



Securing the recovery, ambition, and resilience for the well-being of children in the post-COVID-19 decade

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The policy brief details the critical challenges for the well-being of children in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and lays out the foundations of a Framework for Achieving the Well-Being of Children in the post-COVID-19 Decade to ensure that children are put at the centre of efforts to build back better. The Framework proposes five pillars of action, which includes developing a data framework for monitoring child well-being outcomes and policies and ensuring political leadership and commitment for child well-being. The brief also provides an overview summary of a webinar hosted by the OECD and the Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures in October 2020. This webinar provided a platform for OECD member countries and child well-being experts to share examples of country or regional policies and initiatives aimed at promoting child well-being during the pandemic, and to start shaping a shared understanding of child well-being and the outcome objectives.



Introduction

On 13 October 2020, the OECD Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity (WISE) and the Institute for Inspiring Children's Future at the University of Strathclyde, United Kingdom, hosted the webinar "Securing the Recovery, Ambition and Resilience for the Well-Being of Children in the Post-Covid-19 Decade". The purpose of the webinar was to provide a forum for OECD countries to share examples of country or regional policies and initiatives aimed at promoting child well-being during the coronavirus pandemic and to use these experiences to start shaping a shared understanding of the well-being of children and the outcome objectives in the post-COVID-19 decade. The webinar was the first of several opportunities for member countries and national experts to engage directly with the OECD over the next biennium on achieving the highest possible well-being of children in the post-COVID-19 decade.

This document supplements the background paper originally provided to delegates of the OECD Working Party of Social Policy in advance of the webinar with the addition of an overview of the webinar proceedings and conclusions.¹ The document details the critical challenges for the well-being of children in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and lays out the foundations of a Framework for Achieving the Well-Being of Children in the post-COVID-19 Decade to ensure that children are put at the centre of efforts to build back better.

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Child well-being in the post-COVID-19 decade

The critical challenges created by COVID-19 for child well-being underscores children's distinctive needs, as well as the distinctive implications of policies. Already – before the coronavirus pandemic struck – there was a concerning distance yet to travel in reducing inequalities in opportunities and outcomes for children, and developing the right policy packages to address the factors contributing to their poorer well-being (OECD, 2019^[1]; Marguerit, Cohen and Exton, 2018^[2]). OECD analysis on child well-being highlights the many challenges facing children, depending on age, gender, and family socio-economic background, and the efforts made by countries to promote the well-being of children, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Box 1).

Box 1. Building better policies for promoting child well-being in OECD countries

The well-being of children is a central component of the work of the OECD on social policy and inclusive growth. In 2005, Social Affairs Ministers made the ambitious call on the OECD to identify which interventions alleviate child poverty and would contribute to its eventual eradication, as well as policies to end the cycle of inter-generational deprivation and to support children in making successful transitions through the lifecycle.

The OECD has a proven track record in the measurement and analysis of child well-being and child development, as evidenced in publications such as *Doing Better for Children* (2009^[3]) and the inclusion of a dedicated chapter on child well-being in *How's Life? 2015* (2015^[4]), and the OECD Child Well-Being Portal. In 2019, the OECD published the report *Changing the Odds for Vulnerable Children: Building Opportunities and Resilience* (2019^[1]), which positioned investing in the well-being of children, particularly the most vulnerable, as a central action for inclusive growth. The work on child poverty and inclusive growth demonstrates not only how children need to be explicit beneficiaries of inclusive growth, but how children's – and their families' – well-being is equally crucial to enabling adults in the family to participate and contribute to growth itself.

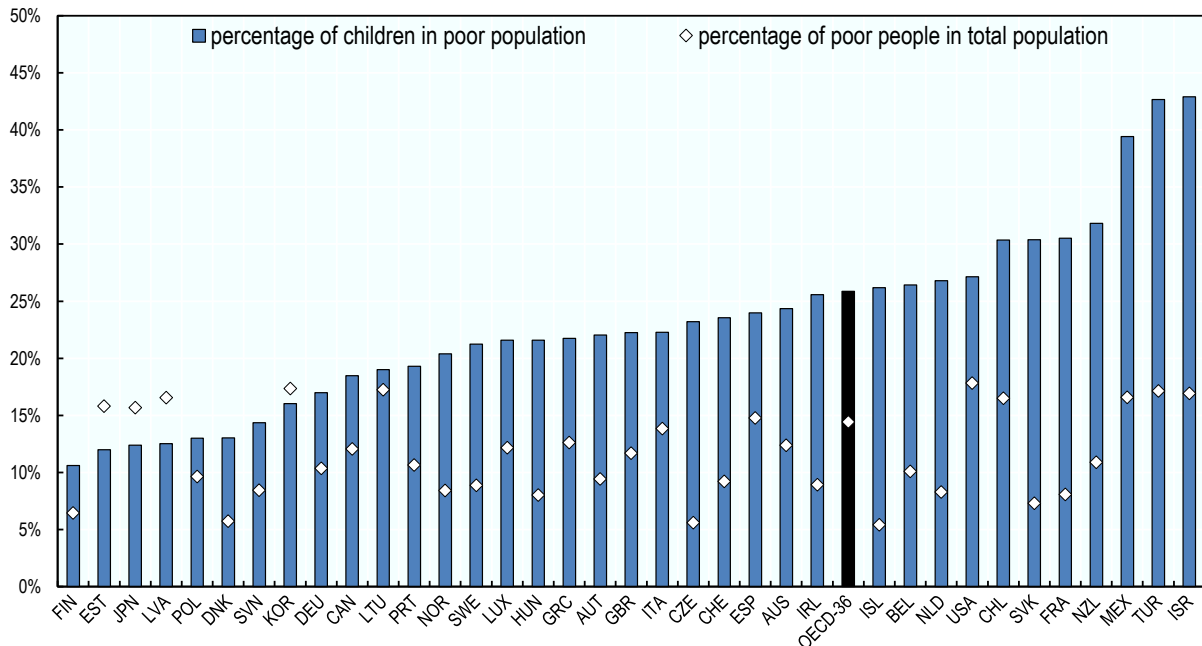
The [OECD Child Well-Being Data Portal](#) provides a set of comparative data to assess trends in different areas of child well-being and child policies. At present, the OECD is undertaking work to strengthen its data and assessment framework for child well-being to capture current risks and protective factors. This work involves developing a conceptual framework for child well-being that can guide sound data collection and the mapping of cross-national differences. Other OECD work involves examining how social and family policies influence the well-being of children, including work-family reconciliation policies and family support services.

Higher levels of child poverty and inequalities

Children are particularly affected by income poverty, a situation that has existed long before the pandemic even hit. In 2017-18, children made up 26% of those living in income poverty in the OECD, despite only representing around 21% of the population. This percentage varies across countries, from almost 43% in Israel and Turkey to as low as 11% in Finland (Figure 1). Overall, in the OECD, 1 in 7 children grow up in poverty.



Figure 1. Children make up the greater share of those living in poverty in the OECD, 2018 or latest available year



Note: Data are for 2018 or latest year available; OECD refers to OECD-36, without Colombia not fulling included in IDD yet.

Poverty refers to share of persons living with less than 50% of national median equivalised disposable income. Children are classified as those under 18 years old.

Source: Calculations from the *OECD Income Distribution database*, <http://oe.cd/idd>.

Since the pandemic, the situation of many children has invariably worsened, as many parents were forced to reduce their economic activity (without the loss of earnings being always fully compensated), or have simply lost their jobs. Though various measures have been put in place to mitigate income losses in the short term, there is much uncertainty about the capacity of countries and social protection systems to respond to a situation that is likely to persist in the longer term (OECD, 2020^[5]). It is too early to state precisely how many children in OECD countries have already fallen or will fall into poverty as a result of the pandemic. However, the few available projections suggest significant rises in child poverty rates; for instance, child poverty in the United States could increase by more than one third by the end of 2020, from 13.6 percent to 20.9 percent using the Supplemental Poverty Measure (Parolin and Wimer, 2020^[6]). Forecasts for middle and low-income countries suggest an additional 62.8 to 86 million children are likely to live in poverty by the end of 2020, depending on the scenario (Save the Children/ Unicef, 2020^[7]).

The pandemic is also worsening the situation of children whose families were already receiving help from service providers. For example, Save the Children reports most (96%) of respondents to a large worldwide survey of participants in their programmes in mostly low and middle-income countries reported struggling to pay for specific items due to income losses caused by COVID-19, among which many (81%) are struggling to pay for food, and one-third are struggling to pay for health care (35%) and nutrition supplements (33%), and one-quarter have difficulties paying their rent (25%) and utility bills (24%). The survey was run among programme participants with telephone numbers or email addresses and may not have included the most marginalised or deprived families, as having a stable phone or Internet connection was a prerequisite for being invited to participate in the survey (Save the Children, 2020^[8]).

Growing up in poverty is harmful for children's well-being and development, both in the short term and in the long run as adults (Thévenon et al., 2018^[9]). Poverty limits parents' ability to provide the quality of



inputs needed to support children's healthy development, from housing, to neighbourhood environments, healthy food, and good quality care and education. Poverty is associated with higher barriers to accessing good quality health care and education, timely support when extra help is needed, and a safe environment to grow up in (OECD, 2019^[1]). Economic hardship may also cause financial stress which can have an impact on the quality of parenting and children's emotional development and behaviour (Cooper and Stewart, 2013^[10]; Schenck-Fontaine and Panico, 2019^[11]).

Promoting parental employment and helping parents reconcile work and family is critical to lift children out of poverty and to secure children's material well-being in the long run. In addition, previous OECD work on child poverty showed that redistribution policies can help mitigate the effect of child poverty and that in many countries there is room for improving their effectiveness in reducing child poverty, including increasing the uptake of social benefits among poor families (OECD, 2018^[12]). However, the pandemic has shown that some of the solutions to children's material deprivation are ineffective during such troubled times. For example, free (or very low cost) school meals were seen as a way to fight against food insecurity, but this approach can be rendered ineffective by school closures or self-isolation measures of populations exposed to the virus, if alternative approaches for distributing food are not quickly implemented. Innovative means of reaching children in these circumstances need to be developed.

Rising poverty is only one among the many consequences of the pandemic. It is apparent that some families are much better equipped financially and/or materially to cope with the upheaval and the stress of COVID-19. In particular, well-off families tend to live in larger spaces, which makes continuous cohabitation during a lockdown more manageable (OECD, 2020^[13]); the parents may have the opportunity to telework and thus more able to arrange working hours around looking after children (Espinoza and Reznikova, 2020^[14]); and the children may benefit from greater material and cultural assets to put to use the resources made available by teachers when schools are closed (OECD, 2020^[15]).

Higher family stress

The pandemic has sharply increased the levels of stress in the day-to-day lives of many families. Research underlines the serious impact that family stress has – when chronic or prolonged – on children's developing biological systems, particularly during the early years of a child's life. The consequences for healthy child development can be immediate and long-term (OECD, 2019^[1]).

Managing family life during lockdown can be particularly challenging for parents, as they must balance personal life, work, and raising children while being cut off from the family's usual support systems. An Italian study found that parents' levels of self-reported stress had a stronger effect on family well-being (parent's and children's collectively) during lockdown than the quality of the home environment or living in a deprived area; among parents who found life more difficult under lockdown, their children's psychological distress was higher, and they exhibited more emotional and behavioural problems (Spinelli et al., 2020^[16]). Moreover, a Canadian study examined the relationship between lockdown, and family stress and intimate partner violence. The study found no association between change in employment status or the move to working from home, and an increase in family stress and intimate partner violence. Rather, the likelihood of reporting higher family stress and intimate partner violence was greater among women reporting worries over their inability to meet financial obligations and to maintain social ties. These findings are consistent with evidence of the link between intimate partner violence and social isolation and decreased bargaining power of women in the household (Beland et al., 2020^[17]). These studies suggest that policy should take into consideration the implications of lockdown on family stress, and the need among some families for non-financial interventions in the immediate term and moving forward.



Learning loss and school disengagement

School closures and the switch to remote learning are likely to exacerbate pre-existing educational inequalities. OECD research indicates that children's educational achievements are strongly influenced by parents' level of education (OECD, 2018^[18]). This advantage, or in some cases disadvantage, continues into adulthood. Results from the OECD PIAAC study highlight the influence of parents' education on adult literacy and numeracy skills, with individuals from advantaged backgrounds more likely to be highly educated than cognitive skills would suggest (OECD, 2018^[18]).

Children's adjustment to remote learning depends on factors such as age, socio-economic background and family circumstances, and the presence of special educational needs, among other. Most of the prior research on the relative effectiveness of online learning is concentrated on older children at upper-secondary school level. It is reasonable to expect that online learning for children at primary or pre-school levels is not likely to be very effective if not carefully designed and tailored to needs and characteristics of young children (Pietro, 2020^[19]). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have the resources in place at home to make the most of online learning compared to affluent peers. They are less likely to have access to relevant learning digital resources (e.g. a computer and good broadband access), a good home learning environment (e.g. a quiet place to study and less disruptions), and direct and indirect support from parents for learning (OECD, 2020^[20]). Moreover, children with disabilities are especially sensitive to disruptions in their routines and find it harder to concentrate in front of a computer, particularly if assisted technologies are not provided (Pietro, 2020^[19]).

The learning gains or losses made by children during school and Early Childcare and Education Centre (ECEC) closures vary significantly by access to remote learning, the quality of remote instruction, home support, the degree of engagement in schoolwork, and the overall attitude towards learning. For example, many children lost contact with teaching staff initially, which increased the risk of disengagement and dropout, especially among children in difficult socio-economic and family situations. Drawing on lessons in the first half of 2020, education systems should not only aim to ensure access to remote resources for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, but also strengthen engagement between schools and parents, in order to improve information and guidance to parents on effective practices for supporting their children's learning (OECD, 2020^[21]). As long as schools remain fully or partly operational, digital online learning platforms should be blended with classroom-based learning (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020^[22]). If numbers of children in the classroom are restricted, prioritising access for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who have additional needs can help limit learning loss.

The precise impact of school and ECEC closures on students' learning ("learning loss") is yet to be assessed and will differ by subject, age and other factors. Though some pre-pandemic research suggest that learning loss could be small and only temporary (Hattie, 2020^[23]), recent estimates suggest much larger learning losses and economic impacts. During the first phase of the crisis, students in grades 1-12 could have lost one-third of a school year of learning, and this could reduce learners' lifetime incomes by about 3%, and lower a typical country's GDP by an average of 1.5% over the remainder of the century (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2020^[24]). Furthermore, research into students' summer learning loss suggests that declines could be steeper for mathematics than for reading, and greater for students in higher grades. The loss is also greater for children from low-income families (OECD, 2020^[25]), and children with disabilities (Kerry and Davies, 1998^[26]).

Greater need for mental health supports

The stress and uncertainty associated with the pandemic potentially has significant negative effects on children's mental health. The crisis is likely to increase financial and social insecurity for low-income groups, presenting a knock-on effect on other factors contributing to poor child mental health, such as poverty, poor parental mental health, and exposure to stressful situations (OECD, 2020^[20]).



Evidence on the impact of the crisis so far on children's mental health is still emerging. The available evidence to date suggests that the emotional reactions to the pandemic are dynamic in nature (Darmody, Smyth and Russell, 2020^[27]). The initial findings from a UK school survey on 13-year-olds indicated an overall reduction in anxiety and rises in well-being, suggesting that removal of external pressures (i.e. school and peer relationships) during confinement had a temporary positive effect. But notably, similar gains were not reported among children who are classified as vulnerable (i.e. children with health problems or disabilities, or identifying as LGBTQ+). Vulnerable children reported higher anxiety and depression scores, and lower levels of well-being than before the pandemic (Widnall et al., 2020^[28]). In addition, it is likely that the few positive effects following entry into confinement disappeared as confinement continued and many children found themselves socially isolated.

Different surveys have tried to capture the impact on children's emotional well-being and behaviours. Parent surveys highlight changes in children's behaviour that include increased irritability, difficulty concentrating, and sleep problems (Darmody, Smyth and Russell, 2020^[27]). Surveys conducted directly with children identify greater loneliness, deterioration in mental health, and worries for themselves and their families, and for their futures (Foróige, 2020^[29]; Save the Children Finland, 2020^[30]; YoungMinds, 2020^[31]). As some of these surveys are based on convenience (volunteer) sampling, they may not be representative of the full impact of the pandemic on children's mental health. Moving forward, it is important to elicit the views of broader groups of children to better understand the impact, particularly as children return to school (Box 2).

Box 2. Children's views and experiences of life under COVID-19

Directly eliciting the view and experiences of children of life under COVID-19 is critical for fully understanding the impact of the pandemic on child well-being, in particular the impact of public health measure and school closures.

In a number of OECD countries, consultations with children on life under COVID-19 are ongoing. For example, Finland, the Children's Voice survey (Save the Children Finland, 2020^[30]); New Zealand, as part of the Growing Up in New Zealand longitudinal study (2020^[32]); and the United Kingdom, the YoungMinds Survey (2020^[31]) and Girls Attitudes Survey (Girlguiding, 2020^[33]). Some consultations have an international scope and involve children living in different countries. For example, the #COVIDUnder19 survey (Terre des hommes – Helping children worldwide, 2020^[34]), and the Children and Young People's Voices in Times of COVID-19 research study (World Vision UK, 2020^[35]).

Results available from the surveys referenced above concern the earlier stages of the pandemic only. Emerging issues raised by children and young people to date include problems of social isolation; challenges to their mental health; and feelings of uncertainty for themselves and their families, and for their future. Children and young people reported mixed experiences around accessing education and other services.

Greater need for support among already-vulnerable groups of children

The longer-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to be greater for certain groups of already-vulnerable children. These vulnerable groups of children include children in homeless families, children experiencing maltreatment, children in out-of-home care, children in the youth justice system, and children with disabilities (OECD, 2020^[20]). In addition, as COVID-19 has a significant impact on the functioning of many families, there is a strong possibility that certain children may now need family support or child protection services, despite not being on the radar of professionals and members of the community before the crisis. This underlines the need for countries to intensify efforts to identify vulnerable children,



and to provide adequate levels of support. However, successfully doing so in practice will be difficult since it requires removing the barriers that at different levels hinder the delivery of family services delivery (Acquah and Thévenon, 2020^[36]).

As highlighted in other sections of this paper, COVID-19 interacts with pre-existing inequalities and deprivations, increasing the likelihood of poor outcomes and harm to children's well-being. In addition, COVID-19 has exacerbated other risks for children, for example, online risks of sexual exploitation and cyberbullying, and risks of child maltreatment and exposure to violence at home (OECD, 2020^[20]; Pereda and Díaz-Faes, 2020^[37]). It is of a significant concern the ways in which COVID-19 has compromised the usual safety nets for children and families. A number of OECD countries record a rise in the number of calls reporting concerns for children's safety and well-being to helplines, yet referrals to child protection services have fallen as children became less "visible" to supportive adults (e.g. schoolteachers, youth workers, and case workers) (Cave, 2020^[38]; Weale, 2020^[39]).

Children and young people in out-of-home care generally have additional care needs given their accumulation of disadvantages early in life. Disruptions to educational and therapeutic services come with significant costs, as access to timely support is key to improving the poor outcomes of this group (OECD, 2019^[1]). School closures and confinement measures can place care placements under extra pressure, particularly in family-based care where carers might find themselves now providing 24-hour care without getting a regular break. Children have experienced disruptions in face-to-face family contact. The alternative, contact over digital devices, is not suitable for young children and some children with additional needs, while digital poverty is an issue for some birth parents. Nonetheless, confinement measures have reduced external pressures of school placements, keeping appointments with professionals, and peer relationships for children in out-home-care. Emerging evidence suggests that some children in residential care settings are feeling less anxious and more settled, and are exhibiting fewer disruptive behaviours (Cameron, 2020^[40]; Murphy, 2020^[41]). This could indicate some value in the innovative practices emerging as carers and children learn to adapt to life under COVID-19, such as reducing the focus from meeting complicated outcome plans and allowing more time for carers to develop empathic relationships with children.

In general, it is difficult for children with disabilities to adapt to restrictions that are enforced during life under COVID-19. Many children with disabilities have experienced a regression in functioning, because of the loss of routine of going to school and access to services, including therapeutic and respite supports. For example, children with Autism Spectrum Disorder can find social distancing and lack of access to recreational activities a strain and an interference with the development of social skills, while the lack of routine and general uncertainty can make them feel more anxious and unsettled (Patel, 2020^[42]). The demands on parents and other family members to meet the care needs of children with disabilities have become greater and more stressful. Parents cannot replace teachers and therapists, and for some it is difficult to provide 24-hour care. A Canadian survey found greater concern among parents during the first phase of COVID-19 for the well-being of children with disabilities than for children without disabilities. While parents reported similar concerns for all children, a higher proportion of parents of children with disabilities were very or extremely concerned for their children's amount of screen time, loneliness or isolation, general mental health, school year and academic success (Arim, Findlay and Kohen, 2020^[43]).

Children living in detention centres are more vulnerable to the COVID-19 disease than the general population. The WHO has flagged detention centres as locations that are very vulnerable to COVID-19 outbreaks due to the closed environment and detainees living in close proximity to one other (WHO, 2021^[44]). The burden of disease is higher among children in detention, and access to nutrition and good healthcare and hygiene facilities are often less assured (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2020^[45]). Outbreaks of COVID-19 in youth detention facilities have been reported in OECD countries, for instance France, Germany and the United States, with some countries taking measures to reduce the detainee population (Rovner, 2021^[46]; RBB 24, 2020^[47]; Noui, 2020^[48]). Furthermore, COVID-19 has contributed to long delays for court hearings, which is a serious concern for children on remand for

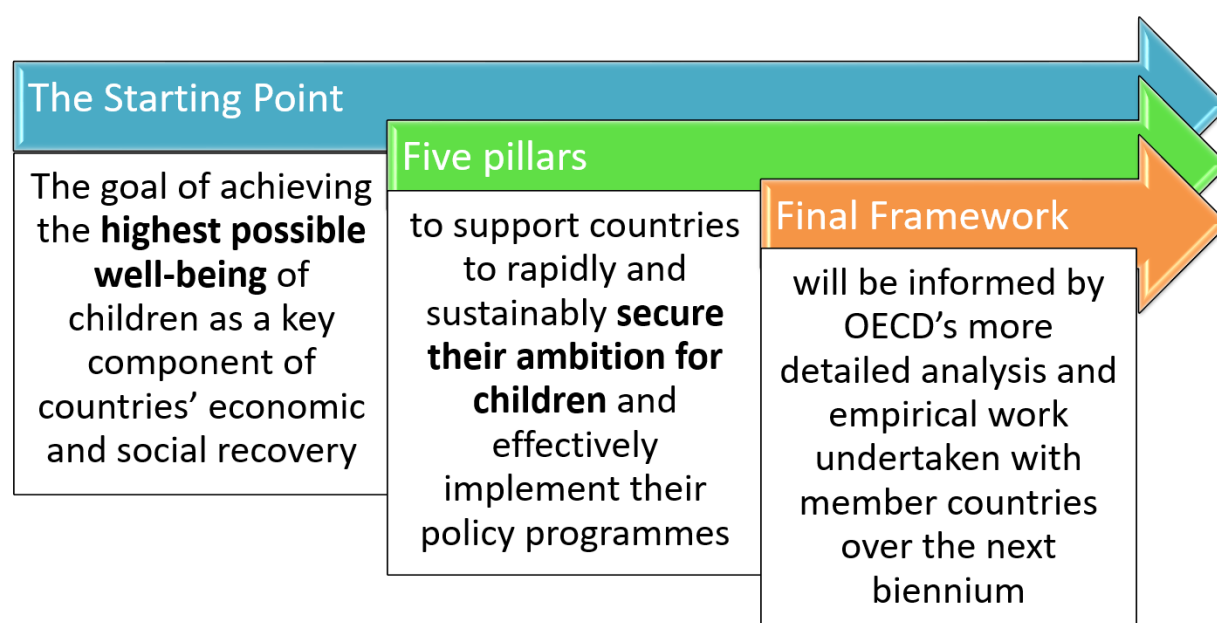


criminal offences as they can be required to spend long hours (sometimes up to 23 hours a day) in isolation (Ferstman, 2020^[49]). A planned national approach is critical for addressing the specific vulnerabilities of children in detention during COVID-19, including the safe and carefully managed release of children from detention, a temporary pause on children newly entering detention facilities, and reducing long court delays.

The Framework

This section sets out the foundations for a Framework for Achieving the Well-Being of Children in the post-COVID-19 Decade (Figure 2). The final Framework will be informed by more detailed analysis and empirical work, which the OECD will undertake with member countries over the next biennium. This final Framework will aim to help countries guide and prioritise policy actions to form a coherent and systematic approach to enhancing the well-being of children. It may also serve as a tool to support local and national thinking, across government and society, in prioritising the well-being of children while managing the biggest challenges. There is value in revisiting the thinking behind child well-being and the priorities for policy-makers in light of the new challenges posed by COVID-19. It goes hand-in-hand with planning and engineering an inclusive and resilient recovery in the post-COVID-19 decade.

Figure 2. Building a framework for achieving the well-being of children in the post-COVID-19 decade



The Framework's starting point is the achievement of the highest possible well-being of children in the post-COVID-19 decade as a key component of countries' economic and social recovery. Broadly speaking, the Framework should help countries adopt a comprehensive approach to promoting child well-being, one that not only supports children's recovery from the most serious impacts of the pandemic but also promotes future resilience of global systems and retains ambition for children's future in the face of significant economic and social challenges. The Framework would help countries in defining their objectives for the well-being of children and assist them in the critical task of identifying the key medium-term priorities for child well-being, and setting out measurable objectives and targets.



The Framework proposes five pillars of action that can support countries as they look to rapidly and sustainably secure their ambition for children and effectively implement their policy programmes. The pillars are aligned to the child well-being and policy challenges in the post-COVID-19 decade and the longer-term goals, including the Sustainable Development Goals. They are:

- Developing a data framework for monitoring child well-being outcomes and policies
- Mobilising (consistently) the appropriate financial resources
- Establishing a clear distribution of policy responsibilities among stakeholders and public administrations
- Ensuring high quality provision of services to the most vulnerable children and families
- Ensuring political leadership and commitment for child well-being

Developing a data framework for monitoring child well-being outcomes and policies

Monitoring policies aimed at promoting child well-being requires a solid information base and a set of priorities for action for assessing whether measures taken to improve the situation of particular groups of children have the desired effect. To this end, it is important for countries to have a data infrastructure that can assess children's well-being outcomes at regular intervals, track the evolution over time, and identify risks and protective factors in children's lives (i.e. factors that increase the likelihood of negative or positive outcomes), as well as emerging challenges for children's well-being. Equally important are data on policies that affect children either directly through their targeting or indirectly through their home, school, social or material environment. Data also plays a role in monitoring progress towards the ambition set by countries for children's well-being.

Data on children are undergoing significant development. Comparative data are multiplying: for example, PISA and HBSC (Health Behaviour of School-Aged Children) data for adolescents, Children's Worlds and EU-SILC data for children in middle childhood, International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study, focused on the social-emotional and cognitive development of younger children. Increasingly, countries are also collecting longitudinal information on cohorts of children in order to better identify developmental paths and inequality dynamics that emerge very early in childhood. Administrative data and cross-referencing with survey data open up important possibilities for extracting information useful for steering policies for children. Despite these developments, OECD countries are not making full use of the data potential available or they lack the infrastructure to extract these data on a regular basis. For example, in France a recent report highlights the need to set up a real data infrastructure focusing on children's living conditions and development (HCFEA, 2019^[50]).

In New Zealand, the launch of the Child & Youth Well-Being Strategy in August 2019 has been followed by the development of indicators to monitor the economic, emotional, relational and cognitive well-being of children (DPMC, 2018^[51]). However, initial work on these indicators has revealed the need for more in-depth reflection on the Child Well-Being framework to guide the collection of relevant data and indicators for children of different ages. A partnership between the OECD and New Zealand has been established around this. Once this work has been completed, a dialogue with the OECD countries can begin on examining how the framework can be implemented in different country and data contexts.

Mobilising (consistently) the appropriate financial resources

Securing the resources for children's well-being in most OECD countries over the next decade will become immensely challenging, as the economic and social consequences of the pandemic take full effect. Countries face an enormous task in restoring sustainability to public finances while meeting greater demands on public expenditure and for public services.



The economic outlook continues to be exceptionally uncertain, with both upside and downside risks. After a sharp decline this year, global GDP is projected to rise by around 4¼ per cent in 2021 and a further 3¾ per cent in 2022. Output is projected to remain around 5% below pre-crisis expectations in many countries in 2022, raising the spectre of substantial permanent costs from the pandemic. The projected large budget deficits and the fall in output level will lead to a sizeable increase in government debt-to-GDP ratios; by the end of 2022, in the median OECD economy, they will be nearly 20% of GDP higher than in 2019 and over 40% of GDP higher in Canada and the United Kingdom. In many economies, government debt as a share of GDP will reach the highest level, at least, in the past four to five decades (OECD, 2020^[52]).

The recovery from the crisis brings with it the need to strike a balance between competing priorities, in order to restore stability to the economy, and meet the needs of all the population groups hard hit by the crisis, children being one of these groups. Governments will have to make budget trade-offs and reprioritise their expenditure programmes, which will make securing sustained investments for the well-being of children more critical (Goudie, 2020^[53]).

Although children are not always an explicit target of the recovery plans that will be adopted, they will be impacted by the budget priorities that will be set. Some structural investments will certainly have positive effects on the well-being of children as well as other population groups, such as investments in health or responding to climate change. In contrast, other budget decisions may have a more mixed impact on children, especially if their funding means that some resources are taken away from programmes that have a more direct impact on children. It is therefore important for countries to develop budget accounting systems that provide a better understanding of investments and budget reallocations that may affect children directly or through indirect processes. For example, Ireland implements equality budgeting to allow in more detail considerations of how proposed or ongoing budgetary decisions impact particular social groups and the overall goals of equality and inclusiveness. Equality budgeting themes include early intervention through children and youth services and equality of access to education (Howard, 2019^[54]).

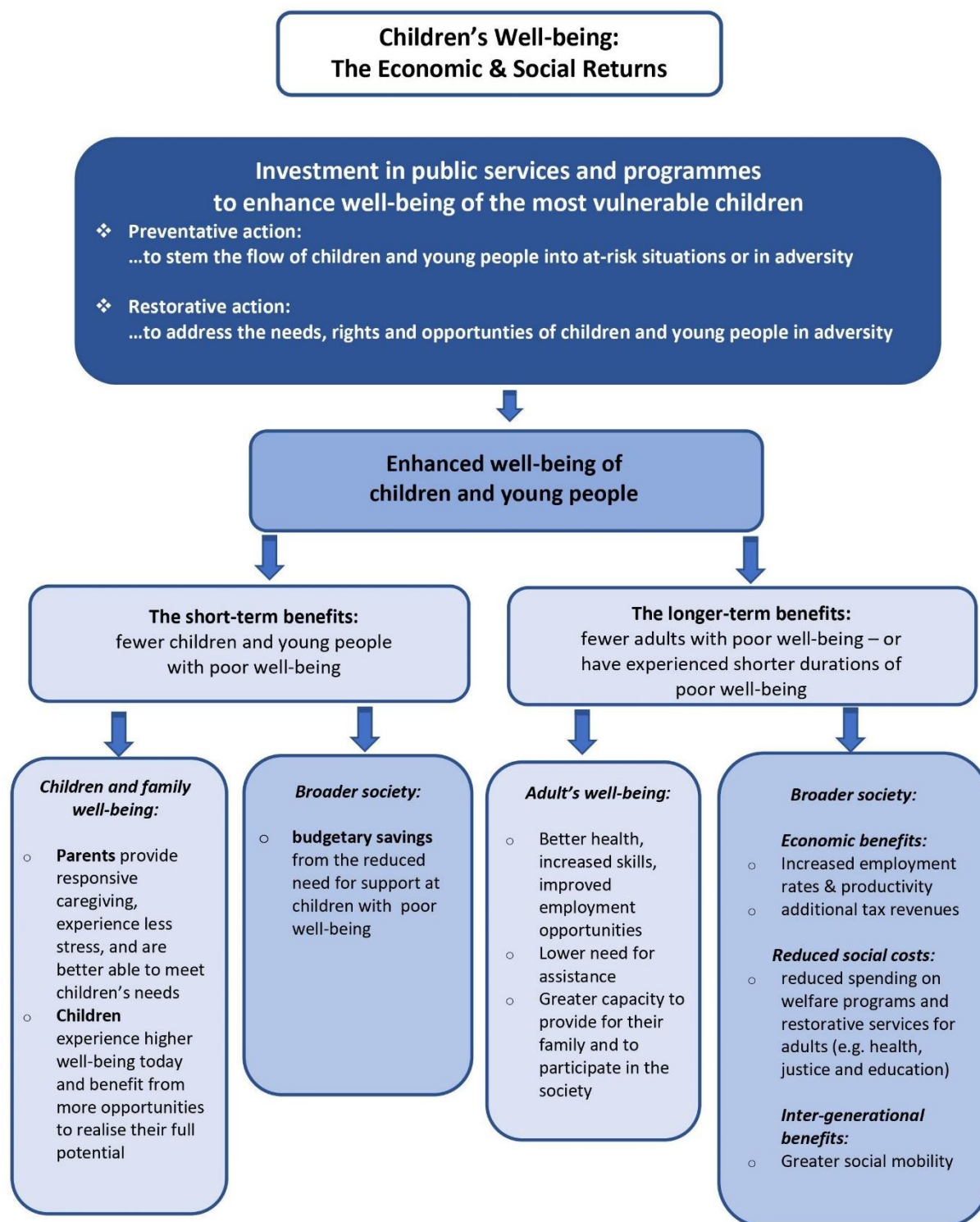
Building the economic case for investing in children is crucial for mobilising the necessary resources and maximising the returns to be expected from public expenditures, especially in times of rising public debt when there is a strong need to ensure that budgetary choices are consistent with long-term economic and social objectives. Hence, recovery and reconstruction plans (including possible fiscal consolidation) have to be gauged against the economic and social returns generated by investments in child well-being and the potential economic and social impact of increases, cuts and reallocation of public expenditures on children need to be carefully measured.

Cost/benefits evaluations of child well-being programmes and policies require factoring in the variable nature of the investments and the wide dispersion of benefits over time and across societies (Figure 3). Investments in public services and programmes to enhance the well-being of children are broadly classified as preventative (i.e. to reduce the numbers of children and young people into situations where they are at risk or in adversity) or restorative (i.e. to address the needs and rights of children and young people already in adversity over the medium-term).

Measuring the benefits of “preventive” measures requires a counterfactual scenario to estimate the costs saved by the introduction of these measures. The evaluation of “restorative” measures requires identifying the channels through which they affect child outcomes. Some of these effects may potentially be long lasting, and therefore also generate new collective gains and cost savings, for example, through increased self-sufficiency in adult age (Almond, Currie and Duque, 2018^[55]). They also set the foundation for stronger and sustainable long-term economic growth through improved well-being outcomes for all segments of the society (Llena-Nozal, Martin and Murtin, 2019^[56]).



Figure 3. The economic and social returns from investing in children's well-being – a schematic illustration



In order to guide policy decisions in the Post-COVID-19 era, the OECD WISE (Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability, Equal opportunity) Centre will develop an evaluation framework to help countries prioritise spending in areas with proven returns, and avoid cuts to spending in areas with high social returns. The proposed evaluation framework will address some of the knowledge gaps by:



- identifying the deterministic channels through which expenditures on children best secure accelerated outcomes;
- identifying and understanding the nature of the potential benefits and diminished costs from investing in preventive and restorative measures for children;
- Identifying the economic and social impact of possible budget cuts in areas affecting children and other population groups. For example, some financial support may have a moderate impact on the well-being of children but may affect the well-being of a wider population group;
- and identifying the data needed to fill the data gap so that the benefits of programmes, particularly those for vulnerable groups of children, can be better assessed.

Establishing a clear distribution of policy responsibilities among stakeholders and public administrations

Developing a comprehensive policy to enhance child well-being requires that responsibilities for action and implementation are clearly distributed among the wide range of actors operating in this field. At present, child policies are distributed in different areas of public action, at the national and/or local level, with for instance ministries responsible for education, health, social development and local government all potentially having responsibility over aspects of family and child policy. The challenges of cross-government working are many and require policy makers to solve complex governance challenges, such as dealing with short-term thinking and its interference with longer-term goals, overcoming government and professional silos, and setting clear accountability and budgetary incentives over different institutions (Acquah and Thévenon, 2020^[36]).

Adopting a whole-of-government approach for child well-being may offer a number of advantages in the post-COVID-19 decade. The value of a whole-of-government approach is that it helps create a shared vision for achieving the well-being of children progress among the different ministries and agencies. It helps improve co-ordination and co-operation and helps the system to act as one in directions that are transparent and where the contribution of all central government bodies is clearly defined. New Zealand, for example, implements a whole-of-government approach to child well-being. It launched a Child and Youth Well-being Strategy in 2019 to provide a unifying framework and a way of aligning efforts across government and other sectors. This involves measures to be taken to address child poverty, family violence, and inadequate housing, and improving early years learning support and mental well-being for children. Finland is in the process of developing a national strategy for children, which will include mechanisms for child budgeting and child impact assessments at the state and municipal level. Among the outcomes anticipated are the more efficient delivery of services at the municipal and regional levels (Jokiranta et al., 2020^[57]).

Other tension exists between national and local levels of government responsibilities. In many countries, certain areas of child policy, such as child protection or family support services are the responsibility of local (regional or municipal) public authorities. This can lead to significant regional disparities and inequalities in the development of programmes in these areas, and ultimately differences in the services provided depending on where children live rather on their needs, even for the most vulnerable children (Bywaters et al., 2018^[58]). It is therefore important for national and local governments to develop mechanisms for limiting regional inequalities and for sharing evidence of “what works”. To this end, a crucial point is to enable the different stakeholders in this field to share knowledge in order to solidify the evidence base, and to bring this evidence into the policy-making cycle and in on-the-ground actions. The use of the knowledge broker is one such mechanism for bridging the divide between experts, practitioners and decision makers. Though the knowledge brokerage function looks promising, research on its effectiveness is still at an early stage. There is growing evidence to suggest that by facilitating policy makers’ access to evidence repositories and other resources, their use of evidence increases (Acquah and Thévenon, 2020^[36]). The OECD Public Governance Directorate is currently undertaking a mapping of



knowledge brokers to develop a more detailed inventory of knowledge brokers operating in the OECD and support the building of their networks.

Ensuring high quality provision of services to the most vulnerable children and families

Parenting practices and the family environment have a large effect on children's development and outcomes. However, there are marked differences in family resources, family lifestyles and the quality of parenting practices, and these differences seem to be on the rise (Kalil, 2015^[59]; Doepke and Zilibotti, 2019^[60]). A challenge for countries is to understand the mechanisms by which the family environment and parenting practices impact on the well-being and development of children at different stages of childhood, and the extent to which they contribute to the widening of inequalities between children.

Family services can then play a fundamental role in enabling children from vulnerable families to access the minimum resources they need to develop well. However, effective delivery of family services is difficult to achieve under normal circumstances as the most vulnerable families are sometimes hard to reach yet they are the families who stand to benefit the most from the services offered (Acquah and Thévenon, 2020^[36]). Vulnerable families have multiple needs, but to access support, they are required to navigate a complex system of services which very often operate in silos (OECD, 2015^[61]; Acquah and Thévenon, 2020^[36]). Because of increasing need for support among vulnerable children following the pandemic, family service providers will be under pressure to meet higher demand, and to find new ways of working with families. The pandemic has also revealed that the critical roles played by social workers or schools, for example in identifying and supporting at-risk children, can be abruptly disrupted, underscoring the necessity of finding new ways of identifying children at-risk.

The pandemic has also underlined the key role played by family service providers in helping socially-isolated families with nutrition and healthcare services, and assisting parents with the care and upbringing of children, and in helping them cope with stress (OECD, 2020^[20]). However, there is potential to make significant improvements to the quality of services. It is possible for family service providers to improve service co-ordination to better respond to the multiple needs of parents and children, and for practices with proven positive effects to be made better known and shared among the different actors (Riding and Thévenon, forthcoming^[62]). Better consideration of feedback from service users, i.e. parents and children, is also necessary to ensure effective service delivery.

From a child's perspective, for service delivery to be *effective* and *efficient*, professionals working with children and families should screen for unmet needs on an ongoing basis so that difficulties or needs are detected as they emerge and effective responses are provided in a timely manner. Screening also requires being able to detect special needs and refer children to specialised services, if appropriate. In order to make this possible, a well-established framework to categorise social services for families is the Hardiker model, which takes a "cascading approach" in the sense that the population size requiring support becomes smaller while the level of intervention becomes more intense (Hardiker, Exton and Barker, 1991^[63]; OECD, 2009^[3]). Services under this model range from generalised universal supports to a more intensive or targeted individualised intervention. A number of OECD countries have adopted a differential response model to make their child protection systems more accessible and the interventions offered more proportional (OECD, 2019^[1]). The flexibility of the cascade or "continuum of care" approach allows a variety of strategies to develop within the context of the programme environment that promotes a healthy childhood and provides families with more intensive interventions when warranted. Such a cascading approach to child policy can help countries to develop a coherent lifecycle approach to policy making. It also offers the opportunity of making smarter budget allocation by increasing the focus on prevention and better targeting support for specialised services.

Finally, the development of digital tools and the linking of different types of data creates new levers to offer timely service delivery, and get a better match between the support needs of families and the services available in the local community (Riding and Thévenon, forthcoming^[62]). A large number of services have



already integrated new technologies into their intervention programmes. For instance, many youth mental health providers offer e-counselling and there is some evidence of its effectiveness but there are challenges in retaining young people over the longer term (OECD, 2019^[1]). However, parents and children face concrete obstacles in engaging with digital services as they need a certain amount of digital literacy, and of course a good Internet connection and access to digital devices. Many service providers also find the cost of digital tools prohibitive and those without an established online presence find it hard to adapt to working digitally (Riding and Thévenon, forthcoming^[62]).

Ensuring political leadership and commitment for child well-being

International political commitments to deliver on the well-being of children have long been established at the highest levels (Box 3). Nonetheless, securing sustained political commitment at the national level is fundamental for bringing about the systemic changes needed to achieve the well-being of children. Such a political commitment is more likely to be achieved if there is a clear understanding across governments and societies of the interrelationship of child well-being and complex social problems. Many of the factors inhibiting children's well-being have their roots in deep-seated or structural problems, for instance, low social mobility or child poverty. These problems have serious implications for future generations and society as a whole. Further complications are added by the fact that these problems fall under many the remit of different policy domains and government ministries.

Political commitment to enhance child well-being requires institutional support. To this end, several non-exclusive options could be explored. First, an inter-governmental taskforce for promoting child well-being could operate at the country- or regional-level, depending on the country context, and involve the participation of government ministries that have responsibility for areas of policy that have both a direct and indirect impact on children's well-being.

Another option is to mainstream the interests and concerns of children when policies are being developed and evaluated, following the example of gender mainstreaming that is used to promote gender equality. Child mainstreaming would require broad consultation between government and civil society actors, and in particular children and young people, on defining and delivering solutions for securing child well-being. This could bring many advantages, including the integration of a deeper understanding of children's needs and the local challenges for service delivery, and the incorporation of children's and young people's expectations into policy objectives (Byrne and Lundy, 2019^[64]). For instance, Scotland (United Kingdom) conducted an independent review of its alternative care system in 2018, running a participative process to review the legislation, practices, culture and ethos underpinning the system and to suggest reforms. Over 5 500 people participated, more than half were children, young children and adults with "lived" care experience, while the rest were families and the paid and unpaid care workforce. The review received high-level political support from the First Minister and the Scottish government (Independent Care Review Scotland, 2020^[65]).



Box 3. International political commitments to the well-being of children

International commitments to the needs, rights and opportunities of children are primarily set out under the articles of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC). Its articles define the rights and needs of children, and the obligations on behalf of countries and the international community. The CRC functions as an anchor point for the multitude of efforts underway to deliver of the well-being of children.

Since the CRC's drafting, there has been three optional protocols. Two of these address ending sexual violence against children and the provision of adequate supports to victims (Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography), and providing the procedures for children to pursue a complaint against a country for the violations of their rights (Optional Protocol on a Communications Procedure).

The CRC Committee regularly publishes its General Comments. These provide interpretation and analysis of articles of the CRC and/or deal with issues relating to children's rights. For example, in 2016, General Comment No.19 focused on public budgeting (Article 4) for the realisation of children's rights.

There are eight further international human rights treaties, which address a range of life circumstances, and therefore have an influence over children's well-being. These treaties are underpinned by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Regional rights conventions and protocols such as the European Convention on Human Rights also shape national commitments.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline a universal plan of action to achieve the 2030 Agenda. At its core is a people-centred vision. There are 17 integrated global goals that aim to balance the economic, social and environment dimensions of sustainable development. This includes securing a world in which children are invested in and every child grows up free from violence and exploitation. At the 2019 UN General Assembly, a pledge was made for the coming decade to be one of action and delivery, with explicit mention made to children and to leaving no-one behind. More recently, at the 2020 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, the Ministerial declaration recommitted countries, in the face of the COVID-19 crisis, to implement the 2030 Agenda in its entirety and ensure that emergency social and economic schemes integrate a child rights perspective.



Webinar overview

The *Securing the Recovery, Ambition and Resilience for the Well-Being of Children in the Post-Covid-19 Decade* webinar took place on 13 October 2020. The purpose of the webinar was to provide **a forum for OECD countries to share examples of country or regional policies and initiatives** aimed at promoting child well-being during the coronavirus pandemic and **to use these experiences to start shaping a shared understanding of child well-being and the outcome objectives** in the post-COVID-19 decade. Around 90 representatives, from across country delegations, ministries, research institutes, civil society and the OECD attended the webinar.

Country presentations

France

Stéfanía Chiru, Policy Officer, European and International Affairs Office of the Directorate General for Social Cohesion, presented the reforms in child policy undertaken by the government since 2016. These reforms leverage the important roles that the different environments in which children grow up have in securing well-being and healthy development. This package of reforms includes **a compact for child well-being** based around three main objectives: 1) prevent all forms of violence against children; 2) guarantee children their fundamental rights, and 3) provide children with support and protection in a timely manner.

France has taken a number of actions to promote the well-being of vulnerable children. These include the development of a National Child Protection Strategy (2020-22), which **gives priority to preventative measures** and in **treating children equally** through ensuring equal access to opportunities and protections for all children. Another focus is on **building children's resilience**, starting in the earliest stages of life: the first 1 000 days. France published a report on the “1000 premiers jours” (Ministère des solidarités et de la santé, France, 2020^[66]) in September 2020 based on consultations with a group of 17 experts on early childhood.

New Zealand

Maree Brown, Director of the Child Well-being Unit, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, presented on the country's efforts to address the impacts of COVID-19 on children's well-being and commented on the pillars of the Framework introduced by the OECD.

New Zealand had more time relative to other countries to prepare its initial responses to COVID-19 and only needed to implement a “shorter” first lockdown. Already **policy efforts and actions to promote child well-being were well underway** across government, for example, through the child poverty reduction legislation (2018) and the Child and Youth Well-being Strategy (2019^[67]). The 2020 Budget also contains **a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention** for children and families and new investment in community-led family services, including services led by Māori for Māori.

The **negative impacts** of the lockdown were **more evident among vulnerable groups of children**, showing itself through spikes in demand for food parcels and other essential goods, children's lack of access to the Internet and digital devices to engage in online learning, and disruption in access to respite services and other services for children and young people with additional needs. Though school attendance levels are higher than the same time last year, there are anecdotal reports of “impaired learning” e.g. students arriving at school looking tired and stressed, and higher absenteeism among certain groups of children, particularly young people from low-income families who might be working longer hours outside of school to supplement family income. **Rapid measures** taken included those intended to **boost income and resources** including wage subsidies, benefit increases, a temporary rent freeze, housing the homeless at least on a temporary basis, addressing food insecurity, providing digital devices to students,



hardship funding for tertiary students, and free youth trades training and apprenticeships and employment support.

The five pillars of the Framework are relevant in the New Zealand context. New Zealand already has in place a good data framework and public reporting mechanisms, although the need remains for improving the availability of well-being data, particularly on younger children, and for specific cohorts. New Zealand is working with the OECD on addressing these gaps. COVID-19 has **highlighted the need for granular-level data to respond to emerging needs**. On mobilising the appropriate financial resources, New Zealand government agencies were asked **to assess all budget proposals** that may have an impact on children and young people **against the six well-being outcomes of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy** and seek cross-agency agreement on prioritising and sequencing any new government investment. The Minister for Finance needs to **report progress on child poverty targets on each Budget Day**. On ensuring high quality provision of services to the most vulnerable children and families, part of the COVID-19 response involved social sector chief executives from non-governmental agencies forming a group to ensure that services reached children and families most at-need; each agency each agency leveraging its informal community networks to create a “network of networks” to provide swift responses and scaling up efforts if needed. On establishing a clear distribution of policy responsibilities among stakeholders and public administrations and ensuring political leadership and commitment for child well-being, mechanisms are in place to **ensure political accountability, build public understanding, and to grow the evidence base** on the changes that will make the biggest impact on child and youth well-being.

Norway

Synnøve Brandt, Senior Adviser in the Ministry of Children and Families, spoke of the effects of the lockdown on children and measures taken by the government to promote children’s well-being.

The **impact of the lockdown on children**, particularly on vulnerable children, **was high on the radar** of the government. 20 percent of children in Norway would be considered vulnerable for different reasons which include having a disability or special care needs, being a recent arrival to the country, or experiencing difficult family circumstances (e.g. living in poverty, a family member has substance abuse or mental health issues, or the presence of family violence). During the early stages of lockdown, schools and kindergartens remained open for children with special care needs or those whose parents worked in essential services. In April a **cross-ministry group was created** to co-ordinate the efforts of the different ministries whose areas of policy responsibility affect children directly. This included the ministries with responsibility for children, families, health, justice, culture, kindergartens and schools. The purpose of the group was to gather knowledge on the consequences of the infection control measures on children, with regular reports provided to the respective ministries. This group found that several services for children were closed or reduced, as they were in fact imposing stricter restriction than that those recommended by authorities, leading to the decision to reopen schools with infection controls in place.

Active measures were taken around the sharing of information to **build public trust**, including the right of children to information. Three **children’s press conferences** were ran, which were led by the Prime Minister, and Ministers for Education and Integration, and for Children and Families, much in the manner as the adult ones were. Press conferences provided children with the **opportunity to understand how a democracy works** while at the same time **safeguarding their right to participate**. Though the impact of the press conferences was difficult to evaluate, the high engagement of children indicated its popularity.



Main takeaways of the webinar

On entering the pandemic, countries found that if they had **already a clear understanding of critical issues facing vulnerable children** it was easier to know which interventions should be implemented, for example, policies to address food insecurity and the digital divide. These issues were the ones that were likely to become even more central for promoting children's well-being.

In the early stages, important policy levers for countries included **quickly scaling-up and providing more funding for existing interventions**, such as free and healthy school lunches and school-based well-being interventions. Also critically important were **financial supports for families** and **measures that helped create a sense of normalcy and connection** for children, such as support for online learning and access to digital devices. New Zealand and Norway provided examples that highlighted the advantages for children's well-being when policy efforts between different government taskforces and groups were co-ordinated.

In the longer run, COVID-19 has highlighted the need to **prioritise well-being and inclusion within the education system**. The crisis has shone the spotlight on the many pressures that young people may feel under at school. Reducing student stress, addressing school disengagement and compensating for learning loss are key issues moving forward.

The webinar discussion indicated that the **five pillars of the Framework** put forward by the OECD and the Institute of Inspiring Children's Futures could be an effective means for countries in capturing the key challenges for child well-being over the coming years. The significance for countries of clearly defining the objectives they wish to target was discussed, along with identifying the critical challenges and the factors that could help boost progress. Furthermore, the critical role played by children in countries' future resilience was acknowledged and the potential rewards for countries if they were to work together early in developing the foresight on how to properly secure the well-being of children in the COVID-19 recovery.

Romina Boarini, Acting Director of the Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunities (WISE), spoke about the new centre and how it will take on the important task of ensuring that the well-being for all people in society, both now and in the future, remains at the heart of COVID-19 responses and recovery strategies. She invited countries that did not have the opportunity to speak during the webinar to contact the centre's Child Well-being Unit to provide information on initiatives that they are implementing, data being collected, and the areas which they think moving forward would be important for the OECD to focus its energy.



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