

Country Profile

ESTONIA¹

Children in care in Estonia

- There are about 2,334 children in alternative care
- Male children account for a bit over 50%
- About 50% of children in alternative care are registered as disabled
- On average, each social worker is responsible for about 1154 children. The case load depends very much on the size of the municipality - In some municipalities a social worker is responsible for 220 children while in others it can be up to 3600 children

Overview of care arrangements

At the end of 2014 the Ministry of Social affairs approved a Green book on alternative care in Estonia. According to it, it is planned to create "professional foster families" of 2 types that is planned to be piloted starting from 2017.

According to the National Social Welfare Act the following care arrangements are currently available in the country: **Shelters**, which are short term placements; **Foster families** that are working on volunteer basis, without guardianship status; **Legal guardianship families (including kinship care)/custody families**; and **Substitute homes**, which include both small groups homes (maximum eight children per family) and small group homes with family parents (maximum six children per family).

Formal inclusion of children's rights

Children's rights in alternative care are not mentioned explicitly in any national guidelines, policies or laws. The new Child Protection Act was adopted by the Estonian Parliament in November 2014 and entered into force from on January 1, 2016. The Child Protection Act stresses in its note that the UNCRC is an important part of the Estonian legislation and its provisions should be used when no Estonian legislation is available or the standard/provision of a national legislation is in conflict with it. Furthermore several acts do stress the need to include child participation in the decision making process that concerns the child. Structures and policies that exist in Estonia to monitor child rights in alternative care are stated to be "not very effective". The most efficient body is that of the Child Ombudsman, which works independently. Monitoring visits include interviews with children to "find out their opinion about their rights". Visits are also made to schools to inform children about their rights.

Child Care Service Workforce

Social workers and professionals giving specialized support to children are required to have a university degree. It is important to note that social workers in Estonia are not given a licence after completion of their education and they are not required to take part in any follow-up training. However, the different municipalities organise regular voluntary meetings for social workers, which provide a good opportunity for exchange of knowledge and experiences between colleagues. For professionals giving specialised support to children, there are no such opportunities.

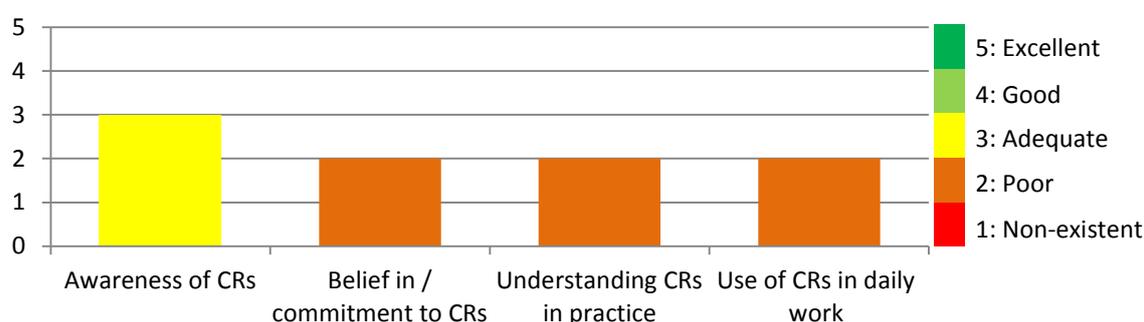
¹ The information in this country profile was drawn from the responses to three surveys answered by one national expert.

Caregivers in residential care are requested to have an upper-secondary education and they must also undergo social work and pedagogical courses (160 hours each). These courses are most commonly provided by the National Health Development Institute, which is under the governance of the Ministry of Social Affairs. However, Child rights are “given only minimal attention in the education and no special focused course on CR is part of the education. Volunteer foster parents are required to follow an official preparatory course provided by the state. This is unfortunately stated to be “not at all” upheld in practice. Child rights are furthermore not specifically addressed within the preparatory course.

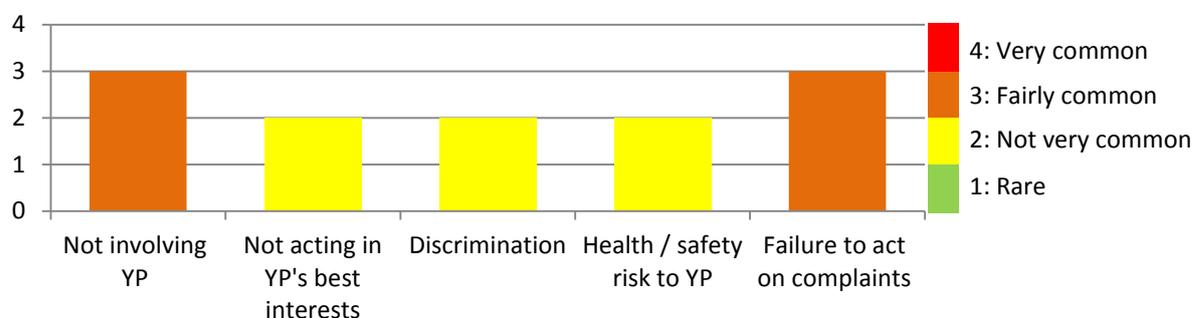
Assessing the state of children’s rights

Respondents were asked to give their personal assessment with regards to care professionals and children’s rights. The results are shown in the charts below².

Your assessment: care professionals and children's rights



Your assessment: how common are the following?



Key challenges

- Involving children in decision making is not well-observed, nor is it thought to be very important.
- Decisions are very often taken not in the best interests of the child, apparently because no ‘good options’ seem to be available - for example, when placing a child in alternative care or choosing a school. This applies particularly in the case of children with special needs. In fact, the problem often lies in the wrong emphasis being given to certain matters: for example, a child is placed in a particular home for geographical reasons and not because the services are better or more appropriate.
- Children with special needs may suffer from discrimination: involving them in decision-making processes often demands more time or requires special skills.

² The respondent notes that the situation varies greatly between the different care professions. Social workers for example are stated to have a “good” awareness of Children’s rights while care workers (substitute homes and foster parents) and legal guardianship families are reported to have an “adequate” awareness.

- The topic of children's rights is not always perceived positively: there are myths that children know too much about their rights and too little about obligations.
- The laws may often be in place, but there are no guidelines for how to implement children's rights in practice.
- Supervisory processes and auditing are not adequate and often focus on formalities. This means that it is difficult to assess how well children's rights are respected.
- The notion that the child is a subject rather than an object is still not accepted by all care professionals.
- Financial constraints present challenges.
- Child rights are not stressed and highlighted as a separate topic in educational curricula and exchange meetings is considered to be one of the main obstacles to accessing education and training in Child Rights in Estonia. No organisations that have expertise in this area are offering such training.