Helping children with disabilities take their place in society

UNICEF upholds the rights of all children with disabilities across Europe and Central Asia, aiming to end their exclusion from society. We work to keep them with their families, ensure that they have an inclusive education and are part of their communities.

Many of the estimated 5.1 million children living with disabilities in the Region are ‘missing’ from families, classrooms and communities. While there is a chronic lack of data on their situation, we know that their rights are often violated, particularly if they are from families already excluded from mainstream society.

Children with disabilities are often viewed as a problem to be ‘fixed,’ with the focus on their disability and a medical response, rather than on their abilities and potential.

We support outreach services to families with young children to identify and respond to disabilities at an early age, helping families stay together and giving children a chance to reach their potential. We aim to tackle the discrimination that excludes them from schools and communities, working to make schools more inclusive and to change attitudes towards disability. We also work with disabled people’s organizations (DPOs), building alliances to ensure the full inclusion of children with disabilities in family life, in schools and across communities.

IN FOCUS: INCLUDING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Eighteen-year-old Atila Komaromi was born with impaired limbs, and spent the first nine years of his life in one of Serbia’s institutions. He was wrongly assessed as having a profound intellectual disability. He is now finishing 7th grade.

The reorganization of residential care in Serbia was a turning point for Atila. A new assessment focused on his abilities, and a programme was tailored to help him reach his potential. He was placed with a foster family, and enrolled in the local mainstream school in Bečej, thanks to close collaboration between the school, local government and social workers.

With the dedication and support of school staff, coupled with Atila’s own motivation, he learned to read, write and speak more clearly, winning many friends along the way and shifting attitudes towards disability.

Toward 2030

Target 10.2. Empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.
Challenges

Many of the estimated 5.1 million children with disabilities in Europe and Central Asia are ‘missing’ from families, classrooms and communities. While there is a chronic lack of data on their situation, we know that their rights are often violated, particularly if they are in families already excluded as a result of their ethnicity, culture, language, poverty or if they are refugee or migrant children.

Children with disabilities are often excluded from national statistics – another factor that contributes to their being ‘invisible’ to decision makers, service providers and the public. Of the estimated millions of children with disabilities across the Region, only one third has been officially identified as having disabilities. The Region lacks services to identify and diagnose child disability at an early age and provide tailored support for families. The medical approach to disability means that responses aim to correct ‘defects,’ rather than help children to reach their potential. Lack of early identification and support means that children with disabilities are more likely than others to be separated from their families.

As a result of these interconnected problems, children with disabilities are often placed in institutional care, an approach often justified -- wrongly so -- as being in the best interest of the child and the family.

Millions of children with disabilities are thought to be out of school across the Region. Many are still excluded from mainstream education and consigned to so-called ‘special schools.’ Some teachers refuse to educate children with disabilities, and some parents fear that their children’s education will suffer if they share a classroom with a child who has a disability.

Children and adolescents with disabilities are also often isolated from social activities and participation in their communities – a problem exacerbated by transport means and buildings that remain inaccessible, as well as the stigma that surrounds disability.

Stigma may stop families from asking for help or information, leaving them unaware of their rights or available support. Families may struggle to balance the need to earn a living with the need to care for a child with disabilities.

The exclusion of children with disabilities is exacerbated when they belong to another disadvantaged group, such as a Roma girl with a visible disability who has been trafficked to beg on the streets. Or a refugee child with disabilities.

“A young girl plays in a park in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through the “It’s About Ability” campaign, UNICEF in Bosnia and Herzegovina promoted the need for improving access to social protection and inclusive services, including education for children with disabilities. The campaign was intended to sensitive the public and create a more inclusive society.

“Even where children share the same disadvantages – of poverty or membership in a minority group, say – children with disabilities confront additional challenges as a result of their impairments and the many barriers that society throws in their way. Children living in poverty are among the least likely to enjoy the benefits of education and health care, for example, but children who live in poverty and have a disability are even less likely to attend their local school or clinic.”


Eleven year old Petra, in fifth grade, is taught by her teacher Ana Frlin at the Isidor Bajic primary music school, in Novi Sad, Serbia. Petra is blind, and attends an inclusive school that welcomes all students.

Petra passed the entrance exam at Isidor Bajic with flying colors and was enrolled in Ms Frlin’s class. The music school helped Petra make the transition from her special school for children with disabilities to a mainstream school.

Petra expresses herself loudly and clearly. “My wish in life is to become the most famous composer and pianist,” she says.

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Our Aim

UNICEF upholds the rights of children with disabilities across Europe and Central Asia. We aim to end their isolation, working to help families stay together, get children with disabilities into mainstream schools and ensure that they participate in everyday community life.

We work to ensure all children with disabilities survive, thrive, learn and are protected from violence, abuse and exploitation, and have the opportunity to actively contribute to their communities.

Our Actions

UNICEF works to ensure the best possible support for every child living with a disability in the Region, from early identification in their infancy to their active participation in community life. We promote the development of effective services that meet children’s individual needs and the needs of their families, including health care, education and social benefits.

We support outreach services to the most marginalized families with young children to identify and respond to disabilities at an early age, helping families stay together and giving children a chance to reach their full potential. Home-visiting programmes – which span child protection, health and nutrition and early childhood development – give families support, prepare children for inclusion in school and their community and connect them to special services.

We also tackle the discrimination that excludes children with disabilities from schools. We recognize that the barriers to learning and participation are not the “fault” of a child’s impairment, but rather the capacity of schools to remove those barriers. In inclusive schools, children with disabilities are empowered to participate in learning and school life. Our work with our partners has helped to increase the number of children with disabilities attending regular schools across the region, with particular successes in Armenia, Moldova, Romania and Serbia, where inclusive education has been prioritized. We know that inclusive education is central to achieving high-quality education for all children, and that inclusive education helps develop peaceful and fair societies.

UNICEF supports governments in their efforts to close residential institutions and create alternative family or community-based care for children with disabilities. We also support efforts to keep children with their families, including through the creation of day-care centres, respite care and specialized services, linked to cash assistance.

We tackle the discrimination that keeps children with disabilities isolated, developing and supporting programmes to change mind-sets and develop skills among medical staff, teachers, psychologists, and social workers, and working to change public attitudes towards disability.

We support campaigns to raise awareness for the rights of children with disabilities, helping to increase public acceptance for the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova and Montenegro. In Georgia, a UNICEF-led social change campaign targeting the general population contributed to the reduction of stigma towards people with disabilities, from 42 percent to 27 percent in two years.

Key government commitments for children with disabilities

Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989

- Article 8: States Parties shall respect and ensure all the rights within the Convention to every child without discrimination (i.e. regardless of a child’s disability). This article, for example, prohibits, the unnecessary separation of children with disabilities from their families, as well as their exclusion from education and from participation in community life.


- Article 2: (1) States Parties shall do everything they can to ensure that children with disabilities enjoy all rights and freedoms on an equal basis with other children. Their best interests are the primary consideration, and they have the right to express their views on matters that affect them on an equal basis with other children.

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Atila with friends at his school in Becej, Serbia.
UNICEF also works with governments and social services to boost investment in community services that reach families of children with disabilities. In Turkey, for example, UNICEF supports outreach teams that identify highly vulnerable refugee families who are eligible for emergency cash support and links children with disabilities to specialized services. In Turkmenistan, early childhood development specialists from education and health sectors as well as non-governmental organizations have had intensive training on early intervention.

We support measures to collect data on children with disabilities, and include questions on child disability in the UNICEF-supported household surveys called the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS).

We advocate with government to sign and ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and develop follow-up strategies and action-plans for implementation. We convene governments, disabled people’s organizations (DPOs), civil society and parents to monitor and report on the situation of children with disabilities.

We support innovation and technology to make buildings, information and communication accessible to children with disabilities to help enable them to lead quality, independent and meaningful lives. We work on creating policies that determine assistive technology and assistive devices essential for independent life.

UNICEF partners with DPOs to ensure the full inclusion of children with disabilities in family life, in schools and across communities. The EU-UNICEF partnership on Ending Violence against Children and Social Inclusion of Children with Disabilities, in cooperation with the European Disability Forum, for example, is forging new DPO alliances across the Western Balkans and Turkey.

Unfinished agenda

Despite the progress that has been made, children with disabilities and their families in Europe and Central Asia still face discrimination that spreads into all spheres of life. At the same time, a lack of data on these children hampers both proper services to meet their needs and their full inclusion in society, while policies remain ineffective and the resources for their implementation limited.

UNICEF will continue to advocate for governments to deliver on the promises they have made to children with disabilities to uphold their rights, and to work closely with all of those who have a stake in their greater inclusion, from parents to teachers, to social works and health professionals. We will work alongside the private sector to identify and scale up the use of assisted devices and technologies. We will also work with schools and hospitals to make sure these devices are available to all children with disabilities who need them. We will continue to push for early and effective identification of disabilities, for more emphasis on children’s abilities, and for far greater recognition of their potential, as well as greater access to mainstream services and opportunities for full participation in society.

Fast Facts

In Montenegro, the UNICEF-supported ‘It’s about ability’ campaign increased public acceptance of inclusion of children with disabilities in regular education from 36 percent in 2010 to 80 percent in 2013.

In Moldova, the number of children with disabilities and special educational needs attending regular schools quadrupled between 2012 and 2017.

In Romania, the number of children with disabilities in regular schools increased from 2 percent in 2006 to 63 percent in 2014.