports, public spaces and private events were lifted and society started opening up again (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2022c).



1.2 Denmark

***Maliina Grønvold Olsen & Jakob Trane Ibsen,
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Summary of the pandemic

On 11 March 2020, the Danish Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, addressed the nation in a press conference, where she announced a two-week nationwide lockdown to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus. All schools, universities, and libraries were to close, leisure activities were to cease from 13 March, and all day care facilities from 16 March. Employees in the public sector with non-critical activities were sent home to work. In the following week, further lockdown measures and restrictions were initiated. These included the closure of the country's borders as well as restaurants and malls and a ban on gatherings of more than 10 participants. Denmark was one of the first countries in Europe to enter a nationwide lockdown and therefore took prevention measures at a very early stage with fairly restrictive measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

On 15 April 2020, Denmark was one of the first countries in Europe to begin a gradual reopening of Danish society. After having been closed for a month, Denmark's childcare centres as well as primary schools (children from 0-5th grade, aged 6-11) reopened their doors. Children in the 6th grade and above and those in boarding schools were not allowed to return to school until 18 May. Students in the third grade of upper secondary schools were also allowed to go back to school. In contrast, first and second graders of upper secondary education did not return until the 27 May 2020. The same rules were applied for leisure activities. Other restrictions also eased over summer 2020 but were re-introduced in the autumn.

In December 2020, the second nationwide lockdown was initiated due to a new wave of COVID-19 infections. All schools and universities closed their doors and switched to distance learning. In the second lockdown, day care centres remained open. In early February 2021, students from 0-5 grades were allowed to come back to school. From the 1 March 2021, Denmark began to phase out restrictions for



most shops and outdoor cultural and sports activities. Moreover, they initiated a geographically delimited reopening for all graduating students, divided attendance into two groups, and reopened all schools on the island of Bornholm. A few weeks later, the remaining students were allowed to attend school physically one day a week. On 6 May, all students in primary school, vocational education and graduation-year students in secondary education and adult education were allowed physically back in school full time. All sports activities for children and young people restarted as well. On 21 May 2021, the remaining secondary, adult, and higher students were allowed physically back in school full time.

In December 2021, new restrictions were introduced to slow down the spread of the new COVID-19 variant Omicron. Bars, clubs, and other evening venues were closed and there was a prohibition on the sale of alcohol at night. On 15 December 2021, primary school children were sent home again. However, this time, they were only there for a couple of weeks, losing four to five school days. In a press conference, the Minister of Education made it clear that it was important for children's mental health and wellbeing that they go back to school – even if it resulted in increased infections.

Between spring 2020 and summer 2022, there were two longer periods of nationwide lockdowns of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, there was a range of local lockdowns where entire schools were closed or classes were sent home. By 31 January 2022, all restrictions in Denmark were lifted.

Strategy

The understanding of the COVID-19 crisis in Denmark has been based on a precautionary principle where the number one priority has been to minimize risk of loss of life and the risk of overburdening the health care sector. The government was granted wide temporary authorities from parliament in order to be able to



progress speedily with necessary measures to minimize and contain health risks.¹ These authorities were at first granted, according to some observers, less democratic oversight than is usual (Holst, 2022).

The precautionary measures themselves have necessitated much complementary work on interpreting the measures and regulations, prioritising and implementing health measures (availability and access to tests and, later, vaccines), and handling consequences across a range of sectors.

There was much discussion within the ministry concerning the correct formulation of guidelines. The ministry attempted to make definitions that could be employed locally, but this work was often fraught with difficulty (Interview with a civil servant in Ministry for Children and Education).

Regarding the implementation of health measures, the general approach was to publicly finance tests and vaccines, first for elderly people and health care personnel, and vulnerable people. The Ministry for Children and Education was responsible for drafting the guidelines, for example, regarding the administration of testing in schools, in collaboration with the Agency for Patient Security and other relevant health authorities.

Concerning the complementary measures, a host of funding packages were proposed by the government and agreed upon by parliament regarding compensation for businesses, cultural life, public institutions and municipalities. Most packages have been decided by substantial or even full majorities (consensus) in parliament, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic.

Government departments and agencies quickly established COVID-19 teams regarding different sectors of society. In order to facilitate effective and fast consultation processes, sector partnerships were organized, for example, concerning schools and day care, youth and secondary education, social affairs and cultural affairs.

1 [Lovforslag: L 133 \(Sundheds- og Ældreministeriet\)](#) Forslag til lov om ændring af lov om foranstaltninger mod smitsomme og andre overførbare sygdomme. (Udvidelse af foranstaltninger til at forebygge og inddæmme smitte samt sikring af kapacitetsmæssige ressourcer m.v.).



The partnership concerning primary education, for example, included professional organizations, associations of various types of schools (public schools, private and free schools) as well as associations of managers from municipal bodies concerning schools and day care. The Danish primary school pupils' association also took part in this partnership, which was facilitated by the ministry.² Another partnership concerned children and youth in vulnerable positions.³ A group of three major non-governmental organizations (Red Cross, Save the Children and Børns Vilkår)⁴ From the beginning, functions related to children and young people in vulnerable positions were defined as critical. This meant that during lockdowns, municipalities had to ensure that these children and young people would continue to receive necessary help. Out-of-home care and preventive measures had to be carried out as usual.

Regarding ministry-facilitated partnerships, agendas and materials were prepared by the ministry for meetings that were generally held every fortnight, depending on the situation and the necessity to inform the public. Meetings were held online and could therefore include representatives from several organisations.

During the pandemic, a range of bulletins and guidelines were sent to local governments, educational institutions, social service institutions and so on. Some of these letters were signed by the minister and the relevant partner. The partner members

2 The organisations were: BUPL, Børne og Kulturchefforeningen Danmarks Lærerforening, Danmarks Private Skoler, Dansk Friskoleforening, Danske Skoleelever, Deutschen Schul- und Sprachvereins für Nordschleswig, Efterskoleforeningen, Foreningen af Frie fagskoler, Foreningen af Kristne Friskoler, Frie Skolers Lærerforening, KL, Lederforeningen i BUPL, Lilleskolernes Sammenslutning, Sammenslutningen af Steinerskoler i Danmark, Skolelederforeningen, Skole og Forældre, Uddannelsesforbundet, Ungdomsringen, Ungdomsskoleforeningen.

3 [Aftale om initiativer for sårbare og udsatte grupper i forbindelse med COVID-19 \(im.dk\)](#)

4 [The partnership](#) consisted of a variety of public, private, and non-governmental organisations from the sector that work for or with children and young people in vulnerable positions. The participants were: Headspace, De anbragtes unges vilkår, Dansk Socialrådgiverforening, Socialpædagogernes Landsforbund, Dansk Erhverv, KFUM's Sociale Arbejde, Blå Kors Danmark, Dansk Ungdoms Fællesråd (DUF), Børne- og Kulturchefforeningen, Mødrehjælpen, Psykiatrifonden, Kirkens Korshær, KL, Danske Regioner, Boligselskabernes Landsforening, Civilsamfundets Brancheorganisation, DGI, DIF, Dansk Skoleskak, Skoletjenesten, Danmarks Biblioteksforening, Socialt Udviklingscenter SUS, Frivilligrådet, TUBA, FADD, Selveje Danmark, LOS, Ventilen, Red Barnet, Red Barnet Ungdom, Børns Vilkår, Røde Kors inkl. Ungdommens Røde Kors.



gave moral support and approved the produced recommendations and guidelines.⁵ In addition to the sector partnerships that were active during most of the pandemic some regional partnerships were established when necessary.⁶

There have been marked differences in the impact of regulations across the country. An informant from the Ministry for Children and Youth stressed that this could be seen by a difference of around 100 days physically in school from the least to the most impacted municipality.

Many actors in educational institutions and services advocated for more *degrees of freedom* in managing school resources during the pandemic, as well as attention paid to extra academic support. Following this, when most children and young people returned to schools, parliament approved that each school could decide, for example, to allocate more funds for pedagogical or social activities and less for teaching activities (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2021a). The agreement, with a strong majority in the parliament, recognized that despite laudable efforts in all schools to support the children and young people, some pupils and students would experience ‘academic lag’.⁷ Another 295 million DKK were set aside to schools, educational institutions and municipalities to deal with academic challenges in primary and lower secondary education and youth and adult education.⁸

5 Letter from the Minister and the Sector Partnership for COVID-19 concerning primary schooling, 18 January 2021. [Børne- og Undervisningsministeriets breve om COVID-19 | Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet \(uvm.dk\)](#) Accessed November 2022.

6 See Nyhedsbrev til dagtilbudsområdet ifm. COVID-19 (uge 46)

7 Aftale mellem regeringen (Socialdemokratiet) og Venstre, Dansk Folkeparti, Socialistisk Folkeparti, Radikale Venstre, Enhedslisten, Det Konservative Folkeparti, Liberal Alliance og Alternativet om håndtering af faglige udfordringer hos elever i grundskolen og på ungdoms- og voksenuddannelser, 1 June 2021.

8 [Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, June 2021](#)



1.3 Finland

Alix Helfer, Finnish Youth Research Network

First Wave in Spring 2020

COVID-19 infection cases began to increase rapidly in Finland in March 2020. To isolate the virus and maintain the capacity of intensive care facilities, Prime Minister Sanna Marin's government declared a state of emergency on 16 March 2020 and adopted the Emergency Powers Act due to the emergency conditions ([VNK 2020](#)). Policies changed swiftly and were applied regionally. From March to April 2020, the county of Uusimaa in Southern Finland, which also contains the capital region, was isolated from the rest of Finland and travel to and from the county was strictly restricted.

When the Emergency Powers Act came into force, schools and access to childcare were heavily restricted for two months (Mesiäislehto et al. [2022](#)). As an exception, onsite education was provided for pre-primary and basic education (grades 1-3) for children of parents working in sectors critical for the functioning of society and for pupils who had received a decision on special support. Guardians were highly recommended to arrange childcare at home, if possible. Upper secondary schools, vocational education units, universities, universities of applied sciences, adult education institutions, and other liberal adult education providers moved quickly to distance education from the 18 March – a recommendation that lasted until the end of the summer semester 2020. (FNAE 2021).

For leisure activities, the Regional State Administrative Agencies recommended that training should be organised in accordance with the local health authorities following the decisions of the Ministries and the National Institute for Health and Welfare. Most public facilities were closed, such as youth centres, libraries, restaurants, and other meeting places favoured by young people. Hobbies were transferred online when possible. Gatherings of more than ten people were prohibited. (Kauppinen & Laine 2022). Online environments were used extensively from March 2020 onwards. At the beginning of April 2020, in addition to online youth



work, youth workers in many municipalities and cities started outreach street youth work (Kivijärvi. et al., 2022).

Towards the end of spring 2020, restrictions were gradually lifted. The handling of COVID-19 moved in April to a hybrid strategy with the idea of *testing (everyone who had symptoms)*, *tracing (contacts when contamination was suspected)*, *isolating (those who had contracted the virus)* and *treating (people with severe symptoms)*. This led to regional and local restrictive measures, where municipalities and associations of municipalities were responsible for controlling infectious diseases in their area. Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVIs) and regional corona working groups coordinated by hospital districts regularly reviewed the need for restrictions. They made regional recommendations based on the epidemic situation (Voipio-Pulkki, 2020).

After three months of COVID-19 restrictions, The Emergency Powers Act was repealed in mid-June. In summer 2020, travelling and public gatherings were still controlled but not restricted as severely as before. Also, during this period, people organised activities outdoors.

The Second Wave

In autumn 2020, the second epidemic wave started in Finland and peaked in December ([Kotkas et al., 2022a](#)). This led to, for example, a reduction in the size of hobby groups in the capital region and a mask requirement for those over 15 years. At the end of November, cultural centres, museums, youth facilities and indoor sports venues were closed in areas with a high infection rate. However, libraries continued to operate on a limited basis. For example in Helsinki, municipally-organised leisure and outdoor sports activities were allowed to continue for those under 20 years old, but competitions, games or series were not organised ([City of Helsinki, 2021a](#)). The restrictions and recommendations issued by the coronavirus coordination group continued in the capital region until the end of January 2021.

The restrictions meant that many events were cancelled or postponed. For example, The National Institute for Health and Welfare and the Ministry of Education and Culture ([OKM & THL, 28.1.2021](#)) recommended that the traditional Finnish



upper secondary school-leaving student parade in lorries should not be held and that the formal dances for second-year upper secondary school students and other celebrations should be postponed to a later date, considering the situation of the epidemic. Gatherings of young adults were associated with an increased risk of infection (ibid).

Upper secondary school students living in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area were given the possibility to prepare for matriculation exams at onsite preparatory classes from 18 January to 5 February 2021, as students had been distance learning for a long time due to the prolonged restrictions on school and recreational activities ([City of Helsinki, 2021a](#)). There were concerns that many students were not able to study effectively during distance education.

Third Wave

The third wave of COVID-19 came in February 2021 and peaked in mid-March 2021. The Finnish government responded with tight restrictive measures: a state of emergency was declared ([Finnish Government, 2021a](#)), but the Emergency Powers Act was not invoked again. Schools in regions with higher epidemic rates were told to switch to distance education from the end of February until April. By the end of March 2021, the government planned curfews and a legislative proposal that would temporarily restrict freedom of movement to the worst epidemic areas ([Finnish Government, 2021b](#)). This was ultimately not implemented however, as the government's proposal was withdrawn due to critical remarks from the Constitutional Law Committee.

In the capital area, limited sports, cultural and youth activities for people under 20 were allowed. Pre-registration was required for hobby activities and non-recurring activities were not permitted. The operation and health safety plan of these activities had to follow the health and safety guidelines (for example, maintaining a safe distance, good hand hygiene, and use of face masks) issued by the authorities. There were no open activities in youth centres. ([City of Helsinki, 2021b](#)).

Restrictions linked to the third wave of the pandemic were eased in stages in spring 2021, taking into consideration the epidemic situation in different regions.



Epidemic control measures were abandoned in May 2021. In the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, schools were allowed to invite students back in class. Guided sports activities and youth facilities for those aged 20 and under were reopened in April 2021. After being closed for several weeks, museums and cultural facilities reopened in the summer, and the rest of the restrictions on sports venues were removed. (Pohjola et al., 2021).

COVID-19 vaccinations for people over the age of 16 began in summer 2021. The Finnish government outlined that vaccines were to be given first to individuals working in strategic positions (mainly health care and administrative workers) and according to age groups, starting from the elderly and moving gradually to younger people. (Pohjola et al., 2021). At the beginning of the autumn semester in August 2021, vaccinations of over-12-year-olds in primary and secondary schools and colleges began ([Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021a](#)). The booster vaccine (second vaccine) was given about three months after the first vaccine.

Fourth and Fifth Waves

In July 2021, approximately 300 COVID-19 infections were diagnosed as a result of football fans coming from the European championship in St Petersburg, which started the discussion of a fourth wave of coronavirus ([YLE, 2021a](#)). With the Delta variant, infection cases rose rapidly, and the fourth wave peaked in mid-August 2021. The 'COVID-19 passport' was introduced by law in mid-October. This was essentially a certificate for those who had received the available vaccinations, which they could show at cultural facilities and events to gain access. New restrictions on public events occurred and masks were highly recommended for all over 12-year-olds in all public interiors.

The fifth wave hit Finland at the end of the year 2021 with the arrival of the Omicron variant ([YLE, 2021b](#)). In January 2022, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (STM) [proposed that schools switch](#) to remote learning after the Christmas holidays due to the rapidly rising number of coronavirus infections (YLE, 2022a). The Government decided that distance learning will be used in teaching at universities of applied sciences and universities, liberal adult education, adult basic education, and adult basic art education until 16 January 2022. (Ministry of



Education and Culture, [2021a](#)). Guided recreational activities for those born in 2003 and younger could continue in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area despite the extensive closures of indoor sports facilities ([City of Helsinki, 2022](#)). This was an example of the principle ‘children and young people first’ in decision-making, which meant that restrictive measures for children and young people were only to be used as a last resort if absolutely necessary. ([STM, 2021](#)).

Lifting the Restrictions After Almost Two Years of Exceptional Circumstances

In February 2022, the government decided to end their rigorous testing and tracing strategy, leaving it up to people to test at home and isolate when they contracted the virus. Recommendations on early childhood care, education and training during the COVID-19 epidemic were updated ([OKM & THL, 1.3.2022](#)), which reminded of the spaciousness and hygiene of premises of contact teaching – for example, staff should work with the same group of children when possible. Large group events were allowed with a recommendation of avoiding overcrowding and maintaining hygiene measures. In May 2022, graduation ceremonies could finally be held without larger restrictions.

Finnish universities have been periodically closed during the pandemic years in 2020-2021, and teaching has been carried out mostly remotely. Most student events have been cancelled or postponed, which has affected the motivation and wellbeing of many students (Salmela-Aro et. al 2022). Applied distance learning was also used widely in secondary and tertiary education during the second and third wave of the pandemic.



1.4 Norway

Jakob Trane Ibsen, VIVE – The Danish Centre for Social Science Research

Norway established a corona commission to collect and assess experiences on the general handling of COVID-19 pandemic. The general description that the commission provided about the strategy is that Norway and Denmark have handled the situation similarly, with the same sets of regulations, recommendations, and preventive measures. The two countries also followed each other in deciding and implementing the different regulations and initiatives at about the same time, with Norway generally acting a couple of days later than Denmark. One main difference, however, was that Denmark chose to test for COVID-19 more extensively than Norway.

The Norwegian government established ‘coordination groups’ regarding different sectors. Of particular interest for this report was the coordination group concerning vulnerable children and youth that was established in April 2020, led by the Department for Children, Youth and Families ([NOU, 2022:5, p. 21, n.8](#)). The commission accounted for the pandemic in Norway as consisting of five waves (See NOU, 2022: 5, chapter 2).

First Wave: Lockdown in March 2020, gradual reopening from April through Autumn 2020.

The period began with a range of measures being put in place, including the lockdown of schools, voluntary associations, and workplaces and the roll-out of a tracking application to trace people who had been in contact with infected persons. By April, there was a decline in the spread of COVID-19, and society generally opened again during the spring and summer. In May, the government put in place a ‘traffic light’ system where kindergartens and schools were opened for physical attendance after summer 2020, and by August, sports activities for children were



reopened. But further reopening was postponed, for example concerning sports events. By autumn, the country saw a new increase in contamination and spread of the virus, but also a growing optimism concerning vaccines.

Second wave: End of October 2020 until February 2021

At the beginning of this period, new recommendations were issued concerning working from home and limitations on the use of public transport. There were also limitations set on private and public events, and recommendations were given for citizens to limit social contact and the number of guests to five in private homes.

The government sought to target the COVID-19 strategy geographically and suggested a range of measures that could be used in areas with a higher spread of the virus. The virus incidence was high in larger cities, mainly in Oslo and Bergen. Further measures were decided in November concerning gatherings and outdoor activities. Limitations on serving alcohol (*skjenkestopp*) were implemented, and the government warned that secondary and vocational education schools should prepare for 'code red level of measures', meaning they should quarantine and teach online.

During this phase, attention increased to the issue of the spread of COVID-19 in different groups. In particular, there was concern that some immigrant groups had a much higher contamination rate than the wider population. At the same time, a report from the coordination group on vulnerable children and youth noted that the 'burden of measures' (*tiltaksbyrden*) was particularly disturbing for vulnerable children and youth. In all, 30 kindergartens and 140 schools were targets of special measures. The coordination group noted that a range of socio-economically challenged municipalities (*utsatte kommuner*) established stronger measures than national ones so that entire classes of pupils were quarantined.

Christmas 2020 was marked by enforced COVID-19 measures concerning social distancing and mobility. There were restrictions placed on entering or leaving the country however, restrictions on travel across municipalities were lessened so that people could visit family during the Christmas period. By January 2021, there was increased concern regarding the Beta variant, which led to stronger measures in ten municipalities. One measure was a lockdown on the sale of alcohol, but this



was rescinded the following day (NOU, 2022: 5,24). In another 15 municipalities, stronger measures were implemented. In relation to the concern raised by the coordination group on vulnerable children and youth, some restrictions were lifted. For example, secondary school students could now be physically present to a higher degree, and children and youth from the same municipality could join the same sports activities. Contrary to health authorities' recommendation, the Minister for Health and Care reopened leisure travel to Svalbard (under a strict test regime).

Third Wave: March 2021 to August 2021

At the beginning of the third wave, there was discussion in the government concerning prioritising vaccines to either vulnerable groups or to geographic regions that were hit harder by the virus. In March, the government decided on a 'limited geographic prioritisation of vaccines' to six counties in Oslo municipality and four municipalities in the eastern part of the country with many virus cases. There was also concern about new variants, and infections peaked in late March.

A difficult issue concerned mobility and social distancing during Easter. Typically, this is when many Norwegians visit relatives, often staying in a summer cottage close together. Detailed recommendations were given as to conduct when going away from their home municipality, for example, concerning shopping for groceries and whether to stay in a hotel.

The previous national recommendation of 'the meter' (one metre distance) was increased to two meters of social distancing. In addition, a ban on serving alcohol across the country, a requirement to work from home where possible, and a ban on indoor sports for adults were implemented. Finally, strong measures concerning travel into the country were put in place, for example concerning places of testing and quarantine. During spring, steps were gradually taken toward reopening. However, with the arrival of the Delta variant, the government put the reopening on hold in late July.



Fourth Wave: September 2021 to November 2021

Two weeks after school started, Norway entered the fourth wave. In this wave, the incidence rate was highest among children and youth between 13 and 19 years of age. The government announced that children aged 12 to 15 should also be vaccinated. By the end of September, all restrictions were lifted.

Fifth wave: December 2021 to April 2022

At the end of November, new concerns were raised concerning the Omicron variant. Winter was marked by widespread contamination by the new variant, and strict measures of distancing and mobility returned, including during Christmas and New Year's Eve. Kindergartens and schools were again 'code red'. This lasted until mid-January when measures were lifted again. These measures continued through spring.

The commission stressed that there were great variations in the spread of the virus, as well as the different measures put in place across the country. The commission found that the grounds on which schools should be shut down were uncertain. Additionally, the commission found that Norwegian society was 'well prepared' for handling the pandemic, 'but with vulnerabilities' (NOU 2022, del 2). One such vulnerability concerned testing and tracing at the municipal level (see page 91) and other elements of health system capacity. Some strengths that were mentioned concerned the relatively high degree of trust that the population had concerning the recommendations of public authorities, relatively high level of education that made it easier to remain informed about the pandemic and regulations or recommendations, as well as a good digital infrastructure that made working and studying from home viable. Other strengths included the country's geography and living conditions in terms of housing, for example (NOU 2022: 5: 444-446).

In August 2022, parliament approved an allocation of 75 million NOK for 'pandemic follow-up for children and youth' for the hardest hit local municipalities (*kommuner* or *fylkeskommuner*). The initiative follows another initiative of 216 million NOK concerning academic and social learning (*faglig og sosial læring*) (Regjeringen.no, 2022).



1.5 Iceland

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In March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, major changes were made to people's rights to gather, necessitating the reorganisation of children's education and leisure activities. A limit of 20 people gathering at one time was set and students in each grade were divided into units. In spring 2020, some primary school students attended every other day and some schools had to rely temporarily on online teaching. Changes in schools and leisure activities had an impact on children and they spent more time at home with their parents or guardians, many of whom worked from home (Nordal et al., 2020). This lasted until 4 May 2020, when schools could operate conventionally.

Unlike many countries, Iceland never imposed a lockdown; primary schools and kindergartens were not closed. Alongside various restrictions implemented, an emphasis was placed on tracking those who had been close to infected individuals and placing them in quarantine. With the help of the biotech company deCODE genetics, authorities tested a large percentage of the population, which made it easier to track those who might be infected. Surveys from this time showed that Icelanders were very satisfied with how the government handled the pandemic, with over 95 per cent stating that they trusted official press briefings and the government's response. In late summer 2020, there was a rise in COVID-19 cases, and increased criticism appeared in the media concerning various aspects of border controls and restrictions. However, the numbers of those who expressed trust in the government's response and experts remained high. Iceland's COVID-19 measures so far can be seen as successful compared to many other countries (Ólafsson, 2021).

During the COVID-19 era, various decisions were made concerning children and their daily lives without their involvement. Further, there has been a lack of providing children with the necessary information. The principle of safeguarding the best interests of the child is reflected in many parts of Icelandic legislation on children's issues, such as in the Children's Act, no. 76/2003, Child Protection Act,



no. 80/2002, Act on Services for Disabled People with High Support Needs, no. 38/2018, and the Act on the Enforcement of Sentences, no. 15/2016. However, a survey by the Ombudsperson for Children (2020) revealed that only 48 per cent of government agencies specifically assessed the impact of their proposals or actions on children in Icelandic society.

On 15 April 2020, the Ombudsperson for Children of Iceland sent a letter to the Minister of Education, Science and Culture on the participation of children in decision-making regarding the organisation of schoolwork and their right to information. The letter stated that schools and school authorities would need to take various measures to ensure the right of children to education in the special circumstances prevailing at the time. The Ombudsperson emphasised the importance of students being involved in the decision-making and receiving the necessary information about them. It was stressed that they should be able to view the available options and express their thoughts before a final decision is made. The Ombudsperson for Children urged the Minister to recommend to school administrators that when making decisions on school arrangements for COVID-19, special attention should be paid to the right of children to information and participation in accordance with the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In a periodic report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child from the Ombudsperson of Iceland (2018), it was stated that the Icelandic government lacked a holistic policy on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In response to this, preparation for new acts was made and then accepted by the Icelandic Parliament in 2021 to improve services for children and create a more child-friendly society (Government of Iceland. Ministry of Social Affairs, 2021). Those acts are: Act on Integration of Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity (hereafter, The Prosperity Act) nr.86/2021, Act on The National Agency for Children and Families nr. 87/2021, Act on The National Supervisory Authority for Welfare nr. 88/2021 and Act on Counselling and Diagnostic Centre, nr. 85/2021. In addition, a parliamentary resolution proposal on Child Friendly Iceland was approved. The Icelandic Government stated that it was committed to continuing working towards protecting and promoting children's rights as they had been, and should always be, a priority for Iceland. Previously, the principle of the



best interests of the child had sometimes been confused with the *best interests of the parent* (United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, 2022).

In 2021, amendments were also made to the Children's Act (Act nr. 28/2021), the Child Protection Act (Act nr. 107/2021), and all doubts about the right of children to participate in decision-making were removed. The goal of these amendments was to ensure the right of children to express their opinions and be listened to during procedures in cases where their issues are being dealt with.

The Prosperity Act includes important new measures to provide improved services for children and decrease waiting lists for health and social services to improve children's overall health. To respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, Iceland invested 540 million Icelandic crowns in improving mental health care in 2020, and an additional 600 million was invested in 2021. This funding improved mental health care services in upper secondary schools. Funding was also secured for [The Centre for Children's Mental Health](#). The centre should work on decreasing waiting lists and improving mental health services. In 2022 the parliament enacted a policy on mental health issues until 2030 ([Parliamentary document nr. 1382/2022](#)). The policy emphasises a change from the bottom up and seeks to empower patients and ensure equitable health care in the near environment. As staffing and recruitment have been a challenge in Iceland, the policy emphasises interdisciplinary collaboration of specialists in mental health services as well as better access, quality, efficiency, and continuity in the services.



1.6 Greenland

Maliina Grønvold Olsen & Jakob Trane Ibsen, VIVE – The Danish Centre for Social Science Research

Greenland is a part of the Kingdom of Denmark with extensive self-government. The self-government arrangements mean that Greenland's government has authority regarding handling the COVID-19 pandemic. Greenland's population is around 56,000 and lives on the 410,449 square kilometres that are free of ice. There are over a hundred settlements throughout the island. However, most of the population lives in the six largest towns, with Nuuk being the capital and the largest city with approximately 17,600 inhabitants.

Due to Greenland's nature and geography, cities, towns, and settlements are isolated from each other, with no roads connecting them. Greenland has no physical borders with neighbouring countries. Travelling between places can therefore only be done by water or air. Greenland's possibility to isolate the country by suspending travel by air and water and controlling the movement of people between cities meant that Greenland has been able to keep society open to a greater extent than other countries. Greenland has not had any nationwide lockdowns – only a few localized lockdowns.

On 16 March 2020, the Prime Minister of Greenland, Kim Kielsen, announced that they identified the first case of COVID-19 in Nuuk. The next day, the Prime Minister announced that the government would close schools and stop air traffic for domestic and foreign flights. It was, however, possible to travel with the approval of the Police and the Medical Director of Health through the visitation group. Schools were to close on 23 March for two weeks. On 18 March, the second COVID-19 case was found in Greenland in Nuuk, which led to additional restrictions being applied only in the capital.

The capital underwent a lockdown, where all indoor cultural institutions, libraries, and leisure activities were closed as well as nightlife, bars, restaurants, and shops, except for grocery stores. Employees in the public sector with non-critical activities



were sent home to work. Events and gatherings of more than ten people were prohibited and all traffic by air and water out of Nuuk was stopped. Further, it was no longer possible to acquire a travel exception.

The closing of public schools was postponed, starting on 18 March. This included day care and other educational institutions in Nuuk. The restrictions applied for three weeks. On 28 March, Kim Kielsen introduced a ban on selling and serving alcohol in Nuuk, a settlement outside of Nuuk and a smaller town. The main reasoning behind this decision was to reduce the spread of COVID-19, and to protect children by providing a safe home for them.⁹

On 7 April 2020, the government announced that schools, except those in Nuuk, would gradually reopen on 15 April. The reopening of schools happened in such a way that the pupils were divided into segments at different time periods. A few days later (on the 20 April) schools and day care centres gradually reopened in Nuuk. The reopening included most of the shops in Nuuk, and domestic flights opened somewhat so that it was possible to travel within Greenland with approval from the Police and the Medical Director of Health by the visitation group.

On 15 June 2020, authorities began the first phase of reopening Transatlantic flights between Greenland and Denmark. To be allowed to fly, travellers had to present proof of a negative test, quarantine immediately after their arrival to Greenland, and then be tested five days later. A little over a month later, the second phase of opening flights up between Greenland and Denmark began. At the same time, quarantine and testing regulations were lifted.

Due to the rise of COVID-19 cases in Denmark in autumn 2020, Greenland reintroduced their quarantine rules for travellers from Denmark. On 30 December 2020, the government closed borders for all travellers, besides persons visiting under a special corona secretariat. This travel restriction lasted until the beginning of May 2021.

9 Sermitsiaq, 2020: "Kielsen indfører alkoholforbud i Nuuk", 28 March 2020.



In autumn 2021, with the rise of COVID-19 cases, the Greenlandic government began to use localized restrictions more extensively until February 2022. When there were many cases of COVID-19 in specific cities, travel was suspended until the epidemic was curbed. In January 2022, the government also banned the sale and serving of alcohol in three municipalities. The reason for the ban was the increase in COVID-19 cases.

Schools were closed only at the beginning of the pandemic when all the country's schools were closed for a few weeks. When COVID-19 cases were identified in schools, day care centres or other institutions, the government temporarily restricted the specific school or institution – either by closing parts of it or entirely. Most daycare centres, educational institutions and leisure activities for children and young people remained open in Greenland during the pandemic.



1.7 Faroe Islands

Firouz Gaini, University of the Faroe Islands

COVID-19 came to the Faroe Islands (Faroës) in March 2020. The first confirmed case was on 4th March. After the first case, others followed quickly, causing a spike in March–April 2020, another spike in July–August 2020, and another from September until October 2020. In 2021, there were major COVID-19 epidemics, starting at the beginning of the year, continuing in May–August, and another spike in September 2021. All in all, there have been six waves of COVID-19 cases in the Faroes (Hagstova Føroya).

As with many other countries, the COVID-19 pandemic came as a new and unknown situation, activating the Epidemic Commission in the Faroes. The Faroese Islands followed the same legislation and epidemic restrictions as in Denmark, though the recommendations were less strict than in Denmark, according to an interviewee (the Ombudsperson). The national COVID-19 coordination group involved the Head of Police; the Chief Medical Officer; the Chief Veterinary Officer; the Head of the Department of Accounting and Financial Administration; the Head of the Food, Veterinary and Environmental agency; the Head of Central Customs and Tax Administration, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Health and the Assistant General Manager of the Faroese Central Hospital. The board decided on the different measures drafted by the Danish authorities. One psychologist was invited to the board at times to monitor the mental health consequences of the crisis. No children were involved.

A special Corona-phoneline was established, with a board of medical doctors who gave out instructions. Most of the activities were approved under the guidance of the Professor of Health in charge, and a special team was named to give or deny permission to the activities of various associations, companies, and even regarding distance school or work.

The Prime Minister and most politicians appealed to the Faroese people to rely on inter-personal trust in the fight against the virus ([Guardian, 2021](#)). There was a



strong sense of cohesion and trust that citizens would adapt their lives to the official recommendations. There was also scepticism toward suggestions of introducing new legally binding restrictions because the citizens and the government considered this to be an “un-Faroese” intervention in their lives.

Several, mostly non-mandatory, restrictions were applied to limit the spread of COVID-19. In the Faroes, most people live on islands interconnected by bridges and tunnels. Therefore, the government wanted to give people guidelines and recommendations instead of implementing restrictions by law ([Guardian, 2021](#)). On 12 March 2020, the Faroe government introduced measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus in the Faroes ([corona.fo](#)). The measures included:

- Appealing to people to travel only in cases of high necessity.
- Appealing to returning travellers to stay at home.
- Restricting visits to hospitals and care homes.
- Appealing to organisers to postpone or cancel all events expected to attract more than 100 people.
- All schools, kindergartens and educational institutions were to be closed, and all non-critical public sector employees were encouraged to work from home, pending further information from management.

The government appealed to all restaurants, cafes, bars, and nightclubs to close by 22:00. The aim was to protect all critical public duties and tasks that needed to be carried out and ensure there would be sufficient supplies for everyone ([corona.fo](#)).

When public schools reopened in the autumn semester of 2020, after the spring lockdown followed by a short reopening and the summer holidays, special health safety guidelines were introduced (KvF, 13 August 2020). The 7,321 pupils from the 44 elementary schools went back to schools which had to follow guidelines with these key elements:



- All classes were to be kept separate to minimise the risk of infection and to simplify contact tracing in case of infection.
- Large gatherings such as the morning assembly were to be suspended, and special arrangements to be made for breaks between lessons.
- All schools were to have clear procedures regarding social distancing and hygiene.
- Parents were asked to drop off their children outside the school entrance and not enter themselves.
- The aim was to have all teachers tested for COVID-19 before the start of the school day.

In the Faroe Islands, schools reopened quite quickly after a few months of lockdown. The schools devised security measures, for example teachers and different classes were separated from one another and had their designated entries to the facilities. Besides the large lockdowns in spring 2020, sports and other leisure activities were quickly reopened. There was a relatively short lockdown period of four to five weeks, where schools and leisure activities were closed entirely. In this period, most schools had distance learning, either online or in other ways.

The government's approach to the epidemic was to introduce large scale testing and contact tracing and install measures such as travel restrictions combined with social distancing within the country. The Faroes had one of the world's highest rates of COVID-19 testing ([Guardian, 2021](#)), due to a large testing capacity, based on laboratory equipment from the fishing and fish farming industries. The fact that the country is so isolated by the sea, contributed to the management of the epidemic, as for a long period all passengers were tested on arrival. Quarantine and testing were mandatory for visitors to the country (Davidsen & Petersen, 2021). According to one interviewee (the Ombudsperson), social control is strong in the Faroese Islands and people mainly agreed with the COVID-19 measures.

Since March 2022, all COVID-19 restrictions in the Faroes has been lifted, and there is no longer mass testing for the virus.

Part 2:

Safeguarding the Rights of Children and Young People

In this section, we will take a closer look at how children and young people's rights were considered in the Nordic countries during the pandemic. We will focus particularly on the spheres of education and learning as well as leisure and recreational time. However, we will additionally consider children and young people's general wellbeing, as it strongly links to these spheres. Further, we will take a close look at vulnerable groups of children and young people, such as children and youth with disabilities (UN's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Articles 3 and 7) during the pandemic. Our central viewpoint is on the inclusion, participation and representation of children and youth in prioritising, planning, and implementing COVID-19-related measures. To be clear, we are not addressing the individual rights of children and young people; instead, our focus is on their group rights, firstly, as young citizens in society, and secondly, as belonging to different groups.

The aim is to chart, in turn, the specific practices and measures of each Nordic country regarding children and young people's right to be heard as individuals and as a group. Again, we have written summaries for each Nordic country, which will be presented in the same order as in the previous section.



2.1 Sweden: Children's Rights – Perspectives and Initiatives

Viola Särkiluoto, Finnish Youth Research Network

Education

Sweden was one of the few countries where preschools and compulsory primary and lower secondary schools were mostly kept open between 2020–2021. Pupils up to 12 years of age (grades 1–6) were allowed to attend school onsite during the entire period. However in the event of any symptoms, it was recommended that the pupil(s) stay home. Most pupils between 13–15 years of age (grades 7–9) could attend onsite school, although some schools offered online and remote education to varying degrees. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020j, 2021h; SOU, 2021: 89a).

The Public Health Agency of Sweden (PHAS) aims to safeguard all aspects of public health, including social, mental and physical health. In early March, PHAS assessed that closing schools was ineffective in preventing the virus from spreading (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021e; Regeringskansliet, 2020a). PHAS estimated that the negative impact of closing schools on children's mental, physical and social wellbeing would be more significant than the positive effects on public health and the spreading of the infection. Previous research had indicated that children and teenagers had been adversely affected by school closures, suffering from negative effects on their learning and their mental and physical health. Additionally, there was a worry that online and distance learning might increase the gaps in both knowledge and wellbeing between the children who do well and those who need more support. The negative consequences of distance education impact hardest those who are already at risk, such as children with disabilities, underlying diseases, or in socio-economically disadvantaged and vulnerable situations. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020g; SOU, 2022: 10).



The strategic decision to keep schools open for younger pupils was based on the child's best interest and research results, according to which children and adolescents accounted for a small proportion of COVID-19 cases, and in most cases, the children had mild symptoms and were infected by an adult. Furthermore, it showed that children were not as susceptible to infection as adults, and schools were not a driving force in the spread of the virus. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020g; SOU, 2022:10). In a report series about COVID-19 in children and adolescents, PHAS referred to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which specified in article 24, the right to health, refers to health and development in a broader perspective (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021m). This includes not only the right to life, survival, and development but also school and education, which prepare children and young people with the knowledge of how to promote good health. In addition to education, article 24 highlights that rest, play, social encounters, various forms of physical activity and recreation all contribute to promoting the health and wellbeing of children and young people. (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child CRC, 2003). From the perspective of children's rights, the routine, supervision, care, and social encounters provided by the schools were considered in the best interest of young children and their wellbeing.

In contrast to the younger children, there were two periods of full online teaching for the students at upper secondary schools, except for students in vulnerable situations. The first period lasted from March until June 2020, and the second two weeks in December 2020. It was estimated that upper secondary school pupils had greater autonomy and ability to manage online and distance learning. They generally did not require similar care and supervision as younger pupils. An exemption was made for students who benefitted strongly from onsite learning, such as individuals who faced social challenges at home or did not have a place to study. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020l; SOU, 2021:89a).

After the first period of online studies, seeing that few children and young people became seriously ill, PHAS reviewed the research and, as a result, abolished the spring 2020 national recommendation of online school in upper secondary schools and higher education. After this, the decisions to issue online teaching were made on a regional level by local infection control specialists and school headmasters. Therefore, many schools had the possibility to switch to online



learning even with short notice, such as in the case of a regional infection cluster. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020g; 2020j).

According to the Ombudsperson for Children in Sweden, the implementation of remote and online teaching and the limitation of some social encounters, such as after-school activities, could be seen as threats towards children and young people's right to quality education. The Ombudsperson also collected experiences from pupils. Even though online studies had been a positive experience for some, many pupils stated that online learning weakened the quality of education. In addition to the lack of social learning, teachers' digital skills varied, which caused fluctuation in the quality of education. Additionally, some pupils pointed out the inequality and inconsistency not only within schools and between teachers but also at the municipal level. Some schools decided not to organise extracurricular assistance with homework, whereas some schools provided this in small groups or digitally. (Barnombudsmannen, 2021a). The National Agency for Education (Skolverket), tasked by the government to study the consequences of the pandemic on education within the school system, has published five interim reports between 2020 and 2022. The final report will be published in December 2022.

An informant from the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, SNAE) mentioned how in any future scenarios, it would be important to remember the importance of school and recreation. During a crisis, onsite school and leisure activities provide routine and structure as well as social encounters and exercise, which are crucial for children and young people's psychosocial and physical wellbeing. School plays an important role as a safety net for children, especially those in socioeconomically and socially vulnerable situations, and disadvantaged groups are hit harder by the negative consequences of school closures. It was, therefore, important to take measures to allow children to attend school. Another important aspect for future reference is promoting psychosocial wellbeing by safeguarding activities outside school, leisure and free time (Interview with SNAE).



Leisure

Children and young people's leisure activities were affected by the recommendations on free time and sports, as well as by the general advice regarding events and social gatherings. Civil society organisations (NGOs), including children and youth organisations, were advised to postpone their meetings and activities (HSLF-FS 2020:12). This meant that homework assistance provided by these organisations was also limited. Many of the pupils felt like their opinions were not heard in planning these activities, as should have been done according to the Child's Right to participation and to be heard (Article 12). Additionally, Article 2 about every child's right to be treated equally was not fully met, as there were irregularities and inconsistencies in the organising of online learning, and the individual situations of the pupils varied as well. (Barnombudsmannen, 2021a).

According to an informant (SNAE), there was feedback from schools that more could have been done to ensure the feeling of safety in school, such as adjustments in physical environments, dividing groups into smaller ones and enabling good ventilation. Generally, protecting the psychosocial wellbeing of children and young people by keeping their daily life as normal as possible and ensuring vulnerable groups' right to onsite education was prioritised. (Interview with SNAE).

During the first wave in spring 2020, sports had to be organised outdoors, and events such as competitions and cups were prohibited or limited (HSLF-FS, 2020: 12, n.d.; SFS, 2020: 162, n.d.). During the second wave, the government issued general advice that all non-essential activities organised by national, regional, or municipal authorities had to be closed. PHAS specified that sports activities could continue if performed outdoors with sufficient safety measures, but persons over 18 years of age were not allowed to participate in indoor sports or team sports. The responsibility of adjusting the specifics was given to the regional and local authorities based on the epidemiological situation and local conditions. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020m).

Some local sports associations adjusted their activities according to the recommendations by offering outdoor sports and making other adjustments. For younger children, sports activities could be organised throughout the entire period on a



smaller scale, complying with the restrictions on gatherings. The experience of one informant with expertise from the sports sector was that the lack of competitions did not seem like a significant loss for most children; for them meeting peers, having fun and doing things together in a social environment still felt meaningful. As the health recommendations restricted parents and adult guardians from visiting their children's sports practices, the training environment became more relaxed for the children. (Interview with HU).

After a year of restrictions, young adults could return to sports indoors. PHAS justified this decision as sports organisations started to lose their young members. A national public health survey revealed that the activity levels of young people between 16 and 29 years of age had decreased, and many spent up to seven hours a day sitting still. PHAS stated when changing the general advice that sporting activities, such as routine and social encounters alongside the positive health benefits, provide many positive effects. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021c). Even before the pandemic, there had been a growing trend of young people opting out of sports associations in favour of independent exercise. The underlying reasons for 15–24 year olds have been the desire for more freedom of choice, such as being able to decide how and when the training should take place and exercise for the sake of having fun instead of competition (Centrum för Idrottsforskning, n.d.; Centrum för idrottsforskning & Ungdomsbarometern, 2020).

The Ombudsperson for Children (2021a) explains that although sports activities were permitted for younger children, they encountered limitations in their right to meaningful leisure and recreation. Some activities had to be adjusted to meet the regulations of safety distances, and some were cancelled. The restrictive measures on civil society and gatherings hindered children and youth from meeting each other at youth centres, concerts, hobbies, or summer camps as they were closed (Barnombudsmannen, 2021a). Save the Children reported a significant lack of free time activities and increased loneliness, caused by the measures the authorities took to protect public health (Rädda Barnen, 2020). The Swedish authorities aimed to protect the wellbeing of younger children in leisure by keeping after-school activities (*fritidshem*) open for children under 12. Meeting places for young people (*fritidsgårdar*) are under municipal responsibility and they responded to the measures in various ways, several of them by going online. For instance, the municipality



of Huddinge has offered workshops, quiz nights and other leisure activities through its social media profiles on Instagram and Discord, which have now become an established part of activities offered (Huddinge kommun, 2021).

Funding for Sports

When sports competitions and events were not permitted, sports associations lost a proportion of their income. In this situation, the Swedish government gave them funds for developing sports and ensuring access to sporting activities during the pandemic. The number of funds directed to sports in 2020–2021 was a total of 3455 million SKR in the form of a ‘crisis and stimulation support’ and was in addition to regular government funding. The Swedish Sports Confederation directed the funds towards economic losses instead of focusing on the activity drop-off. This decision led to sports-political consequences where the local sports associations, up to 73 per cent on a national level, were denied funding as their losses were mostly from a lack of activities rather than other economic losses. This led to an increased inequality of resources between the commercially funded elite sports and competitive sports and sports organised by civil society sports associations. Further, it appears the investment was directed more towards adult sports, even though the funds were meant for children and youth sports. (Norberg, 2021).

Wellbeing

Although schools were open, the fear of illness and death was still present in children and young people’s lives. There was great insecurity and fear which was communicated by the students’ families and the educational staff. Almost half of preschool children did not visit preschool at the beginning of the pandemic because their parents decided to keep them at home. (Interview with SNAE and SKR, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions). Even so, according to a report by the Ombudsperson of Children in Sweden (2021), the decision to keep schools open for younger pupils seems to have safeguarded the children’s rights to quality education. The aim to minimise the consequences for children, in addition to clear communication from authorities about prioritising children’s best interests were seen as positive measures. (Barnombudsmannen, 2021b).



Vulnerable Groups

A group that faced serious negative changes regarding their right to quality education and active leisure were children and young people with disabilities. The initiatives to safeguard the rights and wellbeing of these groups included access to onsite education even during the periods when online teaching was recommended. During the first three weeks of spring 2020, when online teaching was imposed on upper secondary schools, nobody was allowed to come to school. Shortly after, it was realised that this caused difficulties for students dependent on a school lunch or needing close contact with teachers. There were additional difficulties for newly arrived students in Sweden, those who have not yet mastered Swedish, had insufficient digital skills, lived in overcrowded surroundings, faced abuse, or other challenges. (Skolinspektionen, 2021; SOU, 2021:89a). PHAS took several weeks to start issuing exemptions for groups who benefitted from or needed onsite-school, and for some students this meant going to the school for lunch or study in the classroom. During the second period of distance education teaching in December 2020, these groups were exempt from online teaching (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020). Additionally, headmasters were encouraged to provide easy access to onsite studies if any challenges appeared among students. Similarly, the schools for pupils with special needs (*särskola* and *specialskola*) were kept open. (SOU, 2021: 89a; Interview with SNAE.)

To support pupils dependent on school lunches, SNAE and the Swedish Food Agency (Livsmedelsverket) prepared a recommendation that pupils or their parents would be able to pick up school lunches for the whole week from school. In some areas, there were also initiatives for starting study groups to provide students with homework assistance and social encounters. (Interview with SNAE).

For children with disabilities, as well as for children and youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds, affordable summer camps provide a possibility for meaningful leisure when other types of hobbies or activities are out of reach. Since the beginning of 2020, the organising of camps had been restricted or limited, but in summer 2021 PHAS allowed summer camps with certain adjustments, such as limited participants (Krisinformation.se, 2020). Whereas other types of sports and leisure activities could be adjusted, people with physical, mental, and cognitive



disabilities were affected significantly, as their free time activities were put on hold. There were also indications that the children of parents with disabilities faced difficulties regarding online learning and leisure activities. (Myndigheten för delaktighet, 2021).

To support the work of municipalities, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges kommuner och regioner, hereafter SKR), together with the government and various NGOs, collected and shared information about good examples of initiatives and services to support mental and social wellbeing during a crisis. For example, the webpage ¹⁰ contains a list of easy access support services, such as chat lines and information targeted at children and young people, as well as information for adults who work with children and young people. Additionally, SKR collected a list of good practices and examples of working methods and solutions from various municipalities and regions. These included examples of outdoor learning, division of school lunches during periods of distance learning, and opportunities to engage in culture and leisure activities.

10 [Stödlista: Psykisk hälsa i kristid](#)



[Start](#) - [Kraftsamling för psykisk hälsa](#) - Stödlista: Psykisk hälsa i kristid

Stödlista: Psykisk hälsa i kristid

På dessa sidor finns råd och länkar till information, tips och stöd för psykisk hälsa i kristid. Stödlistan påbörjades under pandemin och utvecklas löpande med avseende på kriser i Sverige och i vår omvärld, nu senast kriget i Ukraina.

Picture 1. The view of the Uppdrag Psykisk Hälsa webpage. The following page contains a list of easy access mental health support during crises. Screenshot taken 9.1.2022.

To support individuals who might be more strongly affected by the COVID-19 infection, the government started initiatives to fund civil society organisations supporting children, women and LGBTQIA+ persons in vulnerable situations in spring 2020 (SFS, 2020: 265). The first funding consisted of 100 million SEK, and an additional 280 million was given on two separate occasions in 2021 (Regeringskansliet, 2021a). In September 2021, the government established funding of 20 million SEK for children's rights organisations in 2022-2024 to support children in socio-economically or socially vulnerable situations (Regeringskansliet, 2021b).

Participation

Children's Rights as Law in Sweden: Working Models for Authorities

As the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified as a law in Sweden, it is required that the child's perspective is taken into consideration in all decisions made by the authorities. One possible way of implementing this is to examine and analyse the child's best interest (Article 3) through a Child's Right Impact Analysis (CRIA). The CRIA is used to strengthen the children's rights



perspective in decisions which concern children directly or indirectly (Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner, 2022). PHAS developed two models for a CRIA, one regarding online and distance education issued in upper secondary schools, and later regarding vaccinations for children from 12 years of age. For example, the municipality of Halmstad created a CRIA in 2020 to examine how the pupils' rights to education, health and development are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of upper secondary schools. The CRIA aimed to examine what type of compensatory measures could be taken to safeguard the rights of children and young people (Zivojinovic, 2020).

During the pandemic, the Public Health Agency created an internal, cross-sectorial working group whose main task was to monitor information about children and school related issues. The group was responsible for dialogue with the infection control units, school authorities, and government agencies in the education sector. Furthermore, the group executed infection control guidance targeted for school settings. The group's staff consisted of analysts, both generalists and specialists in different fields, such as public health and law (Interview with PHAS).

Whereas the Public Health Agency aimed to formulate general advice from an epidemiological and infection control perspective, the working group aimed to consider the child's perspective, for example on measures regarding the organising of leisure and sports. Additionally, the group had meetings on a steering group level, examining questions regarding children, youth, and education. During the pandemic, the group informed PHAS and government offices and agencies, regions, and county administrative boards. PHAS actively worked with other national authorities such as the Ombudsperson for Children, SKR, and the local and regional school authorities. The Public Health Agency also organised dialogue meetings. At one of these dialogue meetings, the National Agency for Education invited young representatives from the national organisation for student councils. (Interview with PHAS).

According to the informant representing PHAS, there was an active, continuous attempt to evaluate what the child's perspective might be and what actions are taken in the best interest of the child. In this work however, no active hearings or dialogues with children or young people were held apart from the one meeting with



representatives from student councils on a national level. This was identified as a development area for the future. Similarly, direct contact and actively listening to the voices of children and young people in vulnerable situations could be improved. (Interview with PHAS).

Right to Participate and Access to Appropriate Information

The informant from the Swedish National Agency of Education (SNAE) communicated that SNAE had continuous meetings and dialogues with student representatives (student councils). These students also visited the government office and PHAS. Further, SNAE collaborated with the Ombudsperson, the Swedish Agency for Participation (Myndigheten för delaktighet), an expert agency that promotes work with the implementation of disability policy, and the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen).

According to the informant (SNAE), there would be room for improvement in the current model. When children or young people were heard, it generally happened as an evaluation only *after* decisions had been made and initiatives were taken. This emphasised certain adult-steered questions instead of starting from the actual daily environments of children and young people. SNAE received information that, for example, when headmasters performed risk evaluations or safety tours at the school, it was only with the teaching staff, janitors, and other professionals working at the school, but pupils were usually not included. Neither were their voices heard regarding the way restrictive measures affected schools and caused alterations to the physical or social environment and teaching. It was mostly older, upper secondary school pupils whose voices were heard and younger pupils very seldom. A possible way to improve listening to young people's voices could be via ministerial visits to local schools. The dialogue could be accessible, informal ways of hearing children and young people's thoughts, opinions, and ideas for improvement regarding sports, lunches, native language learning, and other areas needing adjustment. (Interview with SNAE).

As the national authorities produced the pandemic related guidelines, many practical decisions regarding pandemic-related initiatives were made on a local or regional level. At the same time, the responsibility of implementing children and youth



participation in practice was dependent on the structures of the local systems. According to an interviewee representing the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor, MUCF), whose expertise lies in youth participation and civil society, there is a need for active, well-functioning systems to safeguard children and youth participation in a meaningful way that ensures the participation of vulnerable groups:

Fundamental structures for youth participation in society are crucial. The crisis only strengthened the suspicion already there – that youth dialogue is more for show instead of really being valued as an important part of decision-making processes, as an asset to ensure the protection of the rights of the child and young people. By ensuring the rights of children and youth there is potential for positive effects and development in society. When a crisis happens, it is too late to figure out how to have a dialogue and engage young people. (Comment by an informant, MUCF).

During a crisis, children and young people have the right to knowledge and information, and they should also receive the information in a way which is appropriate for their age, as is stated in article 17 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child CRC, 2003). The information from news channels led to increased fear and concern among children, which could be seen in the number of children seeking support from the chat channels of the Children's Right Organisation Bris (Angsell et al., 2021).

However, there were some initiatives to safeguard the children's right to appropriate information about the pandemic. Between March and May 2020, Minister of Gender Equality Åsa Lindhagen, who was responsible for Children's Rights politics in the parliament, hosted a digital hearing with the *Children's Rights Delegation* and two press meetings where she, together with experts from other ministries and authorities answered children's questions about COVID-19. The delegation consisted of civil society organisations that work with issues pertaining to children's rights nationally and internationally, such as UNICEF, the Ombudsperson for Children, Bris and the youth organisation LSU. (Regeringskansliet, 2020b; 2020c; 2020d).



Over time, various authorities and organisations published websites with videos and information directed to children and young people, such as the webpage for regional healthcare providers 1177.se, and UMO.se directed at 13–25-year-olds. The Swedish public television company SVT provided a news broadcast, [Lilla Aktuellt](#), which was commended on discussing corona-related topics that were easy for children to access and understand (SVT, 2021). Additionally, SNAE and actors such as the Ombudsperson for Children and [Save the Children](#), provided support materials on how to discuss the crisis with children and young people.



Lessons Learned

- When planning initiatives and measures, authorities shall evaluate and follow up on the short and long-term effects these might cause for children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations.
- Education plays an important role in safeguarding children's right to health and wellbeing. Onsite school, recreation, and leisure activities function as safety nets, providing routine, structure, social encounters and exercise which are crucial for the psychosocial and physical wellbeing of children and young people.
- Continue strengthening the child and youth perspective within the work of authorities through accessible platforms and methods to facilitate child and youth participation.
- Strengthen the child's perspective in the work of authorities. Establishing a functioning structure for cross-sectional collaboration and dialogue between authorities, such as the National Agency for Education, the Ombudsperson for Children, the infection control specialists, and regional authorities, would be valuable.
 - A key element of these collaborative structures would be that the Convention of the Rights of the Child becomes a formalised topic which guides the work of authorities rather than seeing children's rights as a separate subject.
- Collaboration between schools, NGOs and youth organisations could be fruitful in ensuring children and young people's easy access to leisure activities and support services in the event of a crisis. Youth organisations have experience and expertise in communicating with children and youth in ways that are more natural and accessible for them.



2.2 Denmark: Concerns of Children and Youth

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Education

From the outset, the Danish government, in agreement with Parliament, wanted to keep children as much as possible in schools. One concern was that if children, particularly small children, were prevented from attending day care and schools, parents would not be able to work, and the economy would suffer further. However, the wellbeing of children was their main concern.

The first exception to the general rule of non-attendance in onsite education during lockdown was for children and youth in vulnerable positions and children with special needs. This exception was applied from the outset of the pandemic and was formulated in the emergency education decree (Nødundervisningsbekendtgørelsen) (BEK Number 242, 19 March 2020). The decree tasked the individual institution or school with organising emergency education according to individual student's needs, as far as possible according to the extraordinary health situation. Politically, there was some discussion about how detailed and strict the regulations could be concerning children in kindergartens and schools. The minister herself did not think children could keep a distance within the same class. The recommendation from the ministry stated that there should be a distance between employees and parents and between pupils in different classes, but not between pupils from the same class. The longest lockdown concerned the oldest pupils in primary school (15 years of age) and was about four months in total, from winter 2020 until spring 2021.

As it was not possible to allow onsite attendance for the majority of pupils, the government sought other measures to ensure the rights of children to receive education through distance learning. Therefore, emergency education has included virtual participation, phone and application-mediated messages, assignments given



on digital platforms and virtual teacher presentations and class discussions. Virtual teaching takes place synchronously, where the teacher and pupils are at the same time in a virtual space, or asynchronously, where they are not present at the same time (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2020a).

Municipalities offered emergency care and education for three groups of children aged 0-9 years. The first group included children whose parents worked in critical functions for the public. The second group concerned children whose parents worked in private companies and who had yet to send their workforce home. The third group concerned children and youth with special socioemotional, pedagogical or treatment needs and children whose needs were related to problems at home. Parents were not seen as responsible for their child's education but were encouraged to support their learning. This group included children of school age and youths in secondary or voluntary education.

From early on, a particular concern was raised in the partnership concerning the support for children and young people in vulnerable positions. Several policy packages were decided on by parliament. Early in 2020, a grant was given to voluntary associations to support vulnerable children and families in day care. For children in the last two years of primary school, new agreements were reached in parliament concerning the winter and summer exams of the school year: some pupils were allowed to use the yearly grade as their final exam grade. For the children who finished primary school in 2020, there was a particular concern regarding bridging primary and secondary education schools or institutions. These pupils were not physically allowed to access their newly chosen secondary or voluntary education institutions. Therefore, they started a new educational level and institution with introductory courses and so on virtually. This raised concerns firstly on whether the new students would get a sufficient introduction and clarity about their choice of education, and secondly whether the online focus would mean that patterns would change so that fewer students would pursue voluntary education. Therefore, a political agreement was reached on stronger student guidance and information for young people and their parents (Interview with a civil servant from Ministry for Children and Education, Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2021b). The pattern did not seem to change (e-mail correspondence with a civil servant from Ministry for Children and Education, 16 November 2022).



Young people in secondary education institutions, in particular non-graduating classes from secondary schools, experienced the longest lockdowns, and lack of physical access to educational institutions, both in the first and second periods of lockdown (autumn 2020 and much of 2021).

Regarding youth education, a range of concerns were raised, and measures were employed accordingly. The first concern was about the requirements for distance learning or onsite education. Priority of physical presence was given to students in vocational training institutions due to their workshop-based studies and students in upper secondary educational institutions in their final year. Further, a priority of presence and support was defined for youth with 'special needs'. According to one informant, it was difficult to define and delimit 'special needs' regarding entire educational institutions and individual pupils. Concerning institutions, one example that our informant mentioned was the Preparatory Base Education (Forberedende Grunduddannelse, FGU) which is education for youth up to 25 years of age who may have to do supplementary work on top of their primary school exam to enter education, training or work (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2022b).

The Preparatory Base Education institutions were initially considered 'special' because many students could be in danger of completely falling out of the education system so that they could attend their school physically. Some students and student representatives felt stigmatized for being labelled 'special' and having additional adjustments made to accommodate their needs. On the other hand, they also felt that their education, particularly theory presentations, was relatively difficult to follow online compared to 'hands-on' assignments in a workshop. Regarding the assessment of individuals with special needs, it was difficult to find common ground, and much was left for local authorities and schools. As a civil servant in the ministry explains: "There was a lot of focus on the students with special needs. During the winter of 2021, the formulation of regulation on this was narrowed only to cover those with *very special needs*. But it was difficult to understand... I don't think anyone really understood this".

A second concern was to have equal terms for different cohorts of students so that those whose preparation for exams had been impeded by the restrictions should have another option. As with primary school pupils sitting examinations,



some minor accommodations were therefore made so that students in secondary school could use their yearly grades instead of exam grades. A third concern was the increased need for student counselling and outreach. (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2021b).

To address concerns regarding young people, the government appointed a youth panel tasked with composing recommendations over three months. The youth panel brought together a range of actors, including from young people's organisations. One of the concerns raised by the youth panel was academic outcomes for education with strong practical content and traineeships, for example in vocational education. Politically, the concern for the academic outcomes of students was tied to a long-term concern for the wider economy and the continued education of the workforce. To address this concern, a large three-party agreement on traineeships was made, where the employers' costs of having trainees were lowered significantly. That is, businesses would receive 75 per cent coverage from the government of their expenses during the year of existing traineeships, as well as a supplement for salaries concerning new traineeships. Economically, this could include substantial expenses, among others, some 1.4 million DKK for employers. The allocated amount in the agreement was 5.4 billion DKK (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2020c).

Despite various efforts to maintain standards for teaching and education, there was a continued concern for some students experiencing unavoidable delays and falling behind in their education. To alleviate this, an agreement was made in June 2020 on the continuation of student benefits and loans as compensation for the period without the opportunity to take exams (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2020c).



According to one informant, however, not all funds were used. There was a specific allocation for Preparatory Base Education of 163 million DKK.¹¹ There was a separate agreement on increased support for students with physical, mental, or cognitive disabilities.¹²

Leisure

Along with the lockdown of educational institutions, many leisure activities were limited or completely closed off. Regarding the private social sphere, there were recommendations to maintain social contacts in relatively small ‘bubbles’ with only a few contacts outside of the immediate family. In some periods this meant, for example, less contact with grandparents and the wider family. For some children and youth, it meant being excluded from social bubbles where they would normally be active but more peripheral members. There are indications that such exclusion also has been present in digital fora. The organisation *Children’s Conditions* registered a marked increase in cyber bullying during the first lockdown in 2020 compared to the previous year (Børns Vilkår, 2021).

Regarding the broader and more formally organized leisure activities, most ceased, particularly indoor sports. Many sports organizations tried to maintain some social activities and get-togethers, online or onsite. However, as an informant from the national sports association explained, they experienced various problems. At a practical level, it could be quite difficult to find out what was permitted under the restrictions. Some activities were allowed, under certain conditions, for example, a specified number of people within a specified number of square meters. A further issue was that the sports and leisure organizations, such as the Scouts, usually do not

11 Derudover afsættes særskilt 163 millioner kroner til uddannelsesforlængelser på erhvervsuddannelsernes hovedforløb og FGU, hvor det i særlig grad har været vanskeligt at undervise virtuelt i praktiske fag. Endvidere gives mulighed for en ekstra uddannelsesstart for dem, som allerede er startet 3 gange på et grundforløb. Udmøntningen af uddannelsesforlængelserne på erhvervsuddannelserne sker efter drøftelser med arbejdsmarkedets parter.

12 Aftale mellem regeringen og Venstre, Dansk Folkeparti, Socialistisk Folkeparti, Radikale Venstre, Enhedslisten, Det Konservative Folkeparti, Liberal Alliance, Nye Borgerlige og Alternativet om en samlet indsats for elever og studerende med handicap på ungdomsuddannelserne og på de videregående uddannelser, 11 May 2021. [Link](#)



distinguish whether you are 15 or 17 years of age; you can usually participate in the same activities across age groups. However, the first guidelines were very clear on those age limits.

In the view of the chairperson of the Danish Sports Association, which represents a large part of the formal leisure organisations in Denmark, her membership organisations “showed a lot of community spirit”. She stated that they abided by the rules but tried to maintain activities as best they could. From the perspective of the membership base, initially, there was a strong focus on guidelines and prohibitions. However, as the pandemic evolved, more weight was given to recommendations and suggestions. The individual freedom to judge within each local organisation posed difficulties. On the one hand, the voluntary sector is based on free participation. However, on the other, it was difficult for members of local organisations – from different backgrounds and age groups – to agree on how to strike the right balance between permitting and limiting activities together.

In most cases, the local organisations decided for themselves. But there was a central issue on which the national sports association took a stand, namely to prioritise access to leisure activities for children and young people as opposed to middle-aged and elderly people. “It was quite clear to us”, says the chairperson of an association with 1.6 million members, “that what started as a full-blown health crisis could quickly become a social crisis... What does it do to us as human beings when our everyday lives are so disrupted when we cannot meet in the common activities that inspire us?”. Of particular concern was the impact on children and youth:

“Two years is a lot in the life of a teenager and more significant than in the life of a pensioner. So, we worked very hard to make authorities and politicians favour children”, for example when planning the gradual return to leisure activities (Interview). (See also DGI, 2020)



In early June 2020, an agreement was reached on support for summer activities for children and young people, including summer passes for a variety of activities, summer camps, and outreach efforts regarding children, young people, and families in vulnerable positions. The sum allocated for this support was 220 million DKK in total.¹³

According to an informant, the ministries paid close attention to the views of different organisations. The Pupils' Association attended most meetings and raised their concerns, and expressed their views. While most of the initiatives came from the ministry, the partnerships function as a feedback mechanism for defining priorities and implementation measures.

Wellbeing

From the start, there was a general concern from parliament, government and the different partnerships that the closure of schools and institutions and limiting the social sphere of children and youth, along with anxieties regarding the health of relatives due to COVID-19, would harm their wellbeing. These concerns were supported later by analyses conducted by a variety of organizations. For example, the private philanthropic Egmont Foundation interviewed 28 actors working with or for children and young people very early in the pandemic: April 2020 to May 2020 (Egmont Fonden, 2020). As two informants stressed in interviews, it is important to note that before the corona pandemic there was already a worrying trend of worsening mental health among youth, with increased anxiety and loneliness. The concern was then that the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictive measures could exacerbate the already worrying trend.

Many government recommendations thus stressed the importance of children and young people interacting in a joyful and playful manner as much as possible. For example, a letter to vocational education institutions stressed this in May 2020

13 Danish Ministry of Children and Education (2020) [Agreement on summer activities for children and young people](#)



(Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2022a). Additionally, policy packages concerning wellbeing in education institutions were approved in Parliament ¹⁴

A range of measures have been called for, for example from the Children's Council, and the three major sports associations, to help vulnerable children back into leisure activities after COVID-19 (Hammer et al., 2020). This was labelled the 'restart initiative' (DGI, 2021).

Vulnerable Groups

A study showed that it was especially children and youths from disadvantaged homes whose learning was more negatively impacted than others during the lockdowns (EVA, 2021a; 2021b). Therefore, the government launched an initiative that, in addition to existing efforts, there should be further investment in children's wellbeing and learning. At the start, some 85 million DKK, financed by both public and private funds, were set aside for this purpose. In February 2021, this was followed by an aid package from the parliament 600 million DKK. All parties supported this but one in parliament. (Børns Vilkår 2021).

A study from the National Bureau of Statistics showed a two per cent fall in nationwide reports of concern regarding children and youth. The trend over the past decade has been a steady increase. The Bureau notes that lockdowns can affect the number of reports of concern (Danmarks Statistik, 2021). A report from Children's Conditions expressed concern that social workers have had much less contact with children and youth in vulnerable positions, particularly when there has been increased stress on families. Among other things, they pointed to an escalation of violence in violence-ridden families and a record number of conflictual divorce cases involving children. The report also expressed strong concern regarding those children seeking asylum. As a likely result of the pandemic, those children seeking asylum lived on an average of 984 days in an asylum centre, more than three times as many days as in 2016 (Børns Vilkår, 2021).

14 Aftale om trivselsindsatser og faglige aktiviteter på de videregående uddannelsesinstitutioner, en indsats for særligt udsatte studerende og øget vejledning efter COVID-19.



In addition to the measures noted above, a national initiative for the wellbeing and learning of the most vulnerable children has been launched for the year 2022 (Socialstyrelsen, 2021). Some 200 million DKK were supplied both from public funds and private foundations of VILLUM FONDEN and Novo Nordisk Fonden. The funds were to be distributed primarily to those 25 municipalities out of 98 that appeared to have the strongest need.

Political participation

Generally, the government has been the primary initiator of measures, and most feedback has come from the partnerships. Outside of the partnerships, some effort has been made to include children and young people's voices at both national and local levels.

Some gatherings have been held at the national level to involve more formally organized stakeholders. In November 2020, half a year into the pandemic, the Minister of Education and Research and the Minister of Culture invited many stakeholders to a summit on youth wellbeing during the pandemic. The summit's goal was to develop new ideas for activities and communities for young people. The ideas were gathered in a catalogue of inspiration for educational institutions, teachers, students, and others who work with young people. Some of these ideas were (Uddannelses- og Forskningsministeriet, 2020; 2021):

- **'Corona-buddies'**
Establish groups of 3-4 young people to arrange activities for each other. The idea is that educational institutions, sports and voluntary associations, cultural institutions or individual groups will establish these groups. The purpose is to help ensure that everyone has someone to be with.
- **The big digital party**
Supporting young people's opportunity to get together with each other by arranging online gatherings.
- **Platform for knowledge sharing**
Creation of a national, municipal, or regional online platform for sharing and exchanging experiences.



- **Involve young people**
Arranging a hearing or development day for young people, where they can meet and develop measures that they will find interesting and relevant.
- **Digital competencies for all young people**
Establish friend groups so that young people without access to their own computer or decent internet access can be a part of small groups.
- **Digital or corona-friendly events**
Making virtual spaces available for young people, Meet-up-Mondays, national sports events and competitions, online presentations, and courses.
- **Establishing good advice to support good and inclusive communities**
- **Establishing a website where young people can find activities**
- **Education**
 - Courses in mental health, online homework help, and study cafes.
 - Inviting young people to participate in the planning and development of teaching.
 - Starter package for online education.
 - Onboarding program for new students.

In the same vein, and still at the national level, the government set up a fast-working youth panel during the second phase of COVID-19 in March 2021. Over a period of three months, the purpose of the panel was to come up with recommendations for the government, parliament, municipalities, educational institutions, associations, and civil society on how to alleviate social and personal ill-being and dissatisfaction connected with COVID-19 measures, and how to improve young people's life situation generally. The youth panel included a range of organizations, including student organizations and members of the Danish Youth Council. Although a majority of adults represented children and young people's views, some representatives were children or young people.

According to the chairman of the government's youth panel, three narratives were present in public debate. The first narrative was of the responsible, even 'sacrificial' youth, giving up much of their freedom for the greater good. Another narrative was that of the 'pirate-partying', irresponsible youth. The final, and quite strong, narrative was of a desperate and depressed youth.



For the youth panel, it was important to listen to young people, and include them in solutions locally, present their experiences and views in a way that did not pity a whole generation and present them only as passive victims. Regarding the accommodation of the restrictions, according to the youth panel, the focus should be on the more vulnerable groups rather than on the broad generation of middle-class youth (interview). According to the chairman, the public debate strongly focused on students in gymnasiums their experiences and problems, and much less on vocational training institutions. The youth panel sought to balance this in membership, discussions, and final recommendations.

Already in May 2021, the youth panel presented their findings. The main concern they stressed was children and youth with vulnerabilities and addressing the academic lag as well as social and mental after-effects. Apart from the bodies and actors invited by parliament to present their views, some national organizations also advocated for including children's perspectives and addressing the rights of children.¹⁵

In the first phase, many guidelines and requirements were general, but over time more flexibility was allowed between municipalities and within educational institutions. There was thus more space for including children and young people's perspectives to a greater degree, locally.

A report from the Children's Council (Børnerådet, the national child ombudsperson institution) noted that the ways of including children and young people could be strengthened (Oxford Research, 2021). Every second municipality reported having a local children and youth council, but there is great variation in involving children and youth in decision-making and addressing their input. One municipality in the Child Council's report – Herning Municipality – used the input from children directly in evaluating experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁶

15 See Children's Council: "The Epidemic Act must also take into account the rights of children" and "Save the Children call for political plan for the well-being of children"

16 Since 1985, it has been possible for Danish municipalities to establish and maintain youth councils. Not all municipalities have an active council, but there is a network of active local youth councils nationally (NAU, Netværk af Ungeråd) that receive funding from the national Danish Youth Council (Dansk Ungdoms Fællesråd). Some members of youth councils raised their experiences and perspectives in the public debate. For example, youths from the Youth Council of Copenhagen. [Knorrenborg, 2021](#)



Lessons learned

The Danish experience reveals the following lessons learned:

- Attention should be paid to children and youth from families in vulnerable positions. The experiences from COVID-19 lockdowns demonstrate how risky it can be for children and youth in vulnerable positions to be confined to their homes having little contact with classmates and friends.
- It is worth noting that some children and youth experienced a socially or personally calmer period during the pandemic.
- It is vitally important to be aware of the adverse effects on youth who have, relative to the generations before and after, been held back in their education and deprived of their social life.
- The importance of the measures under COVID-19 to prolong student benefits – a massive expense according to our ministry informant – but also notes that there must be a continued focus on the wellbeing of youth, particularly with poor personal networks and weak ties to teaching institutions and workplaces. Research from the Danish Evaluation Institute finds that some primary schools have developed their instruments for follow-up measures.



2.3. Finland: Measures to Protect Children and Young People's Best Interest

Alix Helfer, Finnish Youth Research Network

Education

The start of the lockdown in spring 2020 meant a huge digital leap for the Finnish educational system needed to be taken: schools, pupils, and teachers had to start from scratch to find many solutions. The transition from ordinary school to distance education was nevertheless quite successful in Finland due to the overall level of technical skills, strong teacher competences, and societal investment in digitalisation (FNAE 2021). Since the 1980s, digital strategies have been integrated into government programmes and school curricula and have been planned and implemented in collaboration with stakeholders, such as teachers, municipality unions, and different organizations (Lavonen & Salmela-Aro 2021).

The forced, rapid turn into distance education pushed new digi-pedagogical innovations, for example, the use of breakout rooms in teaching (Lavonen & Salmela-Aro 2022). New platforms, such as Discord, have been widely used during the pandemic, and students have used them to share thoughts and get help (HS, 2020). The Finnish National Agency for Education has published instructions and recommendations for schools and teachers and emphasised the development of different learning environments. Also, often the solidarity between pupils was strengthened in peer-groups, for example, by sending pictures and tips; caring and being present for each other was expressed through pictures (KARVI, 2020a). Digital literacy skills were strengthened in primary education, while novel pedagogical ideas were created in upper secondary schools during the distance learning periods (Pietikäinen, 2020). Teaching and guidance methods in vocational education and training were implemented; for example, different visitors were used in distance education. Distance learning practices and new approaches to individual support



were developed, such as online tutoring and individual guidance. Remote meetings were a benefit for students who had difficulties coming to school due to a disability or experiences of bullying at school.

However, the transition was not without problems, teachers were struggling to move their lessons to virtual platforms suddenly, and distance learning was unsuitable for all pupils. Some faced learning deficits, and school dropouts increased (Owal Group, 2021). Further, there have been problems accessing digital education as not all students have computers or internet connections. Many schools tried to get equipment for those who did not have a device available at home ([Hilppö et al., 2020](#)). Under the patronage of President Sauli Niinistö, a campaign was started for companies to donate laptops to students ([YLE, 2020](#)).

Additionally, the Finnish National Agency for Education was involved in a campaign where companies donated second-hand computers to schools. Quality learning materials are an integral part of quality distance education. As such, publishers made digital materials free of charge for teachers in spring 2020 – a generous donation estimated to be worth nearly 10 million euros ([Haapiainen-Makkonen, 2020](#)).

Distance education has created challenges particularly for students whose guardians have not supported their studies or everyday lives. Schools are not only about education but are a fundamental part of a welfare society. School can be a breathing space from unstable home life. Some pupils have fallen behind their learning targets and require learning support. There has been a high demand for both pupil support and services. In spring 2021, the Ministry of Education and Culture allocated tens of millions of euros to primary and secondary schools to close the learning gap caused by distance education and launched the so-called *engaging school-community approach*. The aim is to support children and young people in engaging in the school community, as well as to prevent and reduce absenteeism and school dropout cases. ([OKM, 2021b](#)).



The situation sparked new ideas for onsite education, such as lessons in nature. Finland's largest outdoor learning event *Ulos-Uti-Out* organized by several organisations¹⁷ gathered more than 400 teachers, educators and people working with children and young people in June 2021 to develop outdoor teaching and learning. To ensure safe gatherings, some municipalities offered face masks for students ([OPH, 2020](#)) and The National Emergency Supply Agency provided six million COVID-19 tests for schoolchildren ([YLE, 2022b](#)).

The Ministry of Education and Culture granted numerous subsidies during the pandemic – for example, to providers of upper secondary education to finance additional resource needs for teaching, guidance, welfare and support activities for 2021–2023 ([OKM, 2021c](#)). Additionally, subsidies were allocated to early childhood education, pre-primary and primary education to prevent school dropout cases and to give intensive support to the learning of disadvantaged children and pupils, for example, children speaking foreign languages as their mother tongue and children with immigration backgrounds ([OKM, 2021d](#)). Support was targeted to alleviate the problems caused by long distance learning periods and prevent students with special needs from dropping out. The extra funding allowed, for example, additional teaching of skills that had not been learned due to distance teaching. ([OKM, 2021e](#)).

Leisure

The Students' Sports Federation (2020) stated that none of the university sports operated normally during the first restrictions in 2020. Up to 45 per cent of activities were suspended. The remainder used a variety of applied means (i.e., distance sessions or gymnastics videos) to keep activities running at least partially. Besides being offered activities, children and youth were active in helping neighbours or other people in need, for example, to do grocery shopping for them, walking a dog or providing other types of help ([Hilppö et al., 2020](#)).

17 [The list of organizers and additional information](#)



The Ombudsperson for Children in Finland has stressed that it would be important to consider possible substitute sports and other recreational and leisure activities offered to children and young people when the original activities have been cancelled. The Ombudsperson stated (2021b) that more effective use of outdoor sports facilities could create opportunities for children and young people to meet each other and engage in leisure activities. In many places, new measures and ways to support outdoor sports and leisure activities were used. This included maintaining ice rings and ski slopes, removing various user charges during restricted periods, increasing the presence of activity leaders and other adults and even extending the lighting of sports facilities. (ibid).

Meeting and gathering with peers during leisure time is developmentally important for young people. According to an informant (MECF), when shopping malls and youth centres were closed in spring 2020, outreach workers noticed that on the streets, you could mainly see people using drugs and young people. Therefore, it was seen as important to provide young people with places to hang out safely and to increase resources for outreach youth work. Many experts raised their voices to support the safe gatherings of children and youth. Among others, the Ombudsperson for Children stated (2021c) that a curfew is not an option for the rights or development of children and young people. Fury tore, at the beginning of the pandemic, the government assumed that it was not necessary to limit the rights of children as strictly as the rights of the elderly or the disabled. For example, the temporary restrictions on the Uusimaa region (March-April 2020) contained a few exceptions for the benefit of children, as the prohibitions did not apply if the movement is necessary, for example, in order for the child to visit a parent. (Nieminen 2022).

Municipal youth work institutions and other organisations working with young people have been very flexible, adaptable, and dedicated to their activities even during exceptional circumstances. The state has also provided several grants to strengthen the youth sector's activities and develop digital services. According to an informant, (MECF), it was seen as better to strengthen the already existing actors and activities than to start completely new projects. Finland has many established youth organisations which transitioned their activities flexibly online. After a few months of remote work, it was realised that there was a huge need for outreach youth work.



Under normal circumstances, camps and leisure activities organised for children and youth have sustained families over the summer holidays. However, due to the pandemic restrictions, many camps were cancelled in 2020 and 2021. Some large events had to be held remotely. A significant amount of flexibility was required from different youth actors. According to an informant (MECF), many organisations were active in contacting the COVID-19 coordination group on different restrictions and health safety plans. If youth workers could not meet their clientele in person, they organised distance meetings or outdoor events periodically. For example, the Scouts used to meet outdoors. Their meetings were shortened in the winter due to the cold. There was a collective effort in the youth sector to find ways of maintaining a sense of community. Outreach workers organised meeting walks for young people when it was not safe to meet inside. Youth workshops were organised one-to-one so there would be some activities for young people.

According to an informant (MECF), during the pandemic, there was a widely shared appreciation for the work that Finland had started years earlier to develop digital youth work. Many municipalities had been prepared to take up digital solutions. As part of the Centre of Expertise for Digital Youth Work, the organisation Verke supported the field and identified areas for development. Virtual spaces have been created for young people to hang out when they could not meet live.

Many municipal practices and new implementations during the COVID-19 crisis have been listed and documented on public platforms. As an example, the [INNOKYLÄ web page](#) has collected good practices from municipalities during the COVID-19 pandemic, during exceptional circumstances. For example, the list includes an online escape room game in Teams created by youth workers. Another example was 'school breaks on Instagram' which was created by municipality Ylöjärvi's youth services and the website Harrastakotona.fi, which brings together ideas for children and young people to experience, experiment and create art at home.



Picture 2. The view of the INNOKYLÄ webpage (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Finnish Association of Local Authorities and the National Institute for Health and Welfare). Users can add content on good initiatives and models. The following page was dedicated to COVID-19 related examples for activities for children and youth. Screenshot taken 3.1.2022.

To enhance children and young people's right to meaningful leisure activities, including hobbies. The Finnish model for leisure activities was implemented by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2021 during the pandemic. The project provides funding for municipalities to offer free leisure activities based on the recreational aspirations of children and young people. Activities occur in and around schools, during or immediately after school hours, organised by local sports clubs, arts and culture organisations, youth organisations, municipal authorities, and other actors. The Finnish model aims to ensure that every child and young person has access to hobbies, regardless of family background or place of residence. (OKM 2020b).

The pandemic has caused many changes in the organisation of sports and physical activities, which were moved outside and online. Data (OKM, 2020c) have shown the wide range of "pandemic-driven" activities underway in clubs, sports federations and other organisations promoting sports. In team sports, such as football, basketball and ice hockey, many clubs provide training tips to players and coaches to monitor their members' training remotely and hold developmental meetings online. Other popular activities included 'joint video meetings' and 'team nights' to keep the team spirit alive. Distance and video-mediated training were prepared, and sports clubs shared good practices. (ibid).



The length of the pandemic widened gaps in the wellbeing of children and young people. There have been different restrictions in different parts of the country, and children and young people have suffered more in certain areas (Helfer & Myllyniemi, 2022). Most of the public aid has been targeted at municipalities where children and pupils have been worst affected by the pandemic, especially in the larger cities in Southern Finland. According to an informant (OCF), there has not been enough attention during the pandemic on how transportation to leisure activities has been affected, which has created challenges in the daily lives of young people living in rural areas. Further, there have been cuts to public transport, making it more difficult to get around.

The Ministry of Education and Culture ([OKM, 2020d](#)) gave a special contribution to youth centres to cover expenditures relating to activities and events cancelled as a result of the pandemic. The special grant was intended to help eligible youth centres safeguard their activities. The grant could be applied for with respect to expenditures incurred because of the COVID-19 crisis in connection with, for example, the unforeseen expenditure arising from activities after the end of the state of emergency. In June 2021, The Ministry of Education and Culture awarded six national youth organisations a total of 917,600 € in state aid to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on young people. ([OKM, 2021f](#)). The grants were given to support youth work and activities to help alleviate the feelings of exclusion and loneliness among young people, to provide meaningful leisure activities, and to support access to support services.

Wellbeing

The Ministerial Working Group on Child and Youth Policy explained ([OKM, 2021g](#)) that the implementation of the early vaccination programme in municipalities should have taken into account the needs of children, young people and families to receive support and to safeguard their statutory services better. Normal social and health care services were weakened as staff members were moved to handling the pandemic. In particular, resources were diverted from school and student health services at the same time as the need for support increased. As a result, access



to support and assistance for children, young people and families was in many cases more difficult and delayed.

As health professionals were increasingly needed for the tracking and testing of the virus and vaccinations, it resulted in the removal of school health personnel to other tasks in many municipalities. Therefore, many pupils had no access to school health services for long periods of time. The interruption in school health care has caused major problems among students. Furthermore, according to one informant (OCF) the National Patient Safety strategy should better include children and young people, for example, so that they are also prioritised in the vaccination programmes. Additionally, teachers, youth workers and other persons working with children and youth should be seen as critical workers in society, which could have made the return to school quicker and safer. According to our informant (*ibid*), schools and other educational institutions should be transformed to combat circulating viruses and infections. This is done, for example, by paying attention to good ventilation and smaller group sizes in the future.

The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture awarded grants for projects in support of students' wellbeing and learning in 2021 and for projects to strengthen student guidance and student wellbeing in higher education. Cooperation between student representatives and universities played a key role in these projects. The projects organised and developed low-threshold services, such as tutoring and peer support, and aimed to strengthen and organise guidance and support services for university students, such as counselling and mental health services. Some of these projects promoted and developed activities initiated in previous projects. ([OKM, 2021h](#)).

There has been a remarkable increase in the demand for mental health services in student health care. In 2020, the number of mental health related care assessments increased by 26 per cent compared to the previous year, and the demand for services remained high in 2021 ([FSHS, 2021a](#)). Due to the increased need for mental health-services and low-threshold support for young people, the Finnish Student Health Services offered new online chat services for students. For example, a new service line was opened for mental health services. The SelfChat's mental health line serves students for treatment assessment and service counselling on weekdays



in three languages: Finnish, Swedish, and English ([FSHS, 2021b](#)). The provision of group therapies, online brief therapy and courses promoting mental health were increased. Information packages were offered to students to improve ergonomics and physical activity ([FHSH, 2021c](#)) as well as resilience ([FSHS, 2020](#)) during distance education.

The crisis has been visible in the increased number of young people seeking help online. The children and young people's helplines have received many more calls due to the pandemic. For example, children in need have contacted the SOS Children's Village Help Chat for 7–15-year-olds more than 20 000 times in its first year of operation in the midst of the pandemic. The chat operators have reported serious child protection cases to the authorities almost three times a week. ([SOS Children's Villages, 2021](#)). Further, the Association of First Aid and Shelters' (2021) chat rooms' usage quadrupled between 2020–2021, and the use of outpatient services also increased significantly. The most frequent requests for help were related to domestic violence and divorce. Overall, people sought more help than before during the first restriction period.

Significant efforts were made quickly to help children and young people cope with stress, isolation and concerns about their health and wellbeing during the pandemic. In September 2020, the Association of First Aid and Shelters opened a chat service for underage children and young people on parental separation, fighting and domestic violence. During the autumn, around 400 children sought help. Their concerns included parental divorce, their own relationships, insecurity and violence at home. The opening hours of the chat were extended towards the end of 2020. The strength of the chat service of the Federation of First Aid and Shelters is that the same staff also helps face-to-face in local member associations and can direct people to receive help services elsewhere, even in an anonymous chat. ([First Aid and Shelters, 2021](#)).

In April 2022, the Ministry of Education and Culture awarded the Youth Work prize to the joint project of the youth organisation 'Sua Varten Somessa' [*For You on Social Media*], which was launched in March 2020. The project raises awareness among young people and youth professionals about grooming and intervention methods by bringing outreach youth workers into digital environments. This



supports young people's growth, identify their rights, and promote safety on the channels where under-18s are most easily reached, especially on TikTok. With youth spending more time online, there was a need to increase the presence of adults and create a safe space on social media. ([OKM, 2022](#)).

Besides online services, many NGOs have also offered other types of help online or via phone, such as the 24/7 *Sekasin-chat* on Discord server and the *Safe Harbour Discord server* for young people with experience in child protection, the anonymous and free *Boys' phone* telephone service for boys and young men under 20. For LGBTQIA+ youth, weekly group chats have been organised by SETA, the LGBTQIA+ Rights Association, in Finland ([Tukinet, 2022](#)).

Vulnerable Groups

For those in a vulnerable position, the pandemic has been particularly difficult. Even before the pandemic, the Committee on the Rights of the Child had expressed concerns about discrimination against children with disabilities, as well as against immigrant and refugee children, and children from ethnic minorities such as Roma (CRC, 2011). This discrimination was seen as a significant problem in Finland compared to other Nordic countries. (Hakalehto, 2017). For example, children and youth under child protection reported the postponement or cancellation of appointments with social workers, relatives, care and therapy providers and other authorities during the pandemic ([THL, 2020](#)). This can have long-lasting effects and lower trust in society and others.

During the pandemic, the importance of parental support for children and youth has increased. The presence of guardians or parents in online education has been a protective factor for many children and young people. Due to the rapidly changing and complicated regulations, The Finnish Parents' Association was contacted by numerous parents, according to one interviewee (CSGF). The situation has been particularly difficult for children and youth coming from immigrant backgrounds, as their parents may not have been able to support them in distance education. Additionally, many schools gave information only in the national languages (Finnish and Swedish). Some parents could not do remote work from home, and



the children were therefore left to their own devices. In most press releases and conferences, there were no sign language interpreters. Furthermore, because officials and reporters appearing on TV often wore masks, lip-reading became difficult or impossible.

The majority of people with disabilities do not have the opportunity to log in to the OmaKanta portal (a website for accessing data and health records) and download the digital COVID-19 vaccination certification. People with disabilities had difficulties getting a corona passport from the health centre, a problem that the Non-Discrimination Ombudsperson took a stand on ([YLE, 2021](#)).

Due to the crisis, cross-governmental activity brought together many actors nationwide. During the pandemic, there have been signs of solidarity between different experts, institutions, and ministries. There was close cooperation between the government and other stakeholders, such as the Association of Local Authorities, the Teachers' Union (OAJ) and education providers. ([Hammarsten, 2020](#)). Even though NGOs joined forces, within the 11,000 social welfare organisations in Finland, there has been cooperation through volunteering, peer support, and paid professional work. These organisations and their multifaceted services have significantly impacted during the pandemic, offering peer support or other support in everyday life. Various NGOs reach very vulnerable groups. NGOs and other organisations have also produced information about and for their interest groups.

Some children receive the only daily warm food at school. There was a concern that these children would not get enough food during the school closures. Therefore, in many municipalities, schools provided access to school meals for students even during closures ([Hilppö et al., 2020](#)). For example, the city of Helsinki organized school meals for pupils in grades 1-9 who were in distance education. Pupils or their guardians could also collect take-away meals from schools. The distribution of meals was carried out in small groups in accordance with hygiene guidelines ([Innokylä, 2020](#)). A special campaign 'Every Child a Lunch' was launched in spring 2020 to



support low-income families¹⁸. Food bags containing ingredients for nutritious meals for families were provided weekly. The amount of delivered food bags rose in the first month to more than 125,000 meals. ([First Aid and Shelters, 2020](#)).

In a crisis it is important to have a solid knowledge base to determine what kind of help is needed. An informant (MECF) emphasised that there is a strong basis in existing studies to predict trends, as there is a long history of funding research, e.g., Youth Barometers and School Health Promotion studies. The Ministry of Education and Culture made good use of the data for policy implementation. Further, a working group to assist in the preparation of the National Child Strategy was appointed in spring 2020, with one of the tasks to study the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the rights of children and youth. The expert group hosted several workshops for children and young people in cooperation with the NGOs representing children, especially those in vulnerable positions during the COVID-19 crisis – such as children and youth with disabilities, clients of child protection services, children from LGBTQIA+ or single parent families as well as unaccompanied migrants. Additionally, the National Child Strategy's working group implemented nationwide surveys to depict children and young people's everyday lives shaped by the pandemic.

During the COVID-19 crisis, children and young people were often discussed as a unified group. However, children and young people should not be considered a homogeneous group, as the National Child Strategy's expert group emphasised (2021). Domestic courts have recently highlighted that all children must be treated as individuals and not just passive objects (Hakalehto 2021). The different life situations of children and young people must be considered in the management of the crisis (CSGF). Special attention needs to be given to the diversity of their views and experiences. Further, 'vulnerabilities' can be a problematic concept and can result in discrimination. Certain groups of children can be depicted as vulnerable under special conditions, but their situation may alter with time. It is clear that the negative

18 The campaign was organized by different actors, such as Itla Children's Foundation, The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters, The Central Union for Child Welfare, The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare, The Martha Organisation, the Tiina and Antti Herlin Foundation, and Tradeka.



effects of the crisis are particularly felt by children, young people, and families who were already disadvantaged before the start of the pandemic.

As an indigenous people, the Sámi have national and transnational rights to live in their territory, even in exceptional circumstances. The Finnish Chairman of the Sámi Parliament saw the impact of COVID-19 on his community living on the territory of the four countries as significant (YLE, [2022](#)). For many Sámi people, family ties extend across borders, which has been difficult to maintain. The Sámi Community Council criticised that the Finnish authorities did not always assess the impact of the tightened restrictions at state borders on the collective rights of the Sámi people. The young Sámi people have also pointed out that they felt excluded from the Sámi community, as they could not develop their link to their home region. Sámi youth participation in cultural events and other gatherings has been restricted by the pandemic. The pandemic has had an impact on the activities of the Sámi Youth Council. Decisions have had to be taken quickly and the Youth Council did not always have time to express their views during the preparation and decision-making process.

Participation

Right to Participate as Access to Appropriate Information

In general, very little information regarding the pandemic was initially child-oriented, meaning that the *children's right to information was often forgotten*. However, the government organized their first corona-related press conference for children in April 2020. Questions asked by children aged 7-12 years were answered by Prime Minister Sanna Marin, Minister of Education Li Andersson, and Minister of Science and Culture Hanna Kosonen. The event was organised in cooperation with the Finnish Children's News (HS), Apu Juniori and Yle (The National Broadcasting Company), which jointly collected questions from primary school children. Schools could use the live broadcast for distance learning. The briefing was streamed live on the Council of State's YouTube channel with a link to another website and with sign language interpretation. The Children's Corona Information was also shown in Swedish with simultaneous interpretation on the Yle Arena service. ([Finnish Government, 2020](#)).



Otherwise very little national communication about COVID-19, its prevention or the corona strategy has been targeted at children. In September 2021, another question-and-answer session on COVID-19 pandemic was organized for primary school age children and young people by the Minister of Education Li Andersson and Otto Helve, the Chief Medical Officer at the National Institute for Health and Welfare. The questions were asked by pupils in grades 3-9 from selected primary schools across Finland via video conferencing. ([OKM 2021f](#)).

The authorities sent thousands of newsletters to schools, day care centres, and hobby groups during the autumn across the country, almost 3,000 in Helsinki alone. The goal of rapid communication was to ensure that the teaching arrangements were safe and support the opportunity to participate in classroom teaching. ([STM,2021](#)).

Some efforts were made to grasp the perspectives of children and youth, to hear and understand how these groups feel, perceive, and interpret situations where adults place them. It is important to hear younger generations in different ways, considering a child and youth friendly approach. Besides questionnaires and surveys, new ways of data gathering should be implemented. For example, the book “Washing hands and being at home: the coronavirus experiences of third grade pupils” (2020) brought together COVID-19 related experiences and perceptions of children living in the city of Jyväskylä. The material was collected in autumn 2020 under the initiative of the Ombudsperson for Children in Finland. The children were allowed to show their thoughts in the form of a painting, drawing or writing. (Kekkonen, 2020).

To ensure that children and young people have access to information, they should be addressed in their everyday environments, such as social media. Some municipalities and hospital districts partly did this. Further, the Prime Minister of Finland asked for the help of social media influencers, who were active in delivering COVID-19 related messages via Instagram and Tiktok, to reach younger people ([Heikkilä, 2020](#)). Even the National Institute of Health and Welfare did COVID-19 vaccination campaigns on Tinder and other social media platforms ([Kilpamäki, 2021](#)). Some news media such as [Helsingin Sanomat newspaper](#) and the Finnish



Broadcasting Company YLE published COVID-19 related news and social media content (for example, [YLE Kioski on Tiktok](#)) targeted to children and young people.

According to an interviewee, campaigns addressed to young people should be done in their language, be humorous and involve youth in the messaging. For example, MaskiGäng was a joint campaign organised on TikTok to encourage young people to wear masks in crowded places, such as public transport (Innokylä, [2020](#)).

The restrictions have brought opportunities for indigenous people, as the pandemic has further increased the importance of digital youth work in the Sámi language. This is particularly important in terms of reaching out to Sámi youth. The Sámi Youth Council's DigiÁrra project aims, among other things, to increase Sámi language information and counselling services for young people. The project has developed a digital information service and a model for digital youth work for Sámi youth. Distance working has some benefits and has contributed to facilitating and increasing the frequency of meetings. The long distances between the Sámi region and the rest of the country have made it easier for young people to meet. (Sámediggi, 2020).

Civil Society and Political Participation

The Child Strategy handbook on child impact assessment for legislators (Iivonen & Pollari, 2021) emphasises child and youth consultation. Previously, child impact assessments in municipalities have often not been conducted when drafting laws (Rantala et al., 2019: 198; Kemiläinen & Keinänen, 2015). Especially at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, decisions were often made without a major child impact assessment. The COVID-19 crisis has shown how important it is to listen and involve children and young people in decision making. As the Ombudsperson for Children stated in a press release (STT 2021), the best interests of the child must be considered when deciding about exceptional circumstances. Preparedness for this was sometimes weak when making COVID-19 related restrictions. In our interview, the Ombudsperson for Children stated that if practices restricting the fundamental and human rights of children and young people are undertaken, they must be done due to unavoidable reasons and should be proportionate and specific.



Furthermore, the Ombudsperson for Children took a stand in the largest Finnish newspaper on a child's right to education and a child's right to leisure and recreation. In the Ombudsperson's view, the impact of possible restrictive measures on children and youth was not sufficiently assessed in the Government Bill draft. According to her ([Pekkarinen 2021](#), translation AH):

“The inability to take children's views into account and respect children's right to participate in decision-making about them has become visible. The views of children are only considered when they are in line with the views of adults. Corona vaccinations sparked a debate over whether the right to self-determination and privacy of a child capable of making informed decisions should be respected. Taking children's views into account is more broadly related to children's right to participate. When formulating norms during a pandemic, children's opinions have rarely been clarified.”

Youth councils are representative institutions that can be consulted, as there are very active young people who want to impact society. In Finland, each municipality should have a youth delegation. According to the Finnish youth council report ([2021](#)), approximately half of the youth council members said that the COVID-19 crisis had a negative impact on their activities. There was some concern regarding the participation of young people in the board meetings in Teams. The youth councils' involvement was, in some regions, practically non-existent. The restrictions were invariably mentioned as a partial reason for this.

Lessons learned

The crisis is a place to learn. The rapid change to online education was handled quite well in Finland due to the existing good digi-infrastructure and teachers' digital skills. However, the change did not happen without any problems. The crisis has been more severe for some children and young persons, specifically those already in vulnerable positions before the pandemic. Access to digital tools was enhanced with different campaigns. Education institutes had to learn new ways of teaching, new platforms were found and used, and different visitors were useful in distance teaching. For example, group or class reading, or live streaming of cultural events and



performances, combined with organising outdoor events and different challenges (Finnish Parents' League, 1.2.2022). The pandemic has also reinforced the interdisciplinary nature of youth work as (digital) outreach work. Many NGOs were able to adjust their actions during the pandemic. They were supportive of families, whether that was help with providing a warm meal or mental support during uncertain conditions.

Students in higher educational institutions have been in distance education for long periods of time. It is important to find ways to support young persons during the first stages of adulthood – as was said by one of the interviewees, youth cannot be lived from a distance. In some schools, community and support for young people have been enhanced with the use of tutor-teachers or other meaningful adults in everyday life of children and youth. Additionally, resources have been added to outreach work on the streets and digital platforms. It is worth highlighting that educators have been under a lot of stress. As one of the informants said, the digital infrastructure and high-quality digi-pedagogy skills can be continuously improved by teachers and persons working with children and youth, as digi-environments are not going to disappear in the future. With the rapid speed of events, under the stress and extra workload due to the exceptional circumstances, the support, recovery and wellbeing of teachers and youth workers should be emphasised in the aftermath of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis has shown how important it is to hear young people in different ways, for example through creative and participatory methods and at the municipal and governmental levels. It is not only important to listen to children and youth but to enforce and activate different groups in participation. Research and diverse ways of studying children and youth have been used to ensure that decisions and actions are based on a sufficiently broad and high-quality evidence base. *Vis versa*, the latest updates should be communicated to children and youth in a way that they can understand and in surroundings and channels that reach them effectively.



2.4. Norway: Children's Rights Perspective and Initiatives

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Education

As part of the national lockdown, schools in Norway were closed to all but the children of key workers from 13 March. Pupils in grades 1 to 4 returned to school on 27 April, whereas grade 5 pupils returned on 10 and 11 May 2020 (Bubb & Jones, 2020). Two cohorts of children in schools did not take their exams. According to one informant, the longest lockdown for some children has been up to sixteen months. An early study found great variation in the kinds of teaching provided for pupils in elementary schools. Some had relatively frequent onsite teaching or group work, while others primarily worked individually based on work plans (NTNU/NIFU, 2021, cited in Bufdir, 2021).

Early in the pandemic in April 2020, a regional association of teachers surveyed views among their approximately 1,500 members regarding the first experiences of online education. The survey showed great concern among teachers for their performance as teachers during distance education and for the learning of children. Nine out of ten found that children's learning would be negatively affected. On the positive side, the great majority found that information from school management was appropriate and sufficient (Mejlbo, 2020).

A study conducted in the same period, in April 2020, surveyed the views of pupils, parents/carers and teachers of distance education in one municipality, which in terms of national tests and examinations, achieved the national average, but that had according to researchers, “invested heavily in technology, and all schools had already established some digital learning before the home-school period began”



(Bubb & Jones, 2020: 213). The survey results from the early COVID-19 wave were compared with findings from the survey conducted prior to the pandemic in September 2019. The results from the study were surprising; it noted benefits for primary school pupils concerning the use of technology, use of creative teaching, feedback and progress, and pupil and parent involvement.

In sum, it seems that most of the reported benefits from measures taken during the pandemic in education have been found among the younger pupils, those whose parents have been able to better support them at home. The youth expert council under the Ombudsperson Institution finds that across different groups, many have lost their motivation to perform well in school. Therefore, they recommended that social wellbeing should be prioritised when schools physically reopen.

Leisure

As previously mentioned, some children and youth lived under strict measures of isolation, or at least distancing, for 16 months. According to a respondent, this has led to debates about a 'lost generation' in terms of participation in voluntary leisure activities such as sports and hobbies, indoors or outdoors. The Norwegian Children and Youth Council, LNU, is an umbrella organisation for 97 Norwegian children and youth organizations. The LNU has noted that the smaller children have remained engaged in voluntary associational life, but at the same time, it has raised concern that the 15+ youth who were disengaged during COVID-19 may never return. They found indications of at least a 12 per cent decrease in membership from the end of 2019 to the end of 2020 (LNU, 2021a).

The LNU generally finds that the pandemic has significantly harmed the level of activity and the membership base in voluntary associations. It argues that many children and young people need support to pull them back into associational life. Concerning the national budgetary process, LNU has argued that extra support should be provided for the voluntary sector, partly in the form of funding that can be applied for (LNU, 2021b) but also with access to school facilities for activities, and with the prioritisation of children and youth, both in lessening restrictions on



social mobility and in terms of ensuring predictability and support to regain the levels of activity prior to COVID-19 (LNU, 2021a).

A particular concern has been the number of people who partake in voluntary work generally, such as the local football club coaches and the organizers at the philanthropic second-hand clothes shop. The annual 'voluntary work barometer' showed a decline in the share of people who carried out voluntary work, from 66 per cent in 2020 to 55 per cent in 2021 (Frivillighet Norge, n.d.; Kantar, 2021). Additionally, the report on the barometer reveals:

- That the decline in voluntary work is sharpest among the group who take part seldomly and in the group who contribute between 5-10 hours per week
- The youngest age groups and men have shown the biggest decline
- The main decline concerns *active (frequent) participation* (13 per cent decline) as opposed to *having volunteered* (7 per cent decline) and *donating* (4 per cent decline).
- The largest decline concerns leisure and social associations, with a 20 per cent decline overall.
- Four in ten respondents report that the pandemic prevented them from voluntary work. However, five out of ten stated that the main reason for not participating was the cancellation of activities.

Government funds have been allocated both nationally and locally to support leisure activities. Some funds have been given to organisations such as LNU, and municipalities have organised activities like summer camps. According to an informant, this has caused some voluntary associations to critique municipalities for 'crowding out' their efforts. When municipalities also organise events for children and youth, with paid staff, the role of voluntary organisations can be diminished if fewer children and youth participate.

Wellbeing

The previously noted differences concerning education are reflected in the wellbeing of different groups. Firstly, there seem to be differences between children and young



people who, for example, generally orient themselves not to their parents but to other youth outside the home. Many have felt a lack of meaning and hopelessness because of the social restrictions. A report from the child Ombudsperson institution's expert group sums this up in its title: "There is a difference between what you miss in a year when you are 16 and when you are 45" (Barneombudet, 2021a).

The National Health Institute issued an overview report of findings concerning youth and children across countries, including studies from Norway. The report noted a Norwegian study that found most youths were spending more time than usual with their family, yet one in four also reported more problems (*krangling*) in the family (Nøkleby et al., 2021; Bakken et al., 2020)

While the general picture is of great concern of a 'lost generation', a main theme in research is one of 'winners and losers'. As one early study noted, there was a paradox in that, on the one hand, everybody had to do the same (limited) things, but on the other hand, the impact on wellbeing exacerbated existing inequalities in opportunities and preconditions (Eriksen & Davan, 2020). Some groups have had positive experiences under the restrictions, while others have had their wellbeing severely impacted. Based on 40 interviews with young people transferring from elementary school to secondary education, the study found four broad narratives of experiences. In the first narrative, which covered about half of the respondents, the youth people found that things were okay during lockdown and that it had been nice to spend time with family, but they also missed spending time with friends. In the second narrative, a less frequent experience, youths experienced some relief as they avoided bad days in school due to bullying or conflicts. All the youths in this category had middle-class backgrounds and close ties to family but normally found school life difficult. The third narrative was of youth who saw lockdown as an opportunity to concentrate on schoolwork and relax, in contrast to the normal life with many social commitments. All the young people with this experience were from either well-off or very well-off backgrounds. The last narrative, by contrast, centred on the experience of *loss and difficulty*. Though all youths in the study experienced some form of loss, it was dominant in this group, where the youths simultaneously experienced problems in various central parts of their lives. All the youth people with this narrative came from less well-off backgrounds.



Vulnerable Groups

From very early on, concerns were raised about the conditions and learning of children and youth in vulnerable positions. A regional survey among teachers found that nine out of ten teachers were worried about follow-up concerning children and youth in vulnerable positions, and 35 per cent were ‘very concerned’ about them (Mejlbo, 2020). In another study, parents/carers and teachers reported that many vulnerable pupils in schools performed better at home than with the distractions of the classroom (Bubb and Jones, 2020: 216). As noted above, the government had set up a coordination group concerning vulnerable children and youth. The coordination group has reported on concerns and provided input for measures concerning children. Parts of the reports have been based on material from professionals, for example in the Child, Youth and Health Department, Police and Integration, and other departments. Attempts have also been made to directly garner the experiences and views of children and young people. Thus, the Child, Youth and Families department has asked various organisation to conduct hearings and interviews with children and youth to gain their perspectives (Bufdir, 2021).

The Ombudsperson for Children in Norway dedicated a page on its website addressing issues such as who can children and young people talk to about the coronavirus (in Norwegian), with useful resources and helplines.



Picture 3. The view of Norway’s Ombudsperson for Children’s [webpage](#). The following page gathers helplines where children and young people can talk to about the coronavirus. Screenshot taken 3.1.2022.



The coordination group's reports have stressed a range of concerns. Municipalities and regions have reported that many families have cancelled meetings with social counsellors, that the number of referrals concerning children and youth was different from what was expected, that few social workers have had physical meetings with families, and that many of them work from home (Bufdir, 2021: 18). At the beginning of COVID-19, there was much concern whether social counsellors received enough referrals in municipalities. Reports from April 2021 showed some differences across social service units. Some ten per cent of service units reported receiving fewer referrals than usual. However, another ten per cent found that they received more referrals than usual concerning children below school age. However, for children of school age or above, there was an indication of an increase in referrals. Some 23 per cent of units reported an increase, and ten per cent of units reported a decrease in referrals of children of school age or above (Bufdir, 2021: 22).

Another concern mentioned in a status report from April 2021 by both professionals and children and youth is that of children with disabilities. For example, a student with a visual impairment felt that he was hit twice as hard compared to his friends who could see. He stated that “the pandemic has stolen a big and important part of my life it is all the more difficult because I cannot see” (Bufdir, 2021: 49).¹⁹

An area of concern noted by the Ombudsperson for Children and Youth institution was the prioritisation of administrative and health personnel capacity for general health concerns (testing, tracking, etc.) away from specialized health services (including mental health).

19 Citation from [interview page 49](#). Similar concerns were raised by the Children and Youth Ombuds Institution and the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombud, for example in a [letter to the prime minister](#) in March 2021.



Political participation

Democracy and participation are among the core principles in the 2020 Norwegian national curriculum, which states that “children should experience that they are listened to in the daily life of the school, that they have real influence, and that they can affect that which concerns them” (cf. Bubb and Jones, 2020: 210, citing UDIR, 2019). The phrase is based on one of the stipulations whereby a catalogue of human rights was written into the constitution in 2017. The new stipulations included paragraph 104 on the best interests of the child and paragraph 109 on the right to education.

Since 2019, before COVID-19, Norwegian municipalities have been obligated to have a local youth council as a platform for giving voice to youth concerns which could be heard by the local politicians on the municipal council. The Norwegian Association of Local Governments (KS) has conducted a survey which found that those youths who are part of the Youth Councils are generally more satisfied with the functioning and impact of the councils compared to members of local councils for senior citizens and people with disabilities, respectively (KS, 2022). However, during the first phase of the pandemic, it was challenging for municipalities and regions (*fylkeskommuner*) to involve youth councils and local pupils' councils in the process.

As noted, the Department of Children, Youth, and Families sought to involve various children and youth organizations to gain their perspectives more directly. Thus, dialogue meetings were held with LNU, Youth with Disabilities (*Unge funksjonshemmede*), Youth and Spare Time (Ungdom og Fritid), Agenda X, Pupils' Organization, Skeiv Ungdom, and Press/Save the Children Youth. Meetings were also held with user organizations concerning vulnerable children and youth, including children placed in out-of-home care. Experiences and suggestions from these groups were included in the reports from the department. Further, in relation to the local government level, the department sent out a letter to all municipalities and regional stewards (*statsforvaltere*) where they were asked to work together on a list of five tasks, the last of which was participatory processes, to involve children and youth.



Steps have been taken to involve children and youth in decision-making and observe their rights according to the UN convention on children. Several interviewees, however, find that the involvement could have been more thorough. They state that the flaws in the involvement of children and young people had very negative consequences for how they were prioritised. According to a respondent from the Ombudsperson for Children and Youth institution, the appropriate structures for participation were not used:

“We do have structures for participation – pupils’ councils, youth councils, voluntary associations concerning youth and so on, but our impression is that these were just shut down and not used.”

Another problem concerned the pace of the processes. For example, the Ombudsperson for Children and Youth institution found that they were invited to many hearings but were required to respond within 24 hours and often provided with insufficient information. A third way in which children’s involvement was lacking – according to the Ombudsperson for Children - was in terms of the content of decision-making materials – what pieces of information and what types of consequences were considered. According to the constitution, the state, regions, and municipalities ought to carry out a children’s rights evaluation for measures concerning children and youth before they are put in place. This, however, was not done. The consequence was that only direct health effects entered decision-making. A fourth way that involvement was lacking concerned arenas for contestation. According to the Ombudsperson, many decisions were made within the government without even the involvement of parliament.

Similar sentiments were stressed in a study from the first wave of the pandemic that pointed to a lack of political participation on the part of children and young people. The study included 532 youths aged 13 to 19 years. Fifty-three per cent of respondents found that authorities had not taken their needs and concerns into account in relation to COVID-19 measures. One thing the youths found unfair was the prioritisation of adults, for example, the reopening of public spaces and serving alcohol. Sixty-three per cent of the respondents reported having had less contact with friends, and 79 per cent reported having experienced the lockdown of leisure activities (Utdanningsnytt.no, 2020).



In the Ombudsperson's view, the influence of children and youth during COVID-19 has been negligible. She finds that had they, young people, been included more in decision-making, it would have resulted in better decisions. For example, some COVID-19 measures ruled that canteens in secondary schools had to close even when the students were allowed to be present, with the consequence that the young people instead ate their lunch in more congested hallways. Thus, the youth expert panel finds that the rights of young people have not been honoured in relation to participation. The Ombudsperson for Children and Youth also notes a critique of how the government carried out the task of involving children and young people. The government decided to subcontract the task to a private foundation, Forandringsfabrikken. The form of involvement chosen by this actor has later been criticized, and the Ombudsperson found that the government should take on this task in the future.²⁰

20 Interview with representative from the Child and Youth Ombudsperson Institution.



Lessons learned

- The municipalities that were good at involving children and young people before were better at finding efficient local solutions during the pandemic. For example, regarding how to implement social distancing measures in schools.²¹
- Norwegian school researchers are currently examining the impact of COVID-19 on school development.
 - They note that some teachers can now use digital communication and collaboration platforms to suit individual pupils' needs better.
 - Some teachers find that they can better follow up in smaller groups, whether they are sitting in different rooms at school or they are sitting in their respective homes (Mejlbo, 2022).
 - Some language teachers find that digital platforms make it easier to observe language competencies (Mejlbo, 2022).

21 Interview with informant from BUFDIR. In the same way, an informant from the Children and Youth Ombudsperson Institution notes that if the youth had been more involved in planning concerning secondary education, better solutions would have been found. She notes for example that canteens were shut down, with the effect that youths filled the hallways of teaching institutions instead. A similar pattern is reported in research from England, as noted by Jones and Bubb (2020: 210): "Research in England... concluded that schools which had already established a virtual learning environment had higher student engagement levels than those without, especially for disadvantaged children." Bubb, Sara and Mari-Ana Jones (2020): ["Learning from the COVID-19 home-schooling experience: Listening to pupils, parents/carers and teachers"](#), *Improving Schools*, Vol. 23(3), 2020: 209-222, Sage. They reference NFER (2020): [Schools' responses to Covid-19. Pupil engagement in remote learning.](#)



2.5. Iceland: Children's Rights Perspectives and Initiatives

Kolbrún Þorbjörg Pálsdóttir & Ragný Þóra Guðjohnsen

Education

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the guiding principle of the Icelandic government was to keep schools open to ensure the right of children to education in these challenging times. In the opinion of one informant (HEL), the most important measure taken related to education was to protect children's best interests and keep school and leisure as unchanged as possible. He said it was only during spring 2020 that normal education was disturbed by imposing limits on the number of students in each classroom, banning the mixing of students between classrooms, and prohibiting the use of cafeterias. The restrictions had been prepared in close cooperation with stakeholders, and disease prevention measures were implemented in organizations.

Another informant (SO) also agreed that there was a clear policy to keep the schools open. Even when there was a lack of staff, they tried to keep schools open. During that period, some teachers found themselves vulnerable to infection. This was especially true for preschool teachers who were concerned as there were no possibilities of upholding a distance teaching program for that age-group. Teachers were not being prioritised regarding vaccinations, but some measures were taken to change that. However, staff in leisure-time centres at school were never prioritised. Many preschool employees were greatly disappointed when all primary and secondary schools were suspended for a few days in spring 2021, right before the Easter break, but the preschools were kept open. (RÚV, 25.03.2021).

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture wanted a response from all levels of education before restrictions would be put in place. A template for a contingency plan and instructions regarding the dangers



of a viral infection was sent to all public secondary schools on 17 February 2020 and shortly after to all schools and other education providers. There was still some flexibility to get permission for families to keep their children at home if a family member was vulnerable. The Ombudsperson for Children in Iceland (OC) pointed out that some of these children had been in 'protective quarantine' for two years, living with parents with illnesses that made them vulnerable to a COVID-19 infection. It was decided that this group should get special support after the pandemic.

Close cooperation with the authorities and consultation team

Directly following an extensive collaboration on the execution of the first orders on 12 March 2020, a consultation team was established by the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management, dedicated to school operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. They frequently held distance meetings, and roughly 50 representatives of key establishments within the Icelandic educational system took part, either as members or substitutes. Furthermore, more parties from the state and municipal administrations were given a chance to sit in on meetings, which were attended by up to 100 people. The aim of the team was to cover the unified response of all main stakeholders in COVID-19 measures in the educational system. The emphasis was to keep information flowing well between the ministry and educational field and work closely together.

Gradually, the meetings were held less frequently since operational experience had been gained, and actions and consultation between the main stakeholders had become routine. After that, smaller meetings were held to discuss specific levels of education or specific tasks.

In retrospect, an informant thought that the Chief Epidemiologist would have needed to consult with school officials more before the formulation of regulations. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education should have been more involved. Too much weight fell on the municipalities, and more financial assistance would have been needed.

A representative from the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture served as a coordinator to this response team. An informant (SO) explained that in her



opinion, The Association of Icelandic Municipalities took on a significant role in being a communicator and delivering information from the government to the municipalities.

The Faculty of School of Education wanted to contribute during the pandemic and launched a website²² sharing material from experts in the field that could be used by parents, teachers and staff involved in education and leisure. Organizations and institutions in the field of education and leisure were invited to contribute to the sharing of materials. According to an informant (ASE) this led to a collection of articles on the website, which is still open and holds a diverse range of content focusing on e.g., “how to keep your child involved in play during quarantine” or “how to tend to your mental health under difficult circumstances”. Another project this group carried out was collecting useful information posted by teachers and staff on Twitter regarding education and leisure using the hashtag #menntaspjall. The information was shared on the website.

They launched a series of lectures under the name “The home and the university”²³ with different recordings that might be useful for parents. The lectures took on the topic of education and leisure during the pandemic, covering a wide range of issues such as parents’ wellbeing, the importance of outdoor play, and how to work at home with a kindergartner. One lecture was published in English to reach immigrant parents regarding language learning during COVID-19. Learning material from the forum Menntaflétta²⁴ where teachers educate other teachers, was also shared on the website.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, and the Ministry of Social Affairs provided financial support to the organisation *Móðurmál* (Mother tongue) to support students with immigrant backgrounds by providing remote learning in their native language as well as support with their homework.

22 [Bakhjarlar skóla- og frístundastarfs](#) (E. Sponsors for Schoolwork and Recreational Activities)

23 [Heimilin og háskólinn – Fræðsla fyrir foreldra](#) (E. The Homes and the University – Parent Education)

24 [Menntafléttan learning material](#) (E. The Educational Wreath)



Leisure

The government offered special leisure activity grants to children during the pandemic. Epidemiological measures caused varying restrictions on children's leisure activities. According to one informant (HLR), measures were taken by her institution to protect children's best interests and to keep leisure services as unchanged as possible. They worked in close collaboration with the health authorities. It was difficult to implement the different quarantine regulations in the leisure programmes as children were not necessarily in the same groups as during school hours. A strong emphasis was placed on conducting teaching and leisure online on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. In this manner, young people stay connected with their recreation officers, often through interactive online games. When restrictions allowed for large groups outside, the emphasis was placed on meeting outside, physical activity and playing games. It was important to prioritise young people being able to attend onsite so that they would stay socially connected. While the measures can be successful, the result is that many of the teaching staff and other employees are experiencing significant tiredness and burnout, according to an informant.

Children were allowed to participate in sports to a larger extent than other leisure activities, such as arts and music which were more restricted. There was dissatisfaction about the lack of detailed information from the authorities related to participation in these activities. Instructions from the civil defence about gathering restrictions due to the pandemic were generally seen as clear, but things were less clear with coordinating the rules regarding sports activities or vocational education. Some decisions of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture were not taken in consultation with school staff. This caused uncertainty and dissatisfaction among those who planned and offered leisure activities for children, as well as for the children themselves.

There was no information on the restrictions on leisure activities for children to enable them to understand why they were imposed. The Ombudsperson for Children has placed a great emphasis on children always being informed of all measures concerning them, being involved in decision-making, and receiving information about the implementation of measures. Thus, there has been a clear failure



to inform children about the decisions and measures on disease control that are directly related to them, not least regarding sports and leisure activities.

Representatives of the sports associations have stated that there has been uncertainty about the implementation of organized leisure activities. In the future, it is therefore important to pay special attention to whether the participation of children in sports and all other kinds of leisure activities has decreased.

Wellbeing

A recurring theme in the narratives of students across all school levels is that of not having been able to be in regular communication with their friends. It was the most difficult for students at the secondary school level to not be able to participate in everyday social life, but it is also reflected in the narratives of students at the elementary level and in universities. Little to nothing in these narratives suggests that this aspect was dealt with specifically. Technology does not seem to have been used systematically by schools to address this issue.

Furthermore, at the end of 2020 & beginning of 2021, a specialist team was set up with representatives from different institutions, such as the addiction treatment centres Bugl and Stuðlar, to help children deal with multifaceted issues. The value of online therapy and virtual meetings was highlighted during the pandemic. They have become a valuable new tool for specialists to work together in a more effective way to secure appropriate welfare services.

Vulnerable Groups

Concerns were expressed regarding vulnerable groups and families. The *Welfare Watch*, active since the economic collapse in 2008 (Government of Iceland, 2008), served as a kind of reserve squad for this response team. It has been increasingly preoccupied with educational issues e.g., school attendance and school absenteeism at the elementary educational level, student drop-out at the secondary level, and the cost of education for students and families in all levels of education.



The representatives of key stakeholders in the realm of pre- and elementary education signed a declaration of intent about prioritising education, ensuring continued collaboration from the previous school year. The declaration highlights the importance of keeping schools functional with as few changes as possible and the importance of ensuring students' rights to education. Education, wellbeing, and staff safety were placed at the forefront of this declaration.

On 7 January 2022, the Ombudsperson for Children sent a letter to the Ministry of Education and Children on the education of children during the pandemic. It stated that the Ombudsperson had received many suggestions and inquiries about the rights of children who were quarantined or isolated for education. In some cases, there is a risk that children will fall behind in their studies, especially if they need to be repeatedly quarantined or isolated. The Ombudsperson stated that the schools' responses were very different, and they urgently needed guidance to ensure a coordinated response and to respect children's right to education (*Law, no. 91/2008, on compulsory schools, article 13; Law, no. 13/2019, on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 28*).

The Ministry of Social Affairs established a response team dedicated to the service of vulnerable groups, with representatives from various fields, that regularly convened during the first wave of the pandemic. The team was in direct contact with the Director of Health and the Chief Epidemiologist.

To be able to keep schools open, an effort was made to compartmentalize the facilities and split students into smaller groups, both during school hours and in after school programs. An emphasis was placed on tending to children's wellbeing and catering to children in vulnerable or marginalized situation(s). Occasionally, specialized teachers were asked to attend to the general teaching of the class to address the issue of decreased attendance of teachers caused by COVID-19. The consequences of this arrangement were that all sorts of support by professionals for children with special needs decreased considerably.

The impact of the pandemic on children varied depending on their social-economic background. Those who came from vulnerable backgrounds struggled more with remote learning. At the beginning of the pandemic, some children were set back as



they did not have computers nor a proper WI-FI connection, and some measures were taken regarding technical equipment for them. There was also specific funding for leisure, specifically for vulnerable children, which some municipalities used.

Authorities secured leisure grants for municipalities during COVID-19 to protect children aged 12-16 in vulnerable situations. The project's name was *Kedjan*. It is continuing as a venture to support at risk groups in cooperation with the welfare authorities.

The pandemic regulations may have had quite a negative impact on children with disabilities. During the pandemic, there were fewer applications for the rehabilitation of young people. However, there was a significant increase in violence towards children, both sexual and physical. There was an increase in online sexual abuse towards children. More funding was allocated to the Children and Family Centre in Iceland to deal with those issues.

During the pandemic, there tended to be more alcohol consumption, and domestic violence became more commonplace. The Welfare Act was adopted during the pandemic, and many new measures were implemented to ensure children's rights and to integrate different welfare services, especially for children with multifaceted problems. Parents can now request that their child receives a case manager who oversees all their welfare services. A better overview of waiting lists was required to determine why children were on these lists and to provide alternative measures for them.

A special awareness campaign on violence against children was launched. This aimed to reach children and families with different language backgrounds by distributing videos in several different languages. Special leisure activity grants were also offered to children during the pandemic.

Political participation

At the beginning of March 2020, the Ombudsperson for Children requested that school children send in stories about their daily lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. No requirements were made concerning the construction of the replies.



Therefore, children were encouraged to submit pictures, written statements, or videos. The Ombudsman received 116 answers from children across the country who handed in written statements, pictures, journals, and poems. There were also a few video clips with stories and plays. A summary of the children's answers was published in October 2020 on the webpage of The Office of the Ombudsman for Children in Iceland under the title of *Children's stories of COVID-19*²⁵. The children's stories were also discussed in the Ombudsman report 2020 to the Icelandic government as well as in a peer-reviewed article published in the same year²⁶.



Picture 4. The view of Iceland's Ombudsman for Children's webpage. The following page gathers children's stories about corona virus in Iceland. Screenshot taken 9.1.2022.

Our interviewees agreed that children's voices were not sought during the arrangements made in response to the pandemic. Within the municipalities, primarily through youth councils, young people are consulted about many issues, but not at higher policy levels. Children and teenagers were, however, always actively participating in the decisions. However, they were not consulted on how to use the government's additional funding due to the pandemic. New measures are gradually being taken to implement children's rights and listen to their views. In the future, it is important to develop such distant leisure activities which work well for children. Furthermore, there has been an increase in young people's formation of groups

25 [Children's stories of COVID-19](#)

26 Article [Frásagnir barna á tímum COVID-19](#)



where violence occurs as well as online bullying, and these need to be tackled after the pandemic.

An informant (CCF) explained that the new legislation allows children to request a personal service representative at the Children and Family Centre (Act on Integration of Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity, nr. 86/2021, paragraph 20). A child can also accept services for themselves at the age of fifteen, such as psychological support, even without the parent's consent.

The main takeaway from the pandemic was that although children's right to education was always held up and prioritised, their right to be consulted and heard was overlooked. COVID-19 measures greatly impacted children's social life, as well as their sports and leisure activities and the consequences are still to be seen. An informant was advocating for state and municipal practices that estimate the effects all policy making has on children.



Lessons learned

According to the data reviewed in this report, children's wellbeing was a priority in people's minds during the COVID-19 pandemic. The guiding principle was to keep schools open and functioning as much as possible as a measure of respecting students' rights to education. One practical benefit of this time was that schools learned many new ways of conducting remote learning, a lesson that will be taken into the future.

Additionally, measures were implemented to secure leisure activities and social interaction for children and young people. Care, flexibility, wellbeing, and the safety of students and staff were placed at the forefront of discussions. Our interviewees agreed that people were more aware of the value of 'togetherness', that is, how to be united during difficult times. However, welfare and support services diminished during the pandemic, which directly hit socially disadvantaged children hardest leading to a growing concern over the safety and wellbeing of more children.

Another major concern, when reviewing the steps taken during the pandemic related to secure children's education, leisure, and wellbeing, was insufficient direct consultation with children themselves. After all, they are the most well-equipped to be able to estimate which measures are effective, as they experience their effects directly. We should now take our next steps bearing this in mind.



2.6. Greenland: Children's Rights Perspective and Initiatives

Maliina Grønvold Olsen & Jakob Trane Ibsen, VIVE – The Danish Centre for Social Science Research

Education

During the entire period of COVID-19, there was emergency education and day care established for adults working in critical functions and for families in vulnerable positions. A concern in relation to this was maintaining the free school lunch service during lockdown. As a mayor explained, “we must admit that there are children in our municipality who are completely dependent on school lunch service. It would be unfair to let them down at a time when their world has been turned upside-down, and they are already hit by insecurity” (Kommuneqarfiik Sermersooq, 2020d).

One problem was that of children and young people from Greenland who were taking a boarding school year in Denmark, particularly those who were either left there (in otherwise closed-down schools) or had difficulties returning home. Around half of each youth cohort in Greenland, between 250 to 300 young people according to an informant, go abroad in the last one or two years of their primary school, aged 14-16. Over the past couple of years, this number has fallen considerably due to COVID-19. The children and young people who are away usually have a ‘contact family’ in Denmark, whom the pupil spends time with when the boarding school is closed when the pupil is ill, or during holidays. During COVID-19 in Denmark, the boarding schools closed, and the main rule then was that the children and young people should stay with their contact families. But the lockdowns lasted so long that it caused tensions in some contact families when they had to have a young person stay much longer than planned, especially when they were themselves constrained by COVID-19 regulations. The agency for education in Greenland



therefore had a large task of organising properly for the boarding school children, either by finding new contact families (in the cases where it did not work out) or arranging a return to Greenland. Due to the pandemic regulations, returning to Greenland required a special permit.²⁷

Some children and young people who decided to return to Greenland had to quarantine and were then offered to participate in long-distance teaching from their boarding school in Denmark. Due to the four-hour time difference, it was difficult for many pupils to follow classes and maintain their motivation. The sense of togetherness online was much weaker than normal, where children and young people spend a lot of time together in school and leisure time.

According to the head of the Agency for Education, much of the public debate regarding COVID-19 concerns and measures from spring 2020 to winter 2021 was about boarding school pupils. There was some anxiety that the children would bring the virus from Denmark and then spread it to their entire town. Some children also experienced being quarantined in Nuuk for several days before they could come home to other parts of the country. The anxiety caused the government to report when boarding school children tested negative and otherwise behaved very well. There has been a similar concern regarding secondary education schools within the country, many of which have boarding school units.

From the central Agency for Education, much work focused on distance learning, supplying teaching materials, including materials on the news about COVID-19, to be used in class or home schooling. At the local level, many schools were not ready for distance learning. For example, many schools did not yet have iPads available for pupils. Therefore, some municipalities found that the COVID-19 pandemic kickstarted distance learning for them. Some teachers used materials from Denmark that were made freely available temporarily (Avannaata Kommunia, 2020).

Some municipalities not only had to change teaching methods but also the plan for the school year, and pupil attendance. One municipality decided to postpone the

²⁷ Interview, acting head of the Agency for Education.



school start for some children in 2021 and then extend the school year. This later led them to extend the school week to include Saturdays so that the children could better catch up. The municipality had applied for a dispensation from the Agency for Education from the rule of 200 school days in a year, but this was not approved (Qeqqata Kommunia, 2021).

Due to the strong effect of the strict regulations for travel, there has been less central regulation of conduct, for example in schools. Nonetheless, concerns have been raised regarding education, leisure activities, and children and youth in vulnerable positions.

Leisure

Leisure activities were heavily impacted by the lockdown at the beginning of the pandemic so many indoor activities were suspended from March until after summer holidays in 2020. An informant noted that many activities were ‘relatively normal’ in the summer of 2020 when people could be outside, collecting berries, hunting reindeer, and so on. In some areas and among some groups, however, there were signs of anxiety, both fears of oneself or a family member catching the disease and fears of vaccines.

A broad concern was mobility and access to public facilities such as cafés. There were two weeks when children and young people were simply excluded. The regulation at the time stated that you could only enter public places if you had been vaccinated. By that time, vaccines were not yet available for children and young people. There was also a longer period when you had to present a negative corona test to access these places. During this period, the police checked cafés and sanctioned them with fines. According to one informant from the department of social affairs, young people, in particular, suffered due to this.

The government and health authorities worked closely with the Greenland Association of Sports in making recommendations for sports associations across the country. Following the general regulations on travel, limits were imposed on travel to sporting events in towns or settlements outside of one’s municipality. Otherwise,



participation in events – also those indoors – was permitted, under certain conditions; only access for 50 per cent of the number of people that facilities were approved for, a maximum of 100 people indoors, and maximum of 250 people outdoors (Timersoqatigiit Kattuffiat, 2020). These recommendations were updated several times according to the COVID-19 situation.

In comparison with the other Nordic countries, the restrictions on associational life seem to have been smaller. However, sports associations expressed concern regarding the motivation of members. They found that members often lose motivation when no cups or championships are held.²⁸

Wellbeing

In 2019, Inatisiartut approved a national strategy against bullying concerning day care, schools and secondary education. According to an informant, the physical health issue carried the strongest weight in the formulation of guidelines and recommendations initially. However, somewhat later in the process, other issues, such as mental health, were given more attention. The social affairs department produced ten pieces of advice concerning mental health. It is difficult to say whether these pieces of advice have had an effect. The experience normally says that a local dialogue is needed for such recommendations to have an effect, and this has not been possible so far.

At the level of municipalities, several initiatives were supported. Some focused on partnerships with civil society and artists and sought to provide better information and comfort to children and young people. One municipality for example supported the production of a song for children called “We Are Going to Hug Again” (Kommuneqarfik Sermersooq, 2020b).

28 [Hansen, 2020, in Sermitisiag](#). We have not found quantitative data on this. A recent report from University of Southern Denmark focused on qualitative data on the habits of movement, and motives and barriers on participation. Birgitte Westerskov Dalgas and Apollonie Kreutzmann, 2022: GRØNLAND I BEVÆGELSE Hverdagsfortællinger om bevægelsesvaner og motiver og barrierer for fysisk bevægelse.



Vulnerable Groups

From the outset of the crisis, there was a concern regarding children and young people in vulnerable positions. In May 2020, the Council on Human Rights noted that many Greenlandic families with children under 18 years of age live in overcrowded homes, some 17 per cent according to figures for 2018. This was a source of concern, particularly concerning families in vulnerable positions (Institut for Menneskerettigheder, 2020).

Greenland's police reported an increase in house disturbances (husspektakler), including in homes with children during 2020 compared with the previous years since 2016. An increase in disturbances with alcohol or drug abuse accompanied this.²⁹ They also reported a marked increase in threats of suicide (from 977 in the previous year to 1,200 in 2020) and suicide attempts (from 79 in 2019 to 120 in 2020) but a small decrease in the actual number of suicides (45 in 2019 to 41 in 2020) (Grønlands Politi, 2020).

A primary concern was the abuse of alcohol and its effects on family life. Government agencies suggested to the parliament that they should shut down the sale of alcohol so that possible tensions in the homes would not be worsened by alcohol abuse. The government initially followed this suggestion, and a ban on alcohol was enforced for a couple of weeks. The agency recommended continuing the ban, but parliament was not in favour. During the second lockdown there was a brief lockdown again for one week. According to the informant, there were many positive stories from municipalities about the effects of the bans. They reported better concentration of pupils in schools and more ease with engaging pupils.

The Children's Council, MIO, recommended that the work of authorities in the homes of vulnerable families should, as far as possible, be maintained through contacts over the phone (MIO, 2021b).

29 [Grønlands Politi, 2020](#)



Political Participation

Some municipalities attempted to give voice to children and young people's experiences, for example through music videos (Semersooq Municipality; Kommuneqarfik Sermersooq, 2020c) or special events on Facebook with politicians answering questions from children and young people (Kommuneqarfik Sermersooq, 2020a).

Much of the participation of or concerning children has occurred through the Children's spokesperson (MIO), according to an informant from the Department of Social Affairs. At the beginning of the pandemic, MIO spearheaded an effort on behalf of many concerned parents that lockdowns should not only cover leisure activities but should extend to schools (Petersen, 2020). Later, MIO also communicated concerns of families with children who lost income while they had to take care of children who were sent home from day care or schools (MIO, 2021a). A central focus for MIO in 2020 has been that children and young people are heard on issues of relevance to them, including their needs for help with mental health, both from other children and young people and professionals (MIO, 2020). With this focus, and in partnership with the author Niviaq Korneliussen, MIO produced a set of films on the issue that were screened both physically and online.

The Children's Council ([NAKUUSA](#)) has local councils in all five municipalities and has continued its activities, making use of material from Unicef, and communicating via Facebook and online meetings. NAKUUSA is a national branch under Unicef and financed by the Autonomous Government of Greenland. Under the auspices of NAKUUSA, some local councils from early on produced posters and videos for and about children and youth. Some focused on how they could best protect themselves and their friends and family; others focused on communicating their activities and experiences under lockdown. This was valuable, according to the informant from the Department for Social Affairs, because COVID-19 was a sensitive issue, and it was difficult for professionals (pedagogical personnel and teachers) to talk to children about it.

In addition, the Association of Greenlandic Children (*Kalaallit Meerartat, Foreningen Grønlandske Børn*) was active in communicating children and young people's concerns. The Association of Greenlandic Children organise child camps



for groups of children from Greenland or with a Greenlandic background. They also function as observers in government cases concerning children and young people in vulnerable positions.

From this vantage point, according to one informant, Kalaallit Meerartat, together with MIO and NAKUUSA, contributed to “breaking the ‘health wall’ in the public debate” so that other concerns, regarding mental health for children and young people could be heard. She found however, that it was quite late in the pandemic before other issues than physical health were taken into account.

The view of the non-governmental associations about the difficulty of being heard resonates with those of interviewees from government agencies. According to one informant from the Department of Social Affairs, “[w]e did not from the start to involve civil society. People simply panicked, and we did not listen to children and young people, whether in a reference group or another, about their wishes. The politicians and the Chief Medical officer had meetings every day. But children and young people were not *heard*, process-wise. Their voices were listened to occasionally. But it was all hurry-scurry. There was no time for proper, effective involvement. Both because we were so busy and because we were so few personnel”. As she explains, this was because many personnel had to work on virus tracing.



Lessons learned

- The Head of the Agency for Education finds that there has been an effect from COVID-19 measures on the implementation of the anti-bullying strategy that was approved before the pandemic. The agency has become more attentive to making teaching materials available for teachers that they can use.
- Head of the Agency for Education sees a change in distance communication and learning: “We have been used to a lot of travel to schools and kindergartens and day care across the country... Maybe our resources can be better spent for example, on materials and online meetings and sparring.”
- Involvement of children and young people is central but was lacking during COVID-19. According to the informant, the severity of the lockdown was counter-productive, in particular for the older young people. This could have been prevented with better involvement. Rather than seeing distance-education and digital teaching as a ‘deficit model’, some researchers have suggested that it should be viewed as having benefits of its own, which can sometimes make it the first choice of teaching format.



2.7. Faroe Islands: Children and Youth's Rights Perspective and Initiatives

***Firouz Gaini, University of the Faroe Islands & Alix Helfer,
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Children and young people were strongly affected by the pandemic in the Faroes. Over 11,000 persons under the age of 20 had been infected by summer 2022 ([korona.fo](https://www.korona.fo)). Many children and young people suffered from COVID-19 restrictions that severely limited the opportunities for social, cultural, and educational activities in their everyday life.

Education

The pandemic interrupted education for all, and the hurriedly constructed online teaching was less than optimal and not fit-for-purpose in the Faroes (Vijayarathan 2021). The pandemic and lockdown leading to online teaching were very tiresome for teachers and students alike, says Jona Højsted, a schoolteacher in Skúlablaðið (9 December 2021). “There should be no doubt that we all are looking forward to a normal life at school again”, says Tórhallur við Gil, a teacher and member of the board of the Teachers Union, in an article from the start of the pandemic (Skúlablaðið 17 March 2020).

Some Faroese young people felt misunderstood and unfairly blamed for the spread of the virus in society. Stories in the media hinting that the youth generation was spreading the virus because of their social life were strongly rejected by infuriated girls and boys (KvF, 8 November 2021). Young people from Glasir (the upper secondary school in Tórshavn) were also very critical to the school's planning of exams during the pandemic because the authorities did not consult the pupils about the best way to organise the exams. The Pupil's Council conducted a survey among the pupils and a large majority answered that they did not feel ready to go



to conventional exams because of online education (Dimmalætting 13 April 2020). Seventy-six per cent of the respondents in the survey answered that they do not get as much out of distant (online) learning as they did from conventional school learning.

Underneath it all, the focus on student wellbeing during lockdown varied from school to school. All schools had some sort of contact with their students – some by calling their students and others by dropping off a goodie bag. For example, one of the large high schools had the school psychologist call all the students who were quarantined or ill at home (after school started again) to see how they were doing. Due to the short lockdown in the Faroes, people returned to old habits rather quickly, but online participation in teaching is something that has become more common after the pandemic, thus ensuring that all students can have a connection to their schools.

Leisure

Unfortunately, there was not much material related to children and young people's leisure activities during the pandemic in the Faroe Islands that was accessible at the time of data collection for this report. Some minor observations include the following.

Young teenagers aged 13-16 have been less affected by the pandemic than younger children. They use social media and the Internet in their social life. Therefore, they have been able to continue their usual patterns of digital communication smoothly.

Youth organisations were flexible with the new situation according to one informant (FKUC). For example, the Scouts organised online assignments, where they had to make different tasks to receive a small award (called the COVID-19 badge).

During lockdown, children could also not be in close contact with the extended family network – grandparents and cousins – and it was difficult for the youngest children to understand why they were not allowed to visit their relatives. Living at a distance for shorter and longer periods over a year says youth politician Bjørk



Lamhauge, is going to have a negative impact on the mental health of the young generation (Sosialurin 28 May 2021). She says: “We lack, actually, a whole year of socialization and development” (ibid).

In a television programme on KvF (National Faroese Broadcasting), children were invited to talk about COVID-19 (KvF 12 March 2020). “It is annoying and impacts young people...everybody talks about it”, says a 7–8-year-old girl. “It is not so good because many people get it...and many die from it also”, says a boy from the same class. “First time I really heard about it, I didn’t dare to go out”, says a girl. “All people all the time talk about it, and you get quite afraid of it when you think about it, because if you get it yourself...”, another girl from the same school says. Another boy from the same television programme says that children should not be afraid of COVID-19, because they do not get it. He explains that it is only old and sick people who can get the virus (ibid). The children also explain what they are going to do when the school is closed, such as playing games, be at home, etc., “There are good things and there are bad things about it”, says a boy thinking about the pandemic. “I will just have fun at home, and to wait until the school opens again”, says a smiling girl at the end of the programme (ibid).

Wellbeing

While the problem of loneliness was growing under the restrictions, many people spent too much time with computer and smartphone screens. Many young people became tired and stressed because of the (online) ‘Corona school’ however, all in all, most managed very well to get through the difficult times.

According to *Barnabati* (a Faroese children’s rights association equivalent to *Save the Children*) there was a clear change in children’s wellbeing. Barnabati’s *Tú og Eg* (You and Me) counselling service – a telephone and Internet messaging helpline for children – gave the organisation very rich information about the problems related to the ongoing pandemic (Dimmalætting 22 May 2021).

“It is very clear”, says Barnabati’s secretary general Djóni Eidesgaard, “that both children and young people have had a very hard time the last year”. Worried parents



contacted Barnabati to explain that their children's behaviour had changed, but even the parents probably changed their behaviour during the pandemic as well.

Many young students at universities and other educational institutions also contacted Barnabati to talk about loneliness, anxiety, and frustration. Suppose these young people at risk, including Faroese students located in Denmark, do not immediately get help. In that case, they might indeed develop serious depression (ibid).

Vulnerable Groups

Pupils who were often alone at home (because the parents continued going to work) during the distance school period especially struggled and suffered from the lockdown, says Marin Bláberg, schoolmaster in a medium-sized town in the Faroes (Dimmalætting, 25 March 2021). "Involving the children in household chores can also be a good way to boost a sense of unity within the family at times like these", said Barnabati (KvF, 30 March 2020). Experts also recommended sticking to daily routines such as bedtimes and mealtimes, to maintain stability (ibid).

Mental health was already a problem among many young people before the pandemic. Younger children from primary school were also strongly affected. During the pandemic, different organisations, for example Red Cross Faroe Islands, started information campaigns and organised meetings and workshops aiming to fight the growing problem of loneliness and isolation among children and other groups in society ([redcross.fo](https://www.redcross.fo)).

Laura Apol, the former chair of *Sinnisbati* (the Faroese association for people with mental health challenges), talked about the very difficult situation of children with mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic in Faroese media. In an article in Dimmalætting (9 April 2020), she shares her thoughts about children from dysfunctional families with mental and social challenges:



I am really worried about the children and young people that at this moment are sitting at home around the Faroes, where unease and fear constitutes a large part of everyday life. While this situation continues, the horror that these children go through, day by day, is worsening... (ibid).

For these children, she explains, school is a safe and good place to be, while the home represents a precarious space. Children from vulnerable families, she stresses, should “feel that somebody is seeing and thinking about them” (ibid).

Children in kindergartens need care, closeness, and physical contact with people, says Tóra H. Joensen, the head of a preschool in a television programme from the first wave of the pandemic (KvF, 14 April 2020). She explained how the kindergarten is planning to follow the recommendations of the national authorities about distance and hygiene, but at the same time, will provide children with the closeness they need (ibid). It is crucial, said Djóni Eidesgaard at Barnabati, that we parents do not put unnecessary pressure on and stress young people in the Faroes (KvF, 26 March 2020). He maintained that there is a need to “take it easy and to try to be patient, reduce our ambitions and give each other space”. This is, Djóni emphasised, “also good for the children” (ibid).

Participation

In the Faroes, the inclusion of children and young people’s voices was ensured in an organized way by hearing their thoughts on decisions that affect their daily life, or to a higher degree, including institutions representing children and young people, for example, in an organ like the Epidemic Commission.

Nevertheless, Faroese children and young people were not included in the central discussions about the COVID-19 policy of the Faroes. Many young people were very dissatisfied with the restrictions and initiatives that were introduced concerning education and cultural and social activities. “The authorities are hypocritical, because at the same time as we young people are urged not to gather outside of school we are forced to be grouped at school”, pupils from the upper secondary



schools in Tórshavn and Kambsdalur say (KvF, 8 November 2021). Young people from upper secondary schools arranged demonstrations at the centre of Tórshavn.

The National TV and radio channels stated that young people struggled to get a voice in the political discourse on COVID-19 in the Faroes. They did not feel that decision-makers took their opinion and knowledge seriously during the pandemic. Additionally, many informal conversations about problems related to the pandemic were shaped by an assumption that young people's behaviour and lifestyle were why the virus spread so fast in Faroese society. There were no youth representatives in the main boards and committees counselling Faroese politicians in questions about COVID-19 policies. In primary and secondary schools, the pupils and the pupils' counsels had very little influence on decisions concerning distant learning, exams, learning methods, and so on.

On the other hand, many children and young people expressed general support for the national COVID-19 restrictions and recommendations in the Faroes, despite being critical of the lack of youth representation and participation in the core forum discussing the best ways to fight against the virus. Many Faroese students in Denmark and other countries returned home during the early stage of the pandemic, as they felt that it was more difficult to live abroad than in the Faroes when heavy restrictions and lockdown became a part of everyday life.

Children and young people's voices became more of a focus later in the pandemic when it became apparent that there was a need for long-term strategies and that the pandemic could have negative effects on some children and young people. Not that any bad decisions were taken, but regarding the rights of children and young people could have affected the way the restrictions, for example, were communicated by the authorities.

It was not until two years after the outbreak that a psychologist was invited to the COVID-19 epidemic board council, which primarily consisted of representatives from authorities to help prevent the spread of the disease. According to an informant, it would have been appropriate to include professionals or authorities with the responsibility for children and young people's wellbeing earlier to ensure their best interests and rights were taken into consideration concerning school and leisure.



Additionally, this could have meant that collective measures would have been recommended instead of local measures dependent on the individual teacher or school principal.

Lessons learned

- Including professionals that represent children and young people earlier would probably have positively affected some of the decisions taken to ensure the wellbeing of children and young people.
- The pandemic was easily controlled on an isolated island with resources put into tracing resulting in shorter lockdown periods.
- Although having shorter lockdowns, children and young people reported anxiety and negative consequences on their mental health.

Conclusions

by Sinikka Aapola-Kari, Alix Helfer, Jakob Trane Ibsen and Viola Särkiluoto

The Nordic Countries have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that the rights of the child should be guaranteed and that children who can form their own views should be able to express those views freely in all matters affecting them. As a general matter of principle, the more a child or young person is affected by a public decision or measure, the more important it is to ensure that the views of that child or young person are expressed and listened to. Therefore, the rights of children and young people should apply even during times of crisis, especially when a crisis is prolonged and extraordinary measures are applied in society. The COVID-19 pandemic has been such a period of prolonged and extraordinary measures in all the Nordic countries. The consequences for children and youth, and the investigation of children's views in decision-making have often been overlooked during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the rapid pace at which governments, local authorities, and municipalities made decisions during the crisis.

In this report, we have examined the development and handling of the pandemic in the Nordic countries, focusing on the rights of children and youth. In part 1, we have investigated the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and measures related to children and youth. In part 2, we have looked at measures and consequences within the spheres of education, leisure, and wellbeing. We have also examined the extent and nature of the participation – or lack thereof – of children and youth in decision-making, and particular concerns regarding children and youth in vulnerable positions. In each country chapter in the second part of the report, we have noted promising practices and lessons learned.

In general, we find that, in the future, a child impact assessment should be carried out as a core part of crisis handling measures. The consultation of children and consideration of their views has been limited during this pandemic and this has



impacted children and youth negatively in the short term and placed many of them at risk in the longer term. The pandemic and its restrictions have hit some groups of children and young people particularly and made structural inequalities more visible. Therefore, minorities and special groups – for example, children and young people with disabilities, ethnic minorities such as the Sami population, those with an immigrant background, those coming from socio-economically disadvantaged homes, and those living in institutions – should be heard. Further, many interest groups and NGOs have direct contact with these children and young people, and it would be useful to utilise their networks. Future investigations should depict the experiences of children in the long run.

From the observations compiled in this study from different countries, it is obvious that school has an important role, not only in educating children and young people but also as a social community that is central to their wellbeing. The long-lasting restrictions and distance education periods have had detrimental consequences, particularly for high school and secondary school students' wellbeing and study motivation (Holzer et al. 2021). By now, we know that disparities in children's learning have increased, and, in some cases, pupils have dropped out of education entirely. According to the United Nations (2020), pandemic restrictions have led to a global crisis in education and the right to school must be at the heart of pandemic solutions.

While young people have, in general, experienced more negative consequences, younger children have also been affected. Early childhood education has become intermittent, many primary schools have been transitioning to quarantine and back, and secondary and college students have been in distance education in some areas throughout the entire 2021 school year and longer. The social development of children, becoming a member of society and citizen of communities, has received little attention. Restrictions on onsite education, educational institutions and leisure activities have had a major impact on children's growth and development, as social relationships are established in educational institutions and leisure time activities. Many children and youth have lost interest in their previous hobbies due to the restrictions, and their physical and mental health has deteriorated. An important experience in all countries is that not all consequences of the pandemic have been negative. For example, the ban on sports competitions applied



in many Nordic countries led to lessening performance pressures for children and youth participating in competitive sports. Additionally, some families got to spend more time together as the schools were partly online and parents were distance-working. Further, some children and youth who, under normal circumstances, found the social elements of school life challenging experienced improved wellbeing. However, many families also experienced the time of restrictions as anxiety-provoking, particularly those who had problems before the pandemic and lived in crowded apartments.

One of the questions that might raise interest is whether a certain country or countries stand out among the others as an example of safeguarding children and young people's rights?

At this point, it is difficult to say. It was beyond the scope of this project to make a systematic comparison, as the timeline for data collection was limited. We may not have access to all the relevant information. However, we can make some tentative observations based on the material we gathered for this report. Countries where it was easier to restrict travelling and contain the virus, particularly the islands – Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Iceland – did not need to have such severe measures and in some cases, had more recommendations than restrictions. These countries have relatively small populations. Due to their geographic position, a pandemic is easier to manage at the borders. It does not necessarily require such harsh control measures. In these countries on remote islands, schools were generally kept open, with short periods or local instances of distance education. Of the larger countries, Sweden has had a less restrictive policy in handling the pandemic from the start, and schools have been kept open to a large extent, and the measures have been more recommendations than strict restrictions. However, even in Sweden, students have been in distance education for long periods. In Denmark, Finland, and Norway there were more lockdowns and prolonged periods of distance education, even for younger students, and these have had negative effects on learning as well as on social relationships. While innovative digital pedagogies were created, the quality of teaching has varied considerably. However, in these countries, substantial packages of extra resources have been directed to alleviate the negative effects of restrictions on children and young people, particularly vulnerable groups, and new forms of support and activities have been created quickly.



The COVID-19 policy regarding education has made a huge difference in the situation of children and young people in the Nordic countries. It is not only the educational aspect of schools which has suffered but also the social aspects. Schools are not just about learning but about making contacts and being part of a community. For children and young people this is of fundamental importance. Even in the countries which imposed longer lockdowns of schools, there was a recognition that distance education was not going to work for all students, younger pupils, and vulnerable groups were allowed to be onsite.

Leisure activities were also severely restricted in most Nordic countries. However, the younger age groups were allowed to engage in leisure activities more freely. For older age groups of young people, many innovations were quickly launched to allow them to continue their engagement with their preferred activities, including various digital innovations and moving the activities outdoors as much as possible. Still, for many children and young people, their leisure became less rewarding and many lost motivations in their former hobbies. In the longer term, a particular concern for all countries is maintaining the involvement of people – young people as well as adults – who carry out voluntary work, for example, in sports associations.

As far as the COVID-19 situation is concerned, it is still not over, and even afterwards, there is the aftermath. The effects of the restrictions on many children and young people have been negative, and they may have long-lasting reverberations for the rest of their lives. All countries will still have to find ways of dealing with this challenge.

As for children and young people's rights and participation in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be said as a generalization that almost all the Nordic countries – and elsewhere – were not sufficiently involved in issues that had very serious consequences on their lives and which in many ways restricted their right to participate in society. This is a serious lesson to be learnt by all the Nordic countries – and across the world. The UN resolution on children and young people's rights obligates countries to listen to them and enable them to have a say in such issues that have a direct effect on their lives, even in a crisis. Involving them by sharing relevant information with them and justifying decisions for them, creating spaces for



them to be heard and genuinely allowing them to influence policy decisions would have enabled these decisions to be more informed, more effective, and more just.

Measures concerning children and young people's rights can be classified in many ways. At a general level, for example, one may relate the right of the child or young person to express views and have views given due weight to several distinct elements of the provision of such rights. Lundy (2007) usefully distinguishes between four elements, which are all relevant to the context of this report. The first element in Lundy's model is *space*, which concerns whether children and young persons' views have actively been sought and that *all* children can take part or be represented in deliberations concerning them. The second element is *voice*, which concerns whether children and young people have sufficient information to form a view, and whether they have different options as to how to give voice to their concerns, including abstaining from using their voice. The third element is *audience*, which concerns whether there is a process for communicating views and whether the body in which views are expressed has power to make or affect decisions. Fourthly, *influence*, concerns whether children and young people's views were considered by those in power, and whether the children and young people were provided with feedback explaining the reasons for decisions taken (Lundy 2007). In conducting our research, we have posed similar questions concerning the sections on the participation of children and young people, but as noted, we also pay attention to other rights, including the right to education and social life.

Across the Nordic countries, when applying the Lundy model to decision-making during the pandemic, we have seen that firstly, spaces for young people's participation (see Lundy, 2007) have often not been created, and where they existed, they were not utilized effectively. However, in those countries where youth councils or similar organs existed, they were to some extent listened to in relation to pandemic measures. As for the second dimension, children and young people's voices, it is also evident that in general, they have not been provided with enough information about the pandemic in such a way that they can access and understand. However, there have been instances where a special effort has been made to reach out to young people on the media platforms that they use in their own language. Regarding the third aspect in Lundy's model, concerning audience, processes of communicating children and young people's views to decision-makers did not exist



in most cases. Sometimes even when they were heard by a specific instance, for example by researchers or NGOs, their views did not necessarily reach those who made decisions.

The final, fourth aspect in Lundy's model concerns influence. It is clear that those in power in the Nordic countries did not pay enough attention to children and young people's views and the decisions affecting them were not explained to them. There were some local exceptions, but even in situations where the local decision-makers could have relatively easily involved young people in the decision-making process, it was, for the most part, not done.

While the overall picture concerning children and young people's participation during the pandemic is rather sombre, some promising practices were nevertheless recognised, and some valuable lessons learned. This can be useful for different countries, both in preparing for similar crises and dealing with the long-term effects on children and youth of COVID-19. In the next section, we present the most interesting of these practices.

Promising Practices from the Nordic Countries

In this report, we have identified and presented some specific pandemic measures and practices for each Nordic country that can be seen as attempts to safeguard and promote the rights of children and young people in general or for more specific groups. Some measures we present here have existed even before the pandemic, some are innovations, and some have not actually been adapted in practice, but nevertheless may be seen as possibly useful in promoting children and young people's rights in society or a specific sector of society.

We are not in the position to evaluate these practices and their effectiveness, as it depends on the aim and the context of each practice whether it can be seen as successful or not. The Nordic countries' social structures, cultures and geographies differ in many aspects, and similar practices cannot necessarily be applied across them all. However, the practices portrayed here have been presented as positive examples by experts working in youth policy, youth work, or social services. By presenting them here, we can inspire decision-makers on all levels of society to find ways for children and young people to participate in such ways that they are truly heard and can influence society.

Our categorisation of the pandemic measures reflects the many dimensions of participation in society. In our categorisation, we seek to stress the target group of the different measures and the type of measure. Our categorisation has been influenced by Lundy's model (2007), which was presented briefly above. However, our categories cannot directly be derived from the model.

In conducting our research, we have looked at how different concerns have been addressed, to what extent children and youth have been involved in planning, the extent to which they have voiced concerns, and whether their voices have carried any weight on policy nationally or locally. We thus pay attention to both the



political rights of children and youth, and their right to education and to social life. Our categorisation is an attempt to summarise the various measures that were utilised in the Nordic countries during the pandemic. It is based on the findings in earlier parts of the report which we have classified thematically.

We summarise the promising practices under the following five categories:

- a) Maintaining normal practices and routines
- b) Creating structures for children and young people's participation
- c) Communicative practices and information
- d) Extra resources allocated to specific purposes
- e) Measures related to creating new (digital and other) spaces for children and youth.

Similar types of measures have been applied across the Nordic countries, but there are also measures that we have found only in one or two countries. That said, it is still possible that they have been used elsewhere, even though information about that has yet to be found. The practices are presented below. The list is by no means exhaustive, and we hope that new practices of this kind are also invented in the future.

Promising practices to safeguard children and young people's rights during crises

A) Maintaining normal routines and social connections during crises.

These practices are related to safeguarding children and young people's best interests, even during a crisis. These practices aim to protect children and young people's fundamental rights regarding education, meaningful leisure activities, and social relationships.

- **Child impact assessment in crisis.**
The best interests of the child should be the primary consideration when planning and deciding on restrictive measures, even if they are only



short-term or partial restrictions. The past few years have shown that temporary restraint measures may often need to be extended, with the result being that the overall period of restraint may be long. When restricting activities that are important for children's health and wellbeing, efforts should be made to provide them with safe and, if the communicable disease situation allows, substitute activities that can support their wellbeing as much as possible.

- **Holistic views on wellbeing.**

Wellbeing is not only physical health. It is the social environment as a whole. Schools, educational institutions, and recreational activities play an essential role in building the everyday lives and wellbeing of children and young people. Pupil and student welfare services, as well as school lunches, also have a role to play.

- **Supporting safe spaces to meet up.**

Facilitate social gatherings in a protected way, as young people are likely to gather somewhere. Ensure the right to meet and help from relatives and loved ones within the family and extended family. Small group sizes and hygiene standards in schools could be kept in the future to tackle viruses and epidemics.

- **Supporting leisure activities in schools and educational institutions.**

This can be done by strengthening school clubs and morning and afternoon activities for school children.

- **Hope for the future.**

To mitigate the negative effects of exceptional circumstances, there is a need to invest in general support for learning, enhanced support, and specific support. As the crisis has impacted young people's hope for the future in terms of studies and employment, more guidance and counselling are needed at all stages of education and training.

B) Creating structures to enhance children and young people's participation.

These practices are explicitly related to children and young people's possibilities for being heard by decision-makers and influencing in matters concerning their lives. In Lundy's model of participation (2007), there are four central elements of participation: creating space for children and young people to be heard, having a voice, and an audience to influence. It is only through these kinds of practices and structures



that children and young people can genuinely be involved in decision-making processes.

- **Listening to what children and youth have to say.**
Young people's views need to be heard during and in the aftermath of a pandemic. Especially at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, decisions were often taken quickly and in an adult-focused way.
- **Improving new ways of listening.**
Consultations and data collection should be made with various methods, such as the use of drawings and video materials, that are understandable and accessible to children.
- **Decisions should be based on facts.**
Ensure that decisions and actions are based on a sufficiently broad and high-quality evidence base. Use research specifically focused on children and youth.
- **Creating spaces of participation.**
Fundamental structures on child and youth participation, for example, youth councils, should be strengthened at the local government level – in a way that also incorporates the views of those who are not representatives.
- **Making sure that everyone is heard.**
Ensuring active, well-functioning systems to safeguard and inspire children and youth to participate in ways which also ensure the inclusion of vulnerable groups. Children and youth living in institutions, whether in foster care, child protection or service house, have the same rights during exceptional circumstances as others. Ensure that youth from the indigenous community can maintain their language and cultural heritage even in exceptional circumstances.

C) Communicative practices and access to information.

These practices can be seen as supporting children and young people's right to get sufficient information about issues that affect their lives to form their opinion (see Lundy 2007). This is a fundamental element of children and young people's participation.

- **Keeping children, youth and families updated during crisis.**
To ensure access to the latest updates and regulations in emergency situations



information should be provided in a variety of languages and in a culturally accessible way, for carers as well as children and youth. Information must be accessible in sign language and for the visually impaired.

- **Finding different channels to communicate.**
NGOs have an important role in supporting diverse groups. These organisations often have the knowledge and tools to communicate to and with young people in a way that is natural to them. Collaboration between authorities and civil society could help facilitate communication with young people to become more direct and accessible.
- **Ensuring information is delivered in a youth and child-oriented way.**
During and in the aftermath of the pandemic, communication and news coverage must be carried out so that children and young people understand the state of the situation and the reasoning behind crisis measures. This means that communication is provided in formats and on platforms they have access to and use regularly.
- **Involving children and young people.**
Arrange a hearing or a chance to participate in developing their ideas about how to include their peers in crisis management. This can be done by organising special interactional events for children and young people, where they can pose questions to the decision-makers and express their concerns.

D) Extra resources for specific concerns regarding children, youth, and families.

These practices are related to identifying those who need special support as well as resourcing professionals who support vulnerable groups of children and young people during crises. An important aspect of support measures is generating and evaluating knowledge about children and young people's needs in the aftermath of the crisis.

- **Child budgeting.**
In the aftermath of the crisis, the assessment of the impact of the restrictions on children, young people, and families with children must be extended to budgetary decisions. Ensure that adequate resources are available for safeguarding the wellbeing of children, young people, and families.



- **Early support for mental health problems.**

The need for mental health services has increased in recent years. Psychosocial support during the pandemic has been inadequate for people with mental health problems as many outpatient appointments have been cancelled. These services must meet the needs of children and young people who face issues relating to mental health.
- **Special support for young people on the first steps of adulthood.**

Prolong student benefits to ensure the wellbeing of youth with weaker personal networks and ties to teaching institutions and workplaces. Educational institutes have developed their own instruments to follow-up on the possible lag in different areas.
- **Strengthening multi-professional cooperation.**

Cooperation between different actors across sectors must be strengthened in a crisis. Support should be more tailored to the individual needs of citizens.
- **Generating knowledge through longitudinal studies.**

The effects of the pandemic in a possible economic downturn should be monitored with qualitative and quantitative approaches. Particular attention should be paid to children and young people in vulnerable situations. Future investigations should depict children's experiences in the long run.
- **Pay attention to families in vulnerable positions.**

Experiences from COVID-19 lockdowns can be risky for children and youth in vulnerable positions when confined to their own homes, with little contact with classmates at school. For undocumented families with children, it is important to guarantee the same rights as children from the main population. Additionally, more support services that consider the indigenous cultural background and linguistic rights could be provided.
- **Providing special help.**

It is vitally important to be alert to the lag of likely negative effects from COVID-19 on youth who have, relative to the generations before and after, been held back in their education and deprived of their social life. Sufficient support for the use of devices and software must be guaranteed so that for example, speech-impaired people can keep in touch with their loved ones.
- **Bringing help close to children and youth.**

It is important to have adults outside of school staff present to hear and discuss the concerns of children and young people. Meetings with family members should be supported for those living in institutions.



E) Creating new learning and leisure environments for children and young people.

These practices are related to supporting children and young people's possibilities of interaction and learning through peer interaction via virtual encounters. Where physical contact is limited, the digital realm offers possibilities for maintaining social relationships and creating new ones, for finding help and social support, where needed. The negative aspects of digital platforms can also be reduced with the right protective measures.

- **Developing digital environments.**
Digitalisation and online environments should be monitored, and new initiatives can be used in the future, for example, to help young people with disabilities. The continuity and development of digital support services for young people should be adequately resourced.
- **Supporting parents and teachers in their digital skills.**
There have been gaps in learning, especially in families that do not speak the national language(s) at home. Designate one responsible person in schools, educational institutions, and youth work to monitor the development of digital skills and provide digital-pedagogical assistance.
- **Provide the digitalisation of other services in a well-structured way.**
The pandemic has shown that many social and health care services can work at a distance, and with online services new clients have been found in outreach work, as an example. The service pathway from anonymous chat support to longer term support for young people in local communities can be further developed.
- **Digital skills for everyone.**
Due to the huge steps taken in digitalisation, digital skills should be emphasised in education so that pupils have the same basic skills and adequate materials to go online. Various ways of helping young people address their problems are needed, and environments to ensure that support is also available for those who are often excluded from online support.
- **Protecting privacy, wellbeing, and safety in online environments.**
Particular attention must be paid to the privacy of children and young people and their access to digital environments. There should be ways to tackle grooming or bullying in online environments.

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Interviews, country-specific

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Rasmus Meyer	Headmaster	Krogegrup Folk High School, Chairman of Youth Panel	Denmark	–
Charlotte Bach Thomassen	Chairperson	Danish Association of Gymnastics and Sports (DGI)	Denmark	–
Ditte Sølbeck	Head of division	Meeqqanut, Inuusuttunut, Ilaqtariinnullu Naalakkersuisoqarfik; Ministry for Children, Youth and Families	Greenland	–
Brita Toft Hyldgaard	Acting head of division	Ilinniartitaanermut Aqutsisoqarfik - Uddannelsesstyrelsen - Agency for Education	Greenland	–
Rune Nydam Bundgaard	Project lead	KIVITSISA	Greenland	–
Annika Helgadóttir Davidsen	cand. psych. aut. & PhD, Assistant professor	Epidemic Commission in the Faroes University of the Faroes Islands	Faroese Islands	ECF
Hanna Vang	Parliamentary Ombudsperson	The Faroese Parliament	Faroese Islands	POF
Gyða Skaale Johansen	Board member, leader	Føroya KFUK Skótar	Faroese Islands	FFS
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Svandís Ingimundardóttir	School officer	School officer at The Association of Icelandic Municipalities	Iceland	SO



Name	Position	Organisation	Country	Code
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Ólöf Ásta Farestveit	CEO	Children and Family Centre	Iceland	CCF
Salvör Nordal	Ombudsperson	The Ombudsperson for Children in Iceland	Iceland	OCI
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Christian Hellevang	Senior advisor	Norwegian Association of Local Governments, section for local democracy, European policy and international work (KS)	Norway	KS
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Anders Lindquist	Operational Controller	Swedish National Agency for Education	Sweden	SNAE
Daniel Sundvall	Legal adviser	Public Health Agency of Sweden	Sweden	PHAS
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Contributors

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