



# Convention on the Rights of the Child

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## Committee on the Rights of the Child Ninety-sixth session

### Summary record of the 2803rd meeting

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Thursday, 16 May 2024, at 10 a.m.

*Chair:* Ms. Skelton

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*Combined fifth to seventh periodic reports of Estonia (continued)*

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*The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.*

**Consideration of reports of States parties** *(continued)*

*Combined fifth to seventh periodic reports of Estonia (continued) (CRC/C/EST/5-7; CRC/C/EST/QPR/5-7)*

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Estonia joined the meeting.*
2. **The Chair**, welcoming the delegation of Estonia to the meeting, explained that additional members of the delegation would be participating via video link. She invited the delegation to reply to the questions raised by Committee members at the previous meeting.
3. **A representative of Estonia** said that, under a 2022 amendment to the Child Protection Act, the Child Protection Council had been replaced by the Prevention Council, a government commission tasked with organizing child protection policy, setting strategic goals and priorities, coordinating activities in various sectors, making policy proposals to the Government and other relevant institutions and reviewing the Committee's recommendations. The Council had recently approved the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan as part of the European Child Guarantee initiative. Two thematic working groups, one on the mental health of children and youth and the other on child welfare, had been created within the Council.
4. In the past, information on children's disabilities had in many cases not been passed on to the municipal authorities, even though those authorities provided support services. Since 2022, however, municipalities had been permitted to receive data regarding children's disability assessments from the Social Insurance Board so that parents did not have to apply for the necessary support from the municipal authorities separately. The data from the exchange set up in 2023 were automatically updated every 24 hours. Upon receiving notification of a case, the child protection worker had 10 days to contact the parent, conduct any required assessment and offer the relevant assistance. Similarly, the parliament was discussing a proposed amendment to the Child Protection Act that would allow automatic exchanges of data concerning children who had an irreversible health condition. The planned changes would be introduced in 2026 if the proposed amendment became law.
5. The purpose of measures outlined in the action plan for integrated social protection, health and education support was to ensure timely and comprehensive assistance for children with special needs and their families and to establish a single point of contact for the family. Digital solutions would be created to allow the relevant municipal and national offices to exchange information related to social protection, health and education services and give everyone working with families receiving social services immediate access to all relevant information concerning the child. Assessment tools would be linked to the digital platforms used by professionals in different fields to allow them to monitor children's development and well-being. A new case management model was being developed in line with the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health of the World Health Organization (WHO) to harmonize the terminology used by doctors, social workers, education support staff and other relevant specialists.
6. The majority of Ukrainians who had fled to Estonia during the war had been granted temporary residency and were not counted as asylum-seekers. Estonia had been able to accept so many people who had fled Ukraine because there had been a sizeable Ukrainian community in the country before the war and, given the history of Estonia, the vast majority of the population was very eager to help. As most of the children who had fled Ukraine were accompanied by their parents or had parents already living in Estonia, relatively few required foster or institutional care. Efforts had been made to integrate Ukrainian children into the Estonian school system as soon as possible after their arrival.
7. Estonian asylum legislation was based on European Union law. Asylum-seeking children were detained only when a court, taking into account the best interests of the child, ordered them into detention. By law, the police and border guards could detain persons for up to 24 hours. Administrative courts could extend detention by up to two months and, if they were of the view that surveillance or other alternatives were likely to prove ineffective, for further four-month periods thereafter. The courts based their decision on the principle of

proportionality and took the detainee's circumstances into account. Foster care was often the best solution for unaccompanied minors and other child refugees. When apprehending an unaccompanied child, the police and border guards were required to attempt to locate the child's parents or guardians. If the attempt failed, a legal guardian was appointed for the child. In administrative asylum cases, the police or border guards arranged for a lawyer to assist the child and his or her guardian throughout the procedure, free of charge. In cases of other types, lawyers were appointed by the Estonian Bar Association, which since 2021 had required lawyers representing children to undergo training on children's developmental psychology, the questioning of children and children's rights.

8. The social welfare system in Estonia was decentralized, and the country's 79 municipalities had a great deal of autonomy in the provision of welfare services. Most of the local government budget came from income tax, which was shared by municipalities using a formula that took into account the number of residents and the composition of the municipality's population. The State allocated additional funding for areas such as education and social protection. The municipal authorities helped find foster families for children in need, but, as the ultimate responsibility lay with the Social Insurance Board, the municipalities were not overburdened. The Government shared best practices with the municipalities and facilitated cooperation between them in order to ease the social welfare workload.

9. According to the latest data from European Union surveys, the proportion of children who lacked basic facilities such as baths or showers or indoor flush toilets was similar to or lower than the European Union average. Many traditional cottages or country houses had outdoor toilets, and many properties had a separate sauna where people washed themselves. Low-income families with three or more children whose property did not meet modern living standards could apply for a State grant of up to €10,000 for repairs. The Estonian Business and Innovation Agency, a State-run enterprise, offered housing loan guarantees to families with multiple children to reduce the down payment for purchasing a home to as little as 5 per cent of the purchase price.

10. The Government had set a target for all the country's energy to be produced from renewable sources by 2030. A large amount of State and European Union funding had been allocated in the east of the country in particular, where many people worked in the oil industry, and the share of energy produced from oil had been decreasing every year as a result. According to a study of 130 countries, Estonia was one of only seven whose air quality met WHO standards.

11. **A representative of Estonia** said that her Government had committed to increasing overseas development assistance to 0.33 per cent of gross national income by 2030. Progress had already been made, with a significant increase in assistance in 2022 due to Russian aggression in Ukraine, which had led to additional aid for Ukraine and increased spending on refugees. Although children were not a specific area of focus in the strategy for development cooperation for 2024–2030, the priorities for that period included advancing education.

12. **A representative of Estonia** said that all forms of child abuse, including corporal punishment, were prohibited by law in all settings. A survey of the situation concerning corporal punishment, which was conducted regularly, was scheduled to take place in 2024 and 2025. Data indicated that, when parental use of physical violence fell, the use of threats and psychological violence rose, so it was also important to tackle that issue. A parenting support strategy was under development, as were projects to provide information and educational material to parents and expectant parents, develop a skills programme for the parents of children up to 2 years of age, introduce home visits from midwives throughout the first year of life and establish a new parenting programme for underserved groups, such as teenage parents.

13. Artificial intelligence was considered an opportunity, and teachers and children were being educated in how to make best use of it. Children were also taught digital skills in school. Her Government participated in the Children Online Protection Lab, an international initiative that brought together Governments, the private sector, academia and civil society to better protect children online.

14. Environmental awareness, which was treated as a cross-curricular topic, was integrated into learning outcomes in every subject area. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Climate worked together to implement an environmental education and awareness action plan that involved the training of teachers and school leaders in areas such as outdoor learning and the green transition and the development of interdisciplinary support materials and community-based initiatives. A youth environment council in the Ministry of Climate represented the interests of young persons at the local and international levels and in policy discussions. Its members included schoolchildren and university students from the bioscience and medical fields. A recent event held by the council had focused on input for the climate bill. Young people regularly participated in the meetings and hearings of the parliament's Environment Committee, and the Estonian delegation to the Conferences of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change included a youth climate delegate.

15. **A representative of Estonia** said that a comprehensive training programme had been developed for specialists in the judicial field on dealing with children under 21 years old in court proceedings. Training on interviewing children, which had been introduced in 2021, had been attended by 56 judges and court officials. The training had received positive feedback and would be continued. The Code of Criminal Procedure provided that, from the age of 14, children who were parties to criminal proceedings had to be interviewed. The aim was to strike a balance between the fair administration of justice – for victims and defendants – and the protection of children's rights and interests. The basic principle was that evidence should be introduced directly in court and that the accused should have an opportunity to challenge that evidence.

16. The introduction of new rules for the treatment of juvenile offenders in 2018 had led to reforms designed to reduce juvenile delinquency by emphasizing restorative justice, prevention and alternatives to imprisonment. In 2018, there had been 13 juvenile offenders in prison, whereas in 2024 there were none. For a first-time offender who had not committed a serious offence, alternative measures such as community service or electronic monitoring were preferred. Increasing use was made of activities to keep offenders occupied; offenders could, for example, be required to produce written reflections on their actions and the consequences thereof. As an alternative to prison, young persons considered a danger to themselves or others could be sent for up to a year to a secure care service, where they received specialized treatment and could participate in restorative justice programmes.

17. Approximately 500 children had a parent in prison. Article 63 of the Imprisonment Act provided for the disciplinary confinement of minors for up to three 24-hour periods. The provision had not been used recently, as there had been no violent incidents among young prisoners. Article 69 provided for the placement of a minor in isolation as a security measure. A minor at risk of self-harm had been placed in isolation for eight days in 2023.

18. The justice system, which increasingly focused on helping minors with psychological issues, had provided professional development for judicial specialists on the topic, supported by funding from partners. The multidimensional family therapy programme had proved effective, and its implementation had been found positive by the Offence Prevention Council. The Office of the Chancellor of Justice, which acted as the national mechanism for the prevention of torture, was fully independent.

19. **A representative of Estonia** said that shortcomings in the relevant databases meant that the data on children who had been recruited to participate in, or had participated in, armed conflict abroad were not representative. Where there were grounds to believe that a child had been involved in armed conflict, the child was referred for additional support, including psychological support.

20. **A representative of Estonia** said that sexuality education was included in health education, which focused on emotional, social and physical health and healthy relationships. Sexuality education, which was provided at every stage of schooling, was tailored to each age group and was based on the Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe. In early childhood educational institutions, the director, head teachers and teachers were required to hold a bachelor's degree; there was no education requirement for assistant teachers. Reforms

were due to be introduced that would require directors and head teachers to be more highly qualified; assistant teachers, too, would have to meet an education requirement.

21. The number of students admitted to support specialities had increased since 2019, and scholarships for teaching and psychology students had been introduced, alongside allowances for early career support specialists and teachers. Under the law, the owner of a school – the municipality – was responsible for ensuring that support services could be provided, while the head teacher was responsible for organizing them. Since 2018, the municipalities had received greater financial support in order to pay competitive salaries to support specialists, and the number working in educational institutions had increased by more than 700 over the previous five years. There were currently more than 1,450 support specialists working in general education schools. Since many support specialists worked part-time and many schools were small and did not require full-time support specialists, municipalities pooled specialists to provide the required services.

22. The proportion of students with special educational needs in regular classes and schools, which was currently around 70 per cent, was steadily increasing. Parents were entitled to send their children to their local school, and the local government was required to provide appropriate support, where necessary. In the long term, the Government intended to reduce the proportion of children with special educational needs attending special schools to 10 per cent.

23. **Ms. Otani** (Coordinator, Country Task Force) said that she would like to know, as she had noted at the previous meeting, how the members of the young people’s advisory committee were selected and how old they had to be. More generally, she would like to know whether consultations and activities offering young people an opportunity to express their views were open to children of all ages, in particular young children.

24. **Mr. Gudbrandsson** (Country Task Force) said that he wished to know, as he had stated the previous day, what measures were taken to enhance the role played by fathers in their children’s upbringing. Information on any steps taken to tackle violence in sporting and other leisure activities would be welcome. Furthermore, he would be interested to hear the delegation’s comments on reports that the State party had failed to ensure that it had properly implemented the Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction.

25. **Mr. Jaffé** said that he would be grateful for further information concerning the automatic exchange of information on children potentially in need. He wished to know how the social services identified parents whose child had been found not to have a disability but who nonetheless required support with that child. It would be useful to learn to what extent children were formally involved in the State party’s efforts to prepare its nationally determined contribution to the global response to climate change.

26. **The Chair** (Country Task Force) said that she wished to know whether children who had been deprived of their liberty were able to submit complaints and, if so, what complaints mechanisms were available to them. It would be helpful to hear whether such children could challenge any short-term restrictive measures imposed on them during their detention. She invited the delegation to address the Committee’s concern that the firearms training provided to members of the youth organization known as the Young Eagles might constitute military training and to explain whether that training was deemed compatible with the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

27. **Ms. Ayoubi Idrissi** said that she wished to learn to what age group the delegation was referring when it used the term “young people” and at what age a person could be deprived of his or her liberty. As a minor had evidently been held in solitary confinement for eight days owing to concerns about self-harm, the delegation might comment on whether the use of solitary confinement was monitored and whether the Office of the Chancellor of Justice was informed of its use, carried out inspections and engaged with children deprived of their liberty as part of its duties as the national preventive mechanism.

*The meeting was suspended at 11.25 a.m. and resumed at 11.45 a.m.*

28. **A representative of Estonia** said that the Government had no plans to authorize the delivery of military training to members of the youth organizations of the Estonian Defence League. It was of the view, however, that the development of shooting skills among children

over the age of 12, under adult supervision, was a way of engaging young people in sporting activities and promoting an active and healthy lifestyle. The weapons used were designed for sporting rather than military purposes, and no military techniques were taught.

29. **A representative of Estonia** said that the country was home to approximately 80,000 children of early education age. While just 38 per cent of children up to the age of 2 were in early education, that figure rose to 94 per cent among children aged from 3 to 6. The low rates of attendance among very young children were explained by the country's parental leave schemes, which were among Europe's most generous. For the first 18 months of a child's life, one parent was entitled to a benefit equivalent to 100 per cent of his or her salary or three times the average Estonian wage, which was the maximum amount offered. Accordingly, many parents chose to stay at home with the child for that period, after which municipalities were obliged to find the child a kindergarten place. The early education enrolment rate thus increased to around 80 per cent for children 18 months old and older.

30. European support had been provided for the creation of kindergarten places that would help address the shortages in areas with a large number of young families. The Government had decided not to make the final year of kindergarten compulsory, as enrolment rates at that level were already very high and the funds required to make it free and compulsory would be better used to address the challenges within the early childhood care system.

31. **A representative of Estonia** said that the average dropout rate at the basic school level was 0.3 per cent. Dropout rates for boys and girls were 0.4 per cent and 0.3 per cent, respectively. While the rate among girls remained low, it had increased over the past year. The Government was prioritizing activities intended to guarantee equal educational opportunities for boys and girls by promoting an education that was learner-centred and free from gender stereotypes, with a focus on student well-being and the development of strong study and social skills. Around 70 per cent of students who completed basic education continued their studies at the upper secondary level, and a further 26 per cent enrolled in vocational education programmes. The remaining 4 per cent did not pursue any form of education; the Ministry of Education intended to address that situation by raising the age at which children could leave school. There were many more students at the basic level than at the upper secondary level because basic education comprised nine grades, whereas upper secondary education was made up of just three.

32. A specific curriculum had been designed for children with Estonian as a second language, and schools were provided with financial resources to help them support such children. Many schools followed the content and language integrated learning approach. A detailed action plan had been drawn up to manage the transition to a fully Estonian-language education system, which would begin in September 2024; as part of the transition, steps would be taken to increase the amount of teaching in Estonian at all levels and to guarantee the availability of teachers with the necessary language skills. The Government had earmarked sufficient resources to support the transition and was providing schools with Estonian language training and funding for the purchase of suitable study materials. Schools with more than 10 children who shared a mother tongue other than Estonian would continue to be required to provide those children with the opportunity to study their language and culture. The study of the minority language could also be pursued outside school; the Ministry of Education provided funding to programmes set up for that purpose by non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

33. The Government understood the concerns surrounding the workload of Estonian students. The Ministry of Social Affairs was thus in the process of developing new regulations to prevent student fatigue. A large proportion of students participated in extracurricular activities, and the Ministry of Education promoted the integrated organization of formal and informal educational activities in order to ensure that children had enough free time. Health services were provided at school to protect students' well-being and support their development and growth. Some health-care providers had begun to assign mental health nurses to schools. Any students requiring support from special education teachers, speech therapists or psychologists were entitled to receive that support free of charge. School principals could hire specialists working in the private sector where necessary to guarantee the provision of such services.

34. Estonian law established that students should not be required to travel for more than 60 minutes to attend school. Municipalities, which were obliged to ensure that students in the first to sixth grades were assigned a school close to their home, were entitled to financial support from the Government to run those schools. Additional support was available to guarantee the survival of schools that had fewer than 90 students in the first to sixth grades. In areas with a falling population, transport had to be made available to students in the seventh to ninth grades so that they could attend schools in town centres.

35. **A representative of Estonia** said that the shortage of health-care professionals was the greatest challenge facing the health sector. The issue was linked to the fact that the share of gross domestic product allocated to that sector was just 6.7 per cent, which was nearly 3 percentage points lower than the European Union average. The sector was also under pressure owing to increasing treatment costs. Accordingly, there was a need to overhaul the financing of the health system and review its overall functioning. The Government, which was taking steps to recruit more nurses and administrative staff, was participating in a European Union project known as HEROES, the aim of which was to enhance health-care professionals' skills and develop forecasting tools and health governance frameworks. With the exception of 2023, the number of graduating doctors had increased every year since 2015. The number of nurses graduating had remained stable. Overall, the number of practising doctors and nurses had risen in the past five years.

36. Under Estonian law, health-care professionals were able to assess whether a child was capable of consenting to medical treatment without a parent present or against the parents' wishes. Children were deemed capable of doing so once they were able to responsibly consider the benefits and drawbacks of the treatment concerned. Cases in which children consented to medical treatment against their parents' wishes were nonetheless very rare. The Chancellor of Justice had worked with health-care professionals to develop guidelines on assessing the competence of children in such situations.

37. Health-care professionals were required to receive specific training before being authorized to administer vaccines. Steps were being taken to update the immunization training programme by integrating a module on assessing the competence of children to consent to vaccination. The Government shared the Committee's concerns regarding the decline in vaccination coverage and was in the process of developing a long-term strategic plan to increase the uptake of vaccines among the entire population, with a particular focus on children. Communication campaigns were the best way to convince parents to have their children vaccinated. To that end, the Estonian Health Insurance Fund organized regular campaigns highlighting the safety of vaccines and the risks associated with the diseases against which children were vaccinated. A project had been run to create a toolbox of resources for government institutions involved in the delivery of vaccination services, and steps had been taken to develop a digital system through which parents could consent to the vaccination of their children. Although they were not legally required to do so, school nurses responsible for administering vaccines wrote to parents beforehand to obtain their consent.

38. While the trends with regard to the mental health of children were worrying, there was also evident political will to tackle the problem and correct the imbalance between the supply of and demand for mental health services. Additional resources had been allocated to expand services, develop new ones and provide relevant training to mental health specialists, as well as other persons working with children, such as teachers, school nurses, social workers and family doctors. The long-term solution lay in strengthening primary health care, school-based services and prevention. The Ministry of Social Affairs was responsible for mental health because Estonia did not have a separate health ministry. However, given the size and importance of the portfolios, there were two Ministers.

39. Sexual and reproductive health counselling, as well as certain procedures and diagnostic tests, was provided free of charge for all persons up to age 26 irrespective of sex or insurance status. Counselling services on matters including sexual intercourse, gender identity, sexual orientation, contraception, unwanted pregnancy and sexual violence were available in all bigger hospitals and in designated youth counselling centres. No major public debate had yet been held concerning intersex children. However, the sex-change pathway had been regulated, and the Ministry of Social Affairs had recently funded the compilation of guidance for health-care professionals, including with regard to intersex persons.

40. Greater involvement of fathers in the care of children was one of the strategic aims of Estonian family policy. Since 2018, changes had been made to the parental leave system. For instance, in addition to the individual entitlements, a larger portion of the parental benefit was to be shared by the parents. Consequently, a growing number of fathers were staying home with their children. Similarly, child leave days, which could be used until a child turned 14, had been converted into an individual entitlement for each parent not only to encourage fathers to take on a larger share of the care burden but also to cater for different family models. Lastly, NGOs had been provided with support to help them encourage fathers to attend parenting classes.

41. **A representative of Estonia** said that Estonia was systematically establishing community-based parent education and family support centres called family nests. Some of the family nests had already set up fatherhood clubs designed to provide fathers with opportunities to meet other fathers, talk with them and thus increase their self-confidence and involvement as parents.

42. The Youth Work Act defined a young person as a person aged between 7 and 26. However, it was generally children at least 10 or 12 who were involved in the various councils and advisory committees. Efforts were nonetheless made to involve younger children in discussions on age-appropriate topics, such as designing their environment, whether in their childcare centre, school or community. For example, a kindergarten had involved the children in designing its yard, including what flowers to plant, and had then followed those specifications. Showing children that their views were taken into account helped give them the confidence to continue voicing their opinions later in life. The current members of the Advisory Board of the Ombudsman for Children were between the ages of 13 and 15.

43. The violence associated with sporting events or activities had been covered in the media, including the case of a well-known trainer's methods in respect of children and youth, thereby shining an even bigger spotlight on the issue than previously. The Ministry of Culture, together with social partners, was systematically taking measures to prevent the abuse of children who participated in sporting activities, including by developing instructional materials and training programmes, appointing child protection officers in sporting organizations and establishing a nationwide reporting mechanism and a child helpline.

44. **A representative of Estonia** said that all decisions taken by authorities that affected a person's rights and freedoms could be appealed. In the case of children, legal aid must be provided if needed. The case of solitary confinement of a minor that had been mentioned had been exceptional. The intention had been to protect the minor concerned, whose well-being during confinement had been closely monitored by specialists. The Chancellor of Justice, who was always notified when a minor was placed in solitary confinement, oversaw the execution of the confinement order.

45. The Ministry of Justice was the central authority for assisting parents in international child abduction cases; however, since the families were not required to apprise it of developments in their case, its role was limited to facilitating exchanges of information. The Ministry had received 24 requests for assistance in such cases in 2022, 21 in 2023 and 12 in the first five and a half months of 2024.

46. **A representative of Estonia** said that anyone with knowledge of a child in need was required by law to report the case to the child protection services. Guidelines and checklists were being prepared to help professionals in all fields identify children in need. Children who were not officially defined as children in need under the new information exchange system could still receive services if an assessment showed that they needed them. The needs assessment did not depend on a disability diagnosis. The purpose of the new procedure had been to optimize the system and make it more proactive. Once the child protection services were made aware of a child in need, a child protection worker determined what support was required and monitored the family's ability to handle the situation. The situation was reassessed at least twice a year.

47. **A representative of Estonia** said that families that failed to agree on the living arrangements of their minor children following separation could be referred to the national



family mediation service by the courts or contact the service directly. Between September 2022 and March 2024, more than 1,170 families had used the service, which was free of charge. In some cases, however, the parents, with counselling from the service, learned to make decisions regarding their children together and did not ultimately need a parenting plan developed in consultation with the service. Where no agreement was reached, the dispute could be referred to the courts. In cases involving domestic violence, mediation was voluntary and conducted by specially trained mediators.

48. Since the establishment of the service, children had been given the opportunity to express their views. That practice helped parents adopt a more child-focused approach and ensured that parenting plans considered the children's needs. The 34 family mediators offered services in Estonian, Russian and English, and plans had been made to expand the service. An evaluation of the service and associated law was being prepared.

49. **A representative of Estonia** said that the monthly benefit for single parents, which had increased from €19 to €80, had more than quadrupled in 2023. The benefit for the first and second child had risen from €60 to €80 a month, while the benefit for the third child and any subsequent children had remained €100 a month. After a substantial increase in 2023, large-family benefits had been reduced somewhat by the new Government in 2024, though they remained higher than 2022 levels. The benefit for families with three to six children, which was paid out in addition to child and single-parent benefits, was now €450 a month, and the benefit for families with seven or more children was €650 a month. The minimum wage in Estonia was €820 a month.

50. **Ms. Otani** said that the Committee was grateful to the delegation for the clear, detailed and up-to-date information it had provided, which had been useful in understanding the State party's approach to a number of issues.

51. **A representative of Estonia** said she hoped that the replies provided by her delegation had demonstrated the country's firm commitment to human rights and its dedication to creating a child- and family-friendly environment in Estonia. The current Minister of Social Affairs had been a member of the delegation that had come before the Committee in 2017; there was thus understanding of the importance of protecting children and their rights at the highest political level. She looked forward to ongoing dialogue with the Committee on the efforts to be made to enhance children's enjoyment of their rights.

*The meeting rose at 12.50 p.m.*