

Listening to Children's Wellbeing Needs

MindPlay Cross-Country Research Report

Mental Wellbeing in Early Childhood Education: Challenges, Competences and Support Needs Across Europe

A Consolidated Analysis of National Research Conducted within the MindPlay
Erasmus+ Project



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1. Introduction

Mental health and well-being have become increasingly important priorities within educational systems across Europe. Recent research indicates that emotional, behavioural, and social difficulties among children are becoming more prevalent, with many challenges emerging already during early childhood and the first years of formal education. Difficulties related to emotional regulation, anxiety, behavioural problems, peer relationships, attention, and social adjustment may significantly affect children's learning outcomes, school participation, social inclusion, and overall development. If left unidentified and unsupported, these difficulties can have long-term consequences for children's educational trajectories, psychosocial functioning, and future well-being.

Schools play a crucial role in promoting children's mental health, as teachers and other educational professionals are often the first adults outside the family to observe early signs of emotional or behavioural difficulties. Early identification and timely support are therefore essential for preventing the escalation of problems and fostering children's resilience, social competencies, and positive school experiences. However, educational professionals frequently face considerable challenges in recognising early warning signs, differentiating between developmental variations and more serious concerns, and implementing appropriate support measures within everyday educational practice.

Recent societal developments, including rapid digitalisation, changing family structures, migration, and the long-lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, have further highlighted the need for preventive and early intervention approaches within educational settings.

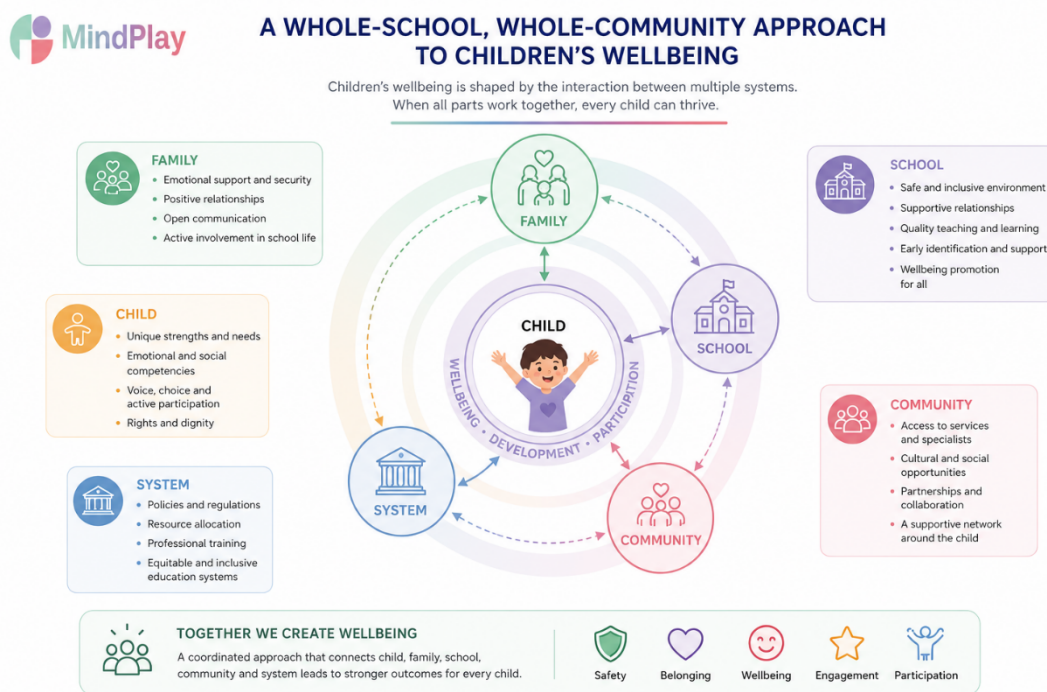
The World Health Organization estimates that approximately one in seven children and adolescents experiences a mental health condition, with many difficulties emerging during childhood (WHO, 2021). Recent European and international reports further indicate growing concerns regarding children's emotional well-being, anxiety, social relationships, and sense of belonging at school (OECD, 2019; OECD, 2023). At the same time, rapid societal changes, including digitalisation, migration, changing family structures, and the long-lasting consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, have intensified the need for preventive and early intervention approaches within educational settings.

European institutions increasingly recognise schools as key environments for promoting children's well-being, resilience, inclusion, and social-emotional development (European Commission, 2023). The Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success



emphasises the importance of supportive school environments and whole-school approaches to well-being, while the European Child Guarantee highlights the need to ensure equitable access to mental health support and inclusive educational opportunities for all children, particularly those in vulnerable situations (Council of the European Union, 2022; European Commission, 2021).

At the same time, schools across Europe are operating in increasingly complex social contexts characterised by rapid societal changes, digitalisation, migration, family instability, and growing diversity among student populations. These developments create new demands on teachers, school leaders, psychologists, counsellors, and parents, highlighting the need for innovative, evidence-based, and practice-oriented approaches to supporting children's mental well-being.



MindPlay Illustration 1

The MindPlay project (2025-1-PL01-KA220-SCH-000360826), co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, addresses these challenges by aiming to improve the mental well-being of children aged 5–9 through the development of innovative educational, diagnostic, and intervention tools. The project seeks to strengthen the competencies of



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teachers, educators, school leaders, and other professionals in the areas of prevention, early identification, and support for children experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Although mental health challenges provided the starting point for this needs analysis, the findings consistently demonstrate that schools require practical prevention-oriented solutions rather than additional diagnostic systems. Across partner countries, stakeholders emphasised early identification, teacher competences, emotional resilience, school-family cooperation and practical classroom tools as the key priorities for improving children's wellbeing.

Work Package 2 (WP2) – *Mapping of Competence Needs* – constitutes a foundational component of the project. The primary purpose of this work package is to obtain evidence-based information regarding competence and skill needs among key educational stakeholders, identify the most significant mental health risks and challenges encountered in schools, and explore existing practices, barriers, and support needs related to children's mental well-being. The findings are intended to inform the development of high-quality, tailor-made MindPlay products, including training programmes, diagnostic and educational games, intervention procedures, integration activities, and strategic recommendations for schools. Furthermore, the evidence generated through WP2 provides the foundation for the European MindPlay Competence Matrix, which consolidates the identified threats, competence requirements, practical skills, and training priorities. The matrix will serve as a milestone deliverable and the primary evidence base for the design and development of WP3 training curricula, educational tools, and implementation resources.

The research was conducted in five European countries: Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. These countries represent diverse educational, cultural, and social contexts, while simultaneously facing many common challenges related to children's mental health and well-being. The inclusion of multiple national perspectives enables a comprehensive understanding of both shared European trends and context-specific needs.

The present consolidated report synthesises the findings from national studies conducted in all participating countries. It provides a comparative analysis of the perspectives of teachers, school leaders, school psychologists and counsellors, developmental specialists, and parents regarding children's mental health needs, early identification practices, competence gaps, systemic barriers, and expectations concerning future MindPlay tools.

More specifically, the objectives of this consolidated report are:



- to identify the most prevalent emotional, behavioural, and social difficulties affecting children aged 5–9 across participating countries;
- to analyse current practices related to early identification and support within educational settings;
- to explore competence needs and professional development priorities among educational stakeholders;
- to identify systemic barriers limiting effective mental health promotion and early intervention;
- to examine stakeholder expectations regarding future MindPlay products and support tools;
- to formulate evidence-based recommendations for the development and implementation of innovative, child-centred, and practice-oriented solutions aimed at promoting children's mental well-being.

The findings presented in this report provide an important evidence base for the subsequent phases of the MindPlay project and contribute to broader European discussions on strengthening mental health promotion, prevention, and early intervention within primary education settings.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-method research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of competence needs, existing practices, perceived risks, and support requirements related to children's mental well-being in early primary education.

A mixed-method approach was selected because it allows for the integration of numerical data with participants' experiences, perceptions, and contextual insights, thereby providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Quantitative data enabled the identification of common trends, prevalence rates, and patterns across participating countries, while qualitative data offered deeper insights into stakeholders' experiences, challenges, expectations, and recommendations.



The research process consisted of two complementary components:

1. Desk Research

Each partner country conducted a review of relevant national and international literature, policy documents, strategic frameworks, and existing research related to children's mental health, behavioural difficulties, early identification practices, and mental health promotion within educational settings. The desk research provided contextual information on the national educational and mental health systems and supported the interpretation of empirical findings.

2. Empirical Research

Empirical data were collected through structured online questionnaires administered to four key stakeholder groups involved in supporting children's mental well-being. The questionnaires included both closed-ended and open-ended questions.

Closed-ended questions generated quantitative data concerning:

- frequency and types of mental health and behavioural difficulties encountered in schools;
- existing identification and support practices;
- competence needs of professionals;
- perceived systemic barriers;
- attitudes towards potential MindPlay products and interventions.

Open-ended questions enabled participants to elaborate on their experiences, describe existing good practices, identify challenges, and formulate recommendations regarding future support measures and project products.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods, including frequencies, percentages, and comparative analyses across countries and stakeholder groups. Qualitative responses were analysed using thematic analysis, whereby responses were systematically coded and grouped into recurring themes and categories.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative findings facilitated triangulation of results, increased the reliability of interpretations, and supported the identification of both common European trends and country-specific characteristics.

2.2 Participating Countries



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The study was conducted in five European countries participating in the MindPlay project: Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania.

These countries represent diverse educational, cultural, social, and demographic contexts, while simultaneously facing common challenges related to children's mental health and well-being.

The inclusion of multiple national contexts enabled comparative analysis of shared and context-specific needs, practices, and challenges. Particular attention was paid to the diversity of school populations across participating countries. For example, some countries reported significant numbers of children with migrant or refugee backgrounds, while others highlighted the presence of ethnic minorities or specific socio-economic vulnerabilities affecting children's well-being.

The cross-national perspective provided an opportunity to identify common competence needs among educational professionals, as well as to explore variations in institutional responses, available support systems, and perceived priorities for future interventions.

2.3 Target Groups

The research targeted four key stakeholder groups directly involved in promoting, monitoring, and supporting the mental well-being of children aged 5–9 years within educational settings.

Teachers

Primary school teachers working with children aged 5–9 constituted the largest participant group. Due to their daily interaction with children, teachers play a central role in observing behavioural and emotional changes, identifying early warning signs, implementing preventive activities, and cooperating with families and support services.

School Leaders and Management

School principals and members of school management teams participated in the study to provide perspectives on institutional policies, organisational capacities, existing support mechanisms, systemic barriers, and strategic priorities related to children's mental well-being.

School Psychologists, Counsellors, and Development Specialists



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This stakeholder group included school psychologists, pedagogical counsellors, special educators, and other developmental specialists involved in assessing, supporting, and monitoring children's social, emotional, and behavioural development. Their participation contributed specialised professional perspectives on early identification, intervention practices, and support needs.

Parents

Parents and guardians of children aged 5–9 participated in order to capture family perspectives regarding children's emotional and behavioural challenges, cooperation with schools, perceived support needs, and expectations concerning future educational and preventive tools.

The inclusion of multiple stakeholder groups ensured a holistic understanding of children's mental well-being and allowed for the comparison of perspectives across home and school environments. This multi-perspective approach strengthened the validity of findings and supported the development of comprehensive, stakeholder-informed recommendations for future MindPlay interventions.

The findings indicate that children's wellbeing is best supported through a preventive, competence-based and whole-school approach. Rather than focusing solely on responding to mental health difficulties, educational systems need practical tools that strengthen protective factors such as emotional resilience, positive relationships, early recognition of emerging difficulties, family engagement and supportive learning environments. This perspective reflects the overarching objectives of the MindPlay project and provides the conceptual foundation for the products developed in subsequent work packages.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was carried out through structured questionnaires administered in the participating countries. The questionnaires were designed for four target groups: teachers, school leaders, school psychologists/counsellors/development specialists, and parents. This structure enabled the research to capture perspectives from different actors involved in children's education, care, and support.

The questionnaires included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions were used to collect comparable quantitative data on the frequency and types of mental health and behavioural difficulties observed among children, existing early identification



practices, perceived competence levels, training needs, systemic barriers, and expectations regarding MindPlay tools.

Open-ended questions allowed respondents to provide more detailed explanations, examples from practice, and reflections on their needs and challenges. These responses were particularly important for understanding the context behind the numerical findings and for identifying practical recommendations for future MindPlay products.

Quantitative data were analysed descriptively, using frequencies, percentages, and comparative interpretation across countries and stakeholder groups. The aim was not to produce statistically representative conclusions for each national education system, but to identify relevant patterns, shared needs, and recurring challenges across the project partnership.

Qualitative responses were analysed through thematic analysis. Responses were reviewed, coded, and grouped into recurring themes such as emotional regulation, behavioural difficulties, peer conflicts, cooperation with parents, shortage of specialist support, teacher workload, early identification needs, and expectations regarding play-based tools. This process enabled the identification of common themes across countries, while also preserving context-specific insights.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled triangulation of results. Numerical data helped identify the scale and frequency of key issues, while qualitative data provided deeper understanding of how these issues appear in everyday school and family contexts. Together, these findings form the evidence base for the development of MindPlay training programmes, diagnostic and intervention games, integration activities, and support materials.

3. Comparative Analysis of Findings

3.1 Prevalence and Types of Mental Health Difficulties

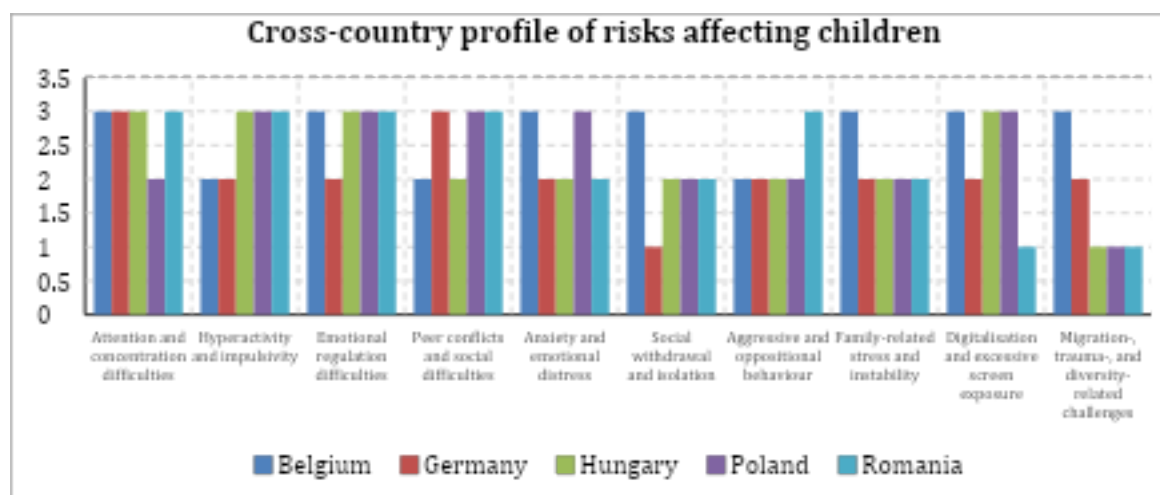
The findings across the five participating countries demonstrate that mental health and behavioural difficulties among children aged 5–9 are perceived as a significant and growing concern within educational settings. Despite differences in educational systems and national



contexts, stakeholders from Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania reported remarkably similar patterns regarding the types of difficulties observed among young pupils.

Teachers, school leaders, psychologists, and parents consistently indicated that emotional, behavioural, and social challenges have become increasingly common in everyday school practice. Many respondents reported encountering such difficulties on a daily or weekly basis, suggesting that mental health concerns are no longer exceptional occurrences but rather constitute an integral aspect of contemporary educational environments.

Although the prevalence and relative importance of specific difficulties varied across countries, several common categories emerged consistently across all national studies.



Externalising Difficulties

Externalising difficulties were among the most frequently reported challenges across all participating countries. These difficulties typically manifest through observable behaviours such as aggression, impulsivity, oppositional behaviour, hyperactivity, and disruptive conduct.

Romanian, Polish, and Hungarian stakeholders particularly emphasised hyperactivity, impulsive behaviour, and aggressive reactions as major challenges in early primary education. Teachers frequently reported emotional outbursts, difficulties following classroom rules, low frustration tolerance, and oppositional behaviours that interfere with learning processes and peer relationships.



Similarly, Belgian participants highlighted aggressive behaviour and behavioural dysregulation, often linking these manifestations to adverse childhood experiences, trauma, family instability, or migration-related stress. German respondents also identified behavioural problems and hyperactivity as common concerns affecting classroom dynamics.

Across countries, participants expressed concern that externalising behaviours often place considerable emotional and professional demands on teachers, who frequently feel insufficiently prepared to respond effectively to challenging classroom situations.

At the same time, stakeholders acknowledged that externalising symptoms are generally easier to recognise because they are visible and directly affect classroom functioning. Consequently, children displaying disruptive behaviours are more likely to receive attention and support than those experiencing less visible emotional difficulties.

Internalising Difficulties

Internalising difficulties emerged as another major category of concern across all participating countries. These difficulties include anxiety, sadness, social withdrawal, loneliness, low self-esteem, psychosomatic complaints, and depressive symptoms.

Stakeholders from Belgium, Romania, Poland, and Hungary repeatedly emphasised that internalising difficulties often remain unnoticed because children experiencing emotional distress tend not to disrupt classroom activities. Anxiety, social withdrawal, emotional inhibition, and silent suffering were frequently described as hidden problems that may go unrecognised for prolonged periods.

Belgian stakeholders paid particular attention to trauma-related emotional difficulties among children from vulnerable, migrant, and refugee backgrounds. Experiences of displacement, family disruption, and exposure to conflict were identified as important contributors to children's emotional distress.

Similarly, Romanian psychologists highlighted that anxiety and emotional difficulties are frequently underestimated by educational professionals, while Polish participants stressed that sadness, withdrawal, and low resilience are becoming increasingly common among young children.



The findings suggest that educational professionals across all countries require additional support in recognising subtle indicators of emotional distress and differentiating between typical developmental variations and signs requiring further intervention.

Attention and Concentration Problems

Attention and concentration difficulties were among the most consistently reported concerns across all participating countries and emerged as one of the most prevalent categories of mental health-related challenges.

German teachers identified concentration difficulties as the single most frequently observed problem among pupils. Similar findings were reported in Romania, Hungary, Belgium, and Poland, where teachers described increasing numbers of children experiencing difficulties maintaining attention, sustaining engagement in learning activities, completing tasks, and following instructions.

Participants frequently associated these difficulties with broader societal changes, including excessive screen exposure, digital overstimulation, reduced opportunities for free play, family stress, and the accelerated pace of modern life.

Many stakeholders expressed concern that children increasingly struggle to maintain attention during classroom activities and demonstrate lower tolerance for effort, delayed gratification, and sustained cognitive engagement.

Attention difficulties were also frequently discussed in connection with hyperactivity and emotional dysregulation, suggesting that these challenges often coexist rather than occur in isolation.

Emotional Regulation Difficulties

Across all five countries, difficulties related to emotional regulation emerged as one of the most prominent and consistently reported concerns.

Teachers, school leaders, and specialists reported that many children experience difficulties recognising, expressing, and managing emotions appropriately. Emotional outbursts, irritability, frustration, impulsive reactions, and difficulties coping with failure were commonly described across all national reports.



Polish and Hungarian stakeholders particularly emphasised children's reduced frustration tolerance and limited ability to cope with setbacks, criticism, or interpersonal conflicts. Romanian participants similarly identified emotional dysregulation as a major challenge affecting both pupils participation and peer relationships.

Belgian respondents highlighted emotional regulation as the most important area requiring additional professional training, while German participants emphasised the need for practical strategies to support children experiencing emotional distress.

The findings suggest that strengthening children's emotional literacy, self-awareness, and self-regulation skills should represent a central component of future preventive interventions and educational programmes.

Peer Conflicts and Social Difficulties

Difficulties related to peer relationships and social functioning emerged as another important area of concern across all participating countries.

Teachers frequently reported peer conflicts, social exclusion, difficulties establishing friendships, poor conflict-resolution skills, and challenges related to cooperation and group participation.

Romanian and Polish respondents particularly highlighted peer conflicts as common occurrences within early primary classrooms. Belgian participants reported concerns regarding loneliness, social isolation, and difficulties related to cultural and linguistic diversity among increasingly heterogeneous student populations.

Hungarian stakeholders expressed concern about children's limited social competencies and reduced opportunities for face-to-face interaction outside school settings, while German participants reported growing social pressures and interpersonal difficulties among pupils.

Across all countries, respondents emphasised the importance of fostering social and emotional competencies, promoting inclusive classroom environments, and implementing preventive activities aimed at strengthening peer relationships and social cohesion.

Overall, the comparative findings demonstrate that children's mental health challenges across Europe are multifaceted and interconnected. Externalising behaviours, internalising difficulties, attention problems, emotional dysregulation, and peer-related difficulties frequently coexist and influence one another. These findings highlight the need for comprehensive, preventive, and



relationship-based approaches that address children's social, emotional, and behavioural development in an integrated manner.

Environmental and Societal Factors Affecting Children's Well-being

Beyond individual emotional and behavioural difficulties, stakeholders across all participating countries highlighted a range of broader environmental and societal factors that significantly influence children's mental health and well-being. Although the relative importance of these factors varied across national contexts, several common themes emerged consistently across the five countries.

Parental Separation and Family Instability

Family-related factors were frequently identified as important determinants of children's emotional and behavioural functioning. Participants from Belgium, Germany, Poland, Romania, and Hungary reported that parental separation, divorce, family conflict, and unstable family environments often negatively affect children's well-being.

Teachers and specialists observed that children experiencing family instability may exhibit anxiety, emotional dysregulation, concentration difficulties, social withdrawal, behavioural problems, and reduced pupil engagement. In Germany and Belgium, respondents specifically referred to parental separation and children living across multiple households as factors contributing to emotional distress and behavioural challenges.

Belgian stakeholders additionally highlighted the impact of chronic family stress, financial hardship, and adverse childhood experiences, including neglect and domestic violence. Across countries, respondents emphasised the importance of close collaboration between schools and families in supporting children facing difficult family circumstances.

Migration and Diversity

Migration and increasing diversity emerged as particularly important themes in Belgium and Germany, although respondents from other countries also referred to issues related to social inclusion, cultural diversity, and vulnerability among minority groups.

Belgian stakeholders highlighted the specific challenges faced by children from migrant and refugee backgrounds, including experiences of war, displacement, trauma, language barriers, and cultural adjustment. Similarly, German participants reported that schools increasingly



support children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, requiring educational professionals to possess intercultural competencies and culturally sensitive approaches.

The findings suggest that children from migrant, refugee, and minority backgrounds may face additional risks related to social exclusion, emotional distress, and adaptation difficulties. Consequently, schools require both specialised competencies and appropriate support systems to ensure inclusive and equitable educational environments.

Digital wellbeing and balanced technology use

Excessive use of digital technologies and prolonged screen exposure emerged as one of the most prominent societal concerns across all participating countries.

Stakeholders consistently reported that increased screen time negatively affects children's attention, emotional regulation, social interactions, and overall well-being. Teachers and parents frequently associated excessive screen exposure with shorter attention spans, reduced concentration, sleep difficulties, lower frustration tolerance, and diminished face-to-face communication skills.

Participants from Belgium, Hungary, and Poland expressed particular concern regarding digital overstimulation and the growing dependence on digital devices from an increasingly early age. Belgian respondents referred to the phenomenon of the "digital nanny", whereby digital devices are frequently used as a means of regulating children's behaviour and emotions.

Across countries, participants highlighted the need to strengthen children's digital resilience while simultaneously promoting balanced lifestyles that include free play, social interaction, physical activity, and opportunities for emotional learning.

Social Pressure and Changing Childhood Experiences

Stakeholders across all countries described significant changes in children's social environments and developmental experiences. Participants frequently referred to increasing performance expectations, academic pressures, reduced opportunities for free play, and the accelerated pace of contemporary life.

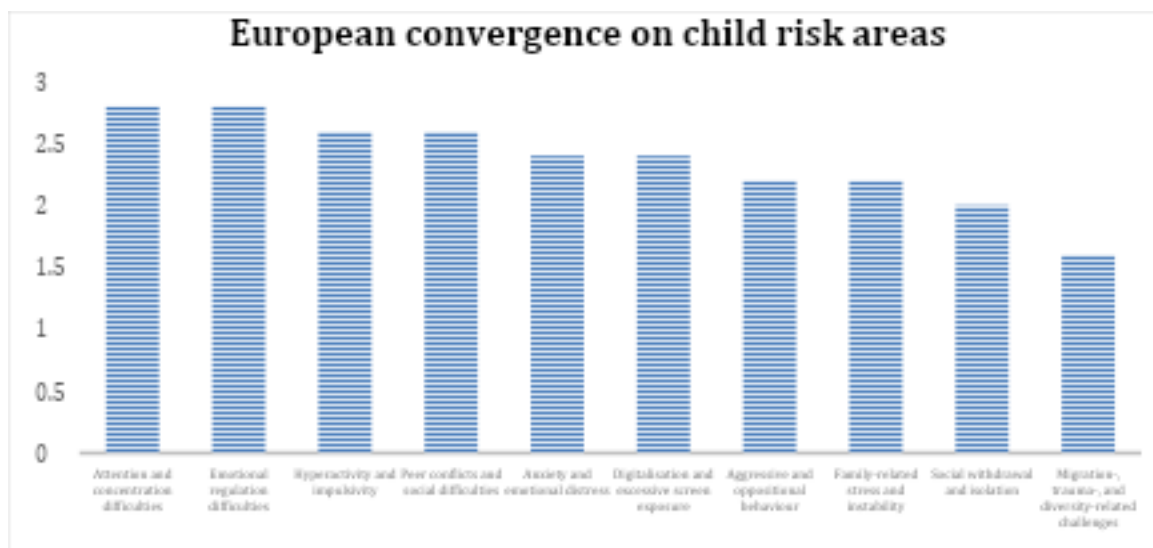
Polish and Hungarian respondents particularly highlighted children's growing fear of failure, low resilience, and difficulties coping with challenges and setbacks. Teachers reported that many



children demonstrate heightened sensitivity to criticism, reduced self-confidence, and limited coping strategies when confronted with frustration or disappointment.

In addition, several respondents expressed concern that children today have fewer opportunities for unstructured play, spontaneous social interaction, and independent problem-solving, all of which are considered essential for healthy social and emotional development.

Overall, the findings indicate that children's mental well-being is shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by broader family, societal, cultural, and technological contexts. These findings reinforce the need for holistic, preventive, and ecosystem-based approaches that recognise the multiple influences affecting children's social, emotional, and behavioural development.



3.2 Early Identification and Diagnostic Practices

The findings across the five participating countries demonstrate that early identification of children's emotional, behavioural, and social difficulties is widely recognised as an essential component of promoting mental well-being in educational settings. Stakeholders consistently acknowledged that timely recognition and intervention can prevent the escalation of difficulties and significantly improve children's developmental, educational, and psychosocial outcomes.



Despite broad agreement regarding the importance of early identification, the findings reveal considerable similarities in both the strengths and limitations of current practices across countries. Four major themes emerged consistently throughout the national studies: the dominant reliance on observation, the lack of standardised tools and procedures, variability in practices across schools, and the central role of teachers as first identifiers of children's difficulties.

Dominant Reliance on Observation

Across all participating countries, observation emerged as the primary method used to identify children's emotional, behavioural, and social difficulties.

Teachers, school leaders, psychologists, and parents consistently reported that concerns regarding children's well-being are most commonly identified through continuous observation of children's behaviour, interactions, emotional expressions, and participation in classroom activities.

Participants described a variety of observation-based practices, including:

- daily classroom observation;
- observation during play and peer interactions;
- monitoring children's participation in learning activities;
- informal conversations with children;
- discussions among school staff;
- communication with parents regarding behavioural changes.

Romanian schools reported extensive use of ongoing pedagogical observation, emotional circles, and individual conversations with children. Similarly, Hungarian and Polish stakeholders highlighted continuous classroom observation as the primary mechanism for recognising early warning signs. Belgian respondents also reported extensive reliance on teacher observation, often supplemented by consultations with psychologists and multidisciplinary teams. German teachers similarly indicated that everyday classroom observation constitutes the most important source of information regarding children's mental well-being.

The findings suggest that educational professionals place considerable trust in their professional judgement and daily interactions with children. However, participants also acknowledged that observation practices are frequently informal and highly dependent on individual experience and sensitivity.



Lack of Standardised Tools and Procedures

One of the most consistent findings across all national reports concerns the limited use of formalised, standardised, and evidence-based tools for early identification.

Across countries, schools predominantly rely on informal assessments and professional intuition rather than systematic screening instruments or structured procedures. Romanian respondents reported that more than half of teachers do not use formal monitoring tools, while only a small proportion of schools reported having established early identification procedures. Similar findings emerged in Poland, where only a minority of school leaders indicated the existence of formal protocols for identifying children's mental health difficulties.

The German study revealed that nearly two-thirds of teachers do not use specific tools or standardised procedures when identifying mental health or behavioural concerns. Belgian stakeholders similarly reported a shortage of child-friendly, non-verbal, and time-efficient screening instruments suitable for young children. Hungarian participants also emphasised that identification practices largely depend on individual professional experience rather than common institutional frameworks.

The absence of standardised tools was frequently associated with several challenges, including:

- inconsistent identification practices;
- delayed recognition of less visible difficulties;
- uncertainty regarding referral decisions;
- limited comparability of observations across professionals;
- difficulties documenting and monitoring children's progress.

Stakeholders across all countries expressed a strong need for practical, evidence-based, and easy-to-use tools capable of supporting systematic early identification without increasing teachers' administrative burden.

Variability Across Schools

The findings indicate substantial variability in early identification practices both within and across participating countries.



Although some schools have established multidisciplinary teams, structured referral pathways, and regular collaboration with specialists, others rely almost exclusively on individual teachers' observations and informal communication processes.

Belgian schools, for example, reported examples of multidisciplinary collaboration involving psychologists, counsellors, and external support services, while many respondents simultaneously highlighted inequalities in access to such services. Similar disparities were observed in other countries, where the availability of school psychologists, specialist support, and institutional procedures often depends on local resources and organisational capacities.

Participants repeatedly noted that children's access to timely support may vary considerably depending on:

- the availability of specialist staff;
- school leadership priorities;
- institutional culture;
- teachers' experience and competencies;
- local support networks and referral systems.

Consequently, the quality and consistency of early identification often remain dependent on individual schools and professionals rather than being guaranteed through systematic institutional approaches.

Teachers as First Identifiers

Across all participating countries, teachers emerged as the primary and most important actors in the early identification process.

Due to their continuous daily contact with children, teachers are uniquely positioned to observe behavioural changes, emotional reactions, social interactions, and developmental patterns over time. Participants consistently recognised teachers as the first professionals likely to notice early warning signs and initiate further support processes.

Teachers reported identifying concerns through:

- changes in behaviour or mood;
- difficulties in peer relationships;
- declining school engagement;



- emotional outbursts;
- withdrawal or isolation;
- changes in participation or classroom functioning.

However, respondents also emphasised that the responsibility placed upon teachers is substantial and often exceeds the level of training and support currently available to them. Teachers across all countries expressed uncertainty regarding the interpretation of observed behaviours, particularly when distinguishing between age-appropriate developmental variations and indicators of more significant emotional or mental health concerns.

Many participants stressed that teachers should not be expected to diagnose children but rather to recognise early warning signs, document observations, initiate communication with families, and facilitate referral to specialised services when necessary.

Overall, the comparative findings demonstrate that early identification practices in participating countries are characterised by strong professional commitment and extensive reliance on teacher observations, but also by limited standardisation and considerable variability in implementation. These findings highlight the need for accessible, practical, and evidence-based tools that support teachers in recognising early signs of difficulty, strengthen consistency across educational settings, and facilitate timely intervention and referral processes.

The results strongly support the development of MindPlay diagnostic and observational tools designed to complement existing professional practices while remaining child-friendly, non-stigmatising, and easily integrated into everyday educational environments.

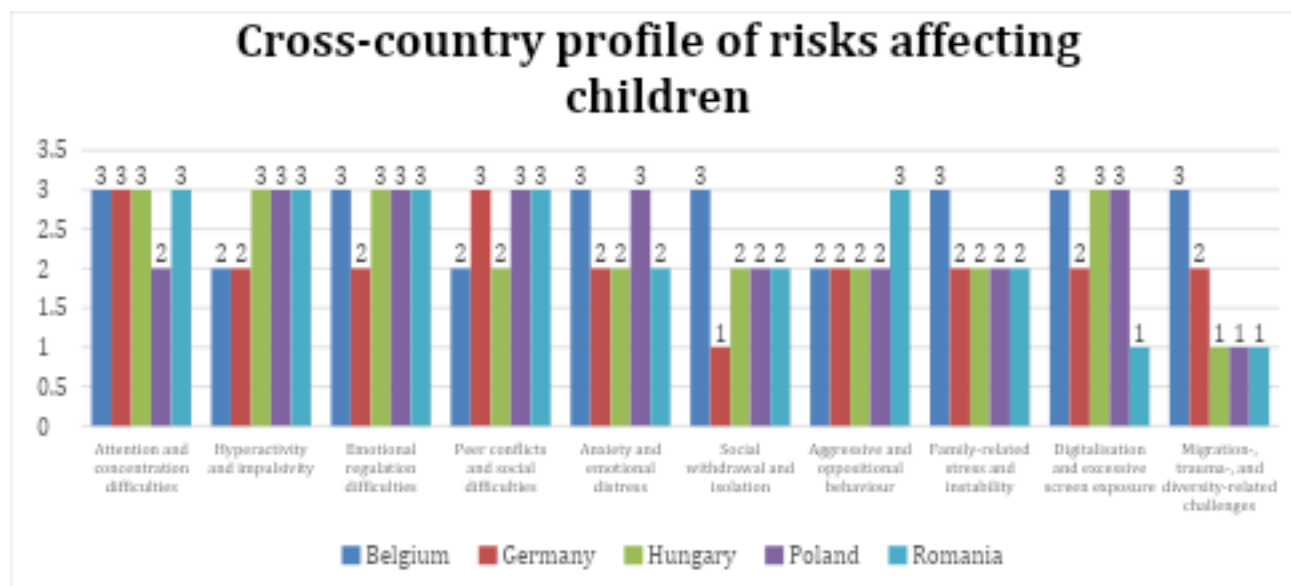
3.3 Competence Needs of Educational Professionals

The findings across all participating countries demonstrate that educational professionals recognise children's mental well-being as an increasingly important component of their professional responsibilities. At the same time, stakeholders consistently reported that existing initial and in-service training opportunities do not sufficiently prepare teachers and other school professionals to address the growing complexity of children's emotional, behavioural, and social needs.

Across Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania, respondents expressed a strong need for practical, evidence-based, and easily applicable professional development



opportunities. Although some country-specific differences emerged, several competence areas were consistently identified as priorities across all stakeholder groups.



Early Identification Competencies

One of the most prominent findings across all national studies concerns the need to strengthen professionals' competencies related to early identification of mental health and behavioural difficulties.

Teachers and school leaders reported uncertainty regarding their ability to distinguish between typical developmental behaviours and early warning signs of more significant emotional, behavioural, or psychological difficulties. Participants expressed particular concern about recognising less visible difficulties, such as anxiety, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, trauma-related symptoms, and early signs of depression.

Stakeholders indicated a need for additional competencies in:

- recognising early signs of emotional and behavioural difficulties;
- differentiating developmental variations from potential mental health concerns;
- identifying internalising difficulties that may remain hidden in classroom settings;
- systematically observing and documenting behavioural changes;



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- monitoring children's social and emotional development over time;
- making informed decisions regarding referrals to specialised services.

Participants consistently emphasised that educational professionals do not seek diagnostic competencies in the clinical sense but rather practical skills that would enable them to recognise concerns early and respond appropriately within their educational role.

Emotional Regulation Support

Supporting children's emotional regulation emerged as one of the most important competence needs identified across all countries.

Teachers, school leaders, psychologists, and parents reported that many children experience difficulties recognising, expressing, and managing emotions. Consequently, professionals expressed a strong need for practical strategies that would enable them to support children's emotional development in everyday educational settings.

Stakeholders identified the following areas as priorities:

- promoting emotional literacy and emotional awareness;
- supporting children's self-regulation skills;
- helping children cope with frustration and disappointment;
- fostering resilience and coping strategies;
- teaching emotional expression in developmentally appropriate ways;
- strengthening empathy and perspective-taking.

Respondents repeatedly highlighted the need for concrete classroom activities, practical tools, and play-based methods that could be integrated into daily educational routines. Emotional regulation was consistently viewed as a core preventive competence that should be embedded within the regular educational process rather than addressed only when problems arise.

Behaviour Management

Behaviour management emerged as another major professional development priority across participating countries.



Educational professionals reported increasing difficulties in responding to disruptive behaviour, aggression, impulsivity, hyperactivity, and classroom conflicts. Teachers frequently expressed feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy when confronted with challenging situations.

Participants identified competence needs related to:

- managing disruptive classroom behaviours;
- responding to challenging behaviour and emotional dysregulation;
- promoting positive classroom behaviour;
- preventing and resolving conflicts;
- supporting inclusive classroom environments;
- implementing preventive approaches to behaviour management.

Across countries, respondents strongly emphasised that future training programmes should prioritise practical solutions, case studies, simulations, and immediately applicable strategies rather than exclusively theoretical knowledge.

Communication with Parents

Communication and cooperation with parents emerged as one of the strongest and most consistent themes across all national reports.

Teachers and school leaders frequently reported difficulties initiating conversations with parents regarding children's emotional or behavioural difficulties. Many respondents described situations involving parental denial, defensiveness, resistance to referrals, or differing perceptions of children's needs.

Stakeholders identified the following competence needs:

- discussing sensitive issues with parents;
- communicating concerns in a constructive and non-stigmatising manner;
- managing difficult conversations;
- strengthening partnership-based cooperation with families;
- engaging vulnerable or hard-to-reach families;
- communicating across cultural and linguistic differences;
- increasing parental involvement in preventive activities.



Several participants emphasised that effective communication with parents is often more challenging than identifying children's difficulties themselves. Consequently, many respondents considered communication competencies to be among the most important areas for future professional development.

Crisis Intervention

Participants across all countries expressed a need for greater confidence and competence in responding to crisis situations involving children.

Although severe crises may not occur frequently in everyday school practice, educational professionals reported uncertainty regarding appropriate responses when children display significant emotional distress, aggressive behaviour, self-harming tendencies, trauma reactions, or signs of abuse and neglect.

Stakeholders highlighted the need for competencies related to:

- responding to emotional crises and behavioural escalations;
- recognising indicators of abuse, neglect, and trauma;
- managing crisis situations safely and effectively;
- implementing referral procedures;
- cooperating with specialised services and external agencies;
- understanding institutional protocols and safeguarding procedures.

Belgian stakeholders particularly emphasised trauma-informed approaches and responding to vulnerable children, while respondents from all countries stressed the importance of having clear intervention procedures and access to specialist consultation.

Teacher Well-being and Self-Care

A further important finding concerns professionals' own well-being and emotional resilience.

Teachers and school staff frequently reported experiencing significant emotional burden associated with supporting children facing complex emotional, behavioural, and family-related difficulties. Participants described feelings of stress, helplessness, emotional exhaustion, and professional overload.

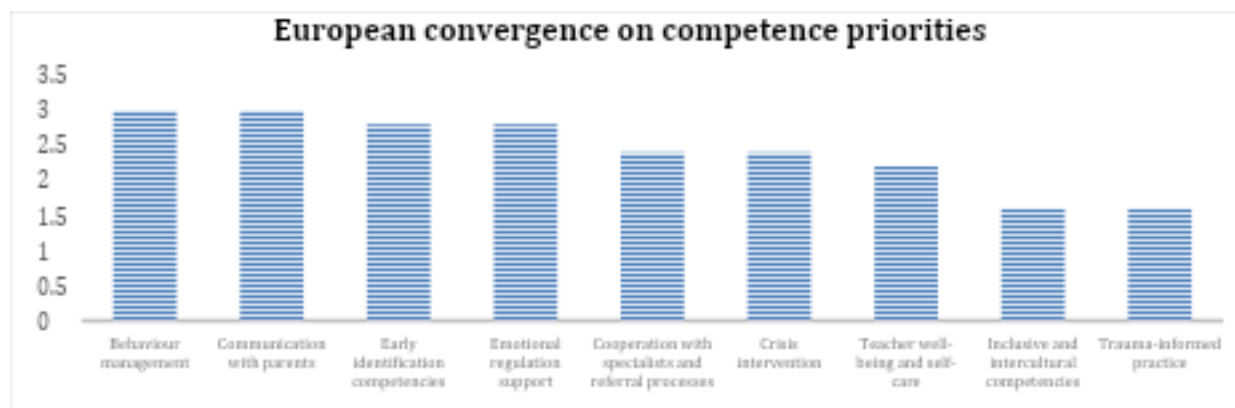
Consequently, respondents identified a need for greater support in the areas of:



- stress management;
- emotional self-regulation;
- burnout prevention;
- maintaining professional boundaries;
- self-care strategies;
- peer support and professional supervision;
- building personal resilience.

Belgian stakeholders particularly highlighted the emotional demands placed upon teachers, while respondents from all countries acknowledged that professionals' well-being directly influences their capacity to support children's mental health effectively.

Overall, the findings indicate that educational professionals across Europe require comprehensive, practice-oriented, and evidence-based professional development opportunities that address both children's needs and professionals' own well-being. The identified competence areas provide a strong foundation for the development of MindPlay training programmes and support materials, ensuring that future project outputs respond directly to stakeholders' expressed needs and everyday professional realities.



3.4 Systemic Barriers

The findings across all participating countries indicate that educational professionals operate within systems that face significant structural and organisational constraints when addressing children's mental health and well-being. Although the nature and extent of these barriers vary

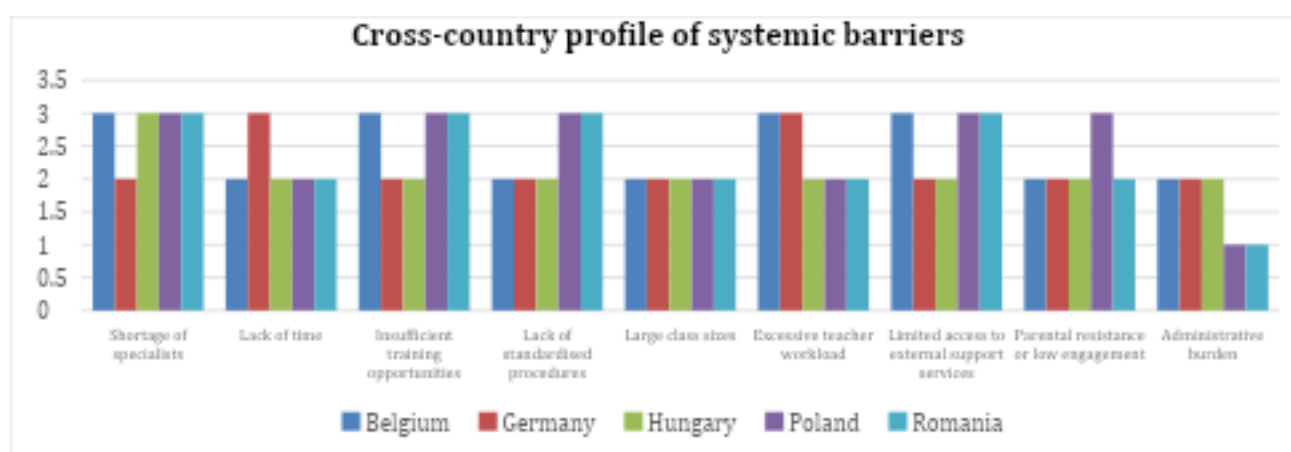


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across national contexts, stakeholders consistently identified several systemic challenges that limit the effectiveness of prevention, early identification, and intervention efforts.

The most frequently reported barriers include shortages of specialist support, lack of time, insufficient training opportunities, absence of standardised procedures, large class sizes, and excessive teacher workload. These findings suggest that improving children's mental well-being requires not only strengthening individual competencies but also addressing broader systemic conditions within educational settings.



Shortage of Specialists

The shortage of specialised support staff emerged as one of the most significant and consistently reported barriers across all participating countries.

Teachers, school leaders, and parents frequently reported insufficient access to school psychologists, counsellors, special educators, developmental specialists, and external mental health professionals. In many cases, existing specialists were responsible for supporting multiple schools simultaneously, resulting in limited availability, delayed interventions, and reduced opportunities for preventive work.

Romanian stakeholders particularly emphasised the lack of school psychologists and specialised services, while participants from Poland highlighted long waiting times for assessments and limited availability of professional support. Similar concerns were reported in Hungary and Germany, where respondents described insufficient access to specialised consultation and support services.



Belgian participants additionally referred to significant pressure on both school-based and external support systems, with many schools experiencing substantial delays between identifying children's difficulties and obtaining appropriate professional assistance.

Across countries, stakeholders expressed concern that limited specialist capacity often places additional responsibilities on teachers, who may feel insufficiently prepared to address complex emotional and behavioural needs without adequate professional support.

Lack of Time

Lack of time was identified as a major obstacle to effective mental health promotion and early intervention in all participating countries.

Teachers and school leaders consistently reported that competing curricular demands, administrative obligations, and organisational responsibilities significantly limit opportunities for preventive and supportive work with children.

Participants described difficulties finding sufficient time for:

- systematic observation and documentation;
- individual conversations with children;
- communication and cooperation with parents;
- implementation of preventive activities;
- collaboration with colleagues and specialists;
- reflection and follow-up regarding identified concerns.

German school leaders identified lack of time as one of the strongest barriers to supporting children's mental well-being. Similar concerns were raised in Romania, Poland, Hungary, and Belgium, where respondents stressed that preventive work is often overshadowed by immediate academic and organisational demands.

The findings suggest that schools frequently operate in reactive rather than preventive modes, addressing difficulties only once they become visible or severe.

Insufficient Training



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Across all participating countries, stakeholders reported that existing pre-service and in-service training opportunities do not sufficiently prepare educational professionals to address the increasingly complex mental health needs of children.

Teachers frequently expressed feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy when responding to emotional, behavioural, or social difficulties. Participants consistently indicated a need for more specialised and practical training opportunities related to:

- early identification of mental health difficulties;
- emotional regulation support;
- behaviour management;
- crisis intervention;
- communication with parents;
- trauma-informed practices;
- inclusive educational approaches.

Respondents across countries emphasised that available training is often too theoretical and insufficiently connected to everyday classroom realities. Consequently, stakeholders expressed strong preferences for practice-oriented training based on case studies, simulations, concrete examples, and immediately applicable strategies.

The findings indicate that strengthening professional competencies through continuous, evidence-based, and practice-oriented training should constitute a key priority for educational systems.

Lack of Standardised Procedures

The absence of clear and standardised procedures for identifying, documenting, referring, and supporting children with mental health difficulties emerged as another major systemic challenge.

Across countries, participants reported substantial variability in institutional practices, with many schools relying primarily on informal approaches and individual professional judgement.

Stakeholders highlighted several challenges associated with the lack of standardisation:

- inconsistent identification practices;
- uncertainty regarding referral pathways;
- unclear roles and responsibilities;



- fragmented communication among professionals;
- difficulties monitoring children's progress over time.

Romanian and Polish respondents particularly emphasised the limited availability of formal protocols for early identification and intervention, while German and Hungarian participants similarly reported reliance on informal and school-specific procedures. Belgian stakeholders highlighted the need for structured, child-friendly tools and clearer support pathways.

Participants consistently stressed the importance of establishing systematic, evidence-based procedures that can support more consistent and equitable responses across educational settings.

Large Class Sizes

Large class sizes were identified as a significant barrier to providing individualised support to children experiencing emotional or behavioural difficulties.

Teachers reported that overcrowded classrooms reduce opportunities for:

- individual observation and support;
- meaningful interaction with children;
- implementation of preventive activities;
- differentiated instruction;
- timely responses to children's emotional needs.

Participants from Romania, Poland, and Germany particularly highlighted the challenges associated with supporting increasingly diverse student populations within large classes. Teachers frequently reported that managing classroom dynamics while simultaneously attending to individual children's emotional needs represents a considerable professional challenge.

The findings suggest that class size directly influences professionals' capacity to establish supportive relationships, monitor children's well-being, and provide timely interventions.

Teacher Workload

Excessive workload emerged as one of the most pervasive systemic barriers identified in the study.



Across all participating countries, teachers described increasing professional demands associated not only with teaching responsibilities but also with administrative tasks, communication with parents, documentation requirements, and responding to children's increasingly complex social and emotional needs.

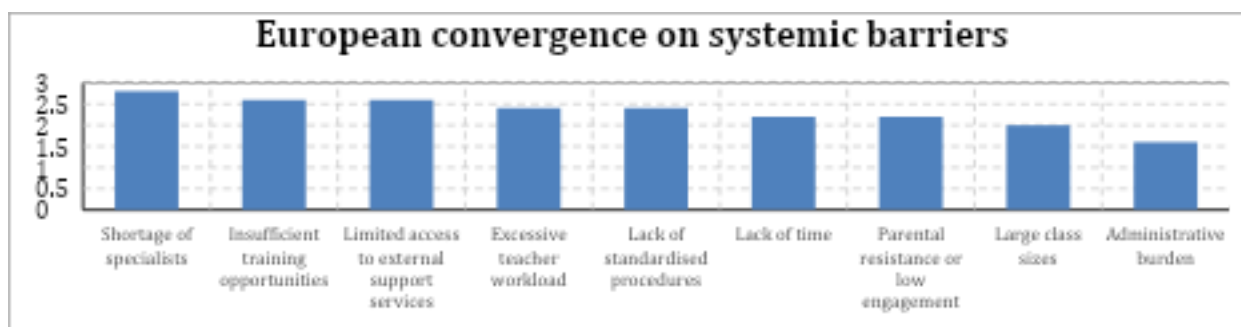
Participants frequently reported:

- administrative overload;
- competing professional responsibilities;
- emotional exhaustion;
- difficulties balancing multiple roles;
- limited opportunities for reflection and self-care.

Belgian stakeholders, in particular, highlighted the substantial emotional burden experienced by teachers working with vulnerable children and families. Similar concerns were expressed across all countries, with many respondents indicating that high workload negatively affects both professional well-being and the quality of support provided to children.

The findings suggest that teacher workload should be recognised not only as an organisational issue but also as an important factor influencing the sustainability and effectiveness of school-based mental health promotion efforts.

Overall, the comparative analysis demonstrates that educational professionals across Europe face numerous systemic barriers that limit their capacity to effectively promote children's mental well-being. Addressing these barriers will require coordinated efforts at institutional, policy, and system levels, alongside the development of practical tools and support mechanisms that are realistic, accessible, and compatible with the everyday realities of educational practice.



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3.5 School–Family Cooperation

School–family cooperation emerged as one of the strongest and most consistent themes across all participating countries. Stakeholders unanimously recognised that children's mental well-being cannot be effectively supported by schools or families acting independently. Rather, promoting children's social, emotional, and behavioural development requires strong, trusting, and collaborative partnerships between educational institutions and families.

Across Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania, respondents consistently described parents as essential partners in the processes of prevention, early identification, intervention, and ongoing support. At the same time, participants highlighted numerous challenges that continue to hinder effective collaboration between schools and families.

Importance of Partnership-Based Cooperation

Stakeholders across all countries emphasised that effective support for children's mental health depends on regular communication, mutual trust, shared responsibility, and coordinated action between schools and families.

Teachers and specialists noted that parents possess valuable knowledge about children's emotional functioning, behaviour at home, family circumstances, and developmental history. Similarly, parents recognised the important role of schools in observing children's daily functioning in peer groups and structured educational settings.

Participants consistently highlighted that combining information from home and school environments allows for:

- earlier identification of emerging difficulties;
- more comprehensive understanding of children's needs;
- better-informed intervention decisions;
- greater consistency in support strategies;
- improved developmental outcomes for children.

Several respondents stressed that many emotional and behavioural difficulties become visible only in specific contexts. For example, parents frequently reported observing emotional distress, anxiety, or behavioural difficulties primarily at home, while teachers often identify problems related to peer interactions, classroom behaviour, or learning engagement.



The findings therefore underline the importance of establishing systematic channels for information exchange between schools and families.

Communication Challenges

Despite widespread recognition of the importance of cooperation, communication between schools and families was frequently described as challenging.

Teachers and school leaders across all countries reported difficulties discussing sensitive topics related to children's emotional, behavioural, or developmental difficulties. Participants described concerns regarding:

- parental denial or minimisation of problems;
- defensive reactions from parents;
- fear of stigmatising children or families;
- differing perceptions regarding children's needs;
- limited parental engagement in support processes.

Communication about mental health-related concerns was consistently identified as particularly challenging. Many professionals expressed uncertainty regarding how to raise concerns in a constructive, non-judgemental, and partnership-oriented manner.

Polish stakeholders especially emphasised parental denial and reluctance to seek additional support as major barriers to effective intervention. Similar findings emerged in Romania, Germany, and Hungary, where respondents frequently described situations in which schools and families held different views regarding children's difficulties.

At the same time, parents participating in the study generally reported high levels of trust in schools and expressed willingness to cooperate with educational professionals. This discrepancy suggests that communication barriers may not necessarily stem from a lack of parental interest but may instead reflect differences in expectations, communication styles, or previous experiences.

Barriers to Effective Cooperation

Several common barriers to effective school–family cooperation emerged across participating countries.



These include:

- parental denial or resistance;
- limited parental availability due to work and family responsibilities;
- insufficient communication opportunities;
- lack of trust between schools and families;
- stigma surrounding mental health issues;
- cultural and linguistic differences;
- differing expectations regarding children's development and educational responsibilities.

Belgian stakeholders additionally highlighted challenges related to migration, cultural diversity, and language barriers, particularly when working with refugee and migrant families. German participants similarly reported increasing diversity within school communities and emphasised the need for culturally sensitive communication approaches.

Across countries, participants stressed that families experiencing social vulnerability, economic hardship, migration-related challenges, or complex family circumstances may require additional support and tailored engagement strategies.

Parental Involvement in Prevention and Support

The findings indicate that stakeholders strongly support greater parental involvement in preventive and mental health promotion activities.

Parents across all countries expressed interest in receiving additional information, guidance, and practical support related to:

- children's emotional development;
- recognising early warning signs;
- supporting emotional regulation at home;
- managing digital media use;
- strengthening parent–child relationships;
- promoting resilience and social skills.

Teachers and school leaders similarly emphasised the importance of involving parents not only when problems emerge, but also as active partners in preventive activities aimed at promoting children's overall well-being.



Participants suggested that workshops, informational materials, practical guidelines, and shared school–family activities could strengthen parental competencies and foster more collaborative relationships.

Implications for MindPlay

The findings clearly demonstrate that school–family cooperation represents a critical component of effective mental health promotion in early primary education.

Future MindPlay products should therefore not focus exclusively on children and educational professionals but should also actively support families through accessible, practical, and evidence-based resources.

Stakeholders across all countries expressed particular interest in:

- parent-oriented educational materials;
- practical guidance on supporting children's emotional development;
- communication tools facilitating dialogue between schools and families;
- activities promoting joint parent–child engagement;
- resources addressing digital well-being and emotional regulation.

Overall, the comparative findings suggest that strengthening school–family partnerships should be considered a key strategic priority for promoting children's mental well-being. Building trusting, inclusive, and collaborative relationships between schools and families has the potential to improve early identification, increase the effectiveness of interventions, and contribute to more holistic and sustainable support systems for children.

3.6 Environmental and Societal Factors Affecting Children's Well-being

The findings across the five participating countries demonstrate that children's mental well-being is influenced not only by individual characteristics and school-related factors but also by broader environmental, societal, and family contexts. Stakeholders consistently highlighted that contemporary childhood is shaped by rapid social change, evolving family structures, digitalisation, migration, and increasing societal pressures, all of which have important implications for children's emotional, social, and behavioural development.



Although the relative importance of these factors varied across countries, several common themes emerged consistently throughout the national studies.

Family wellbeing

Family stress emerged as one of the most significant contextual factors affecting children's well-being across all participating countries.

Teachers, school leaders, psychologists, and parents reported that children's emotional and behavioural functioning is strongly influenced by the overall family environment. Respondents frequently referred to the impact of:

- parental stress and burnout;
- financial difficulties;
- family conflict;
- unstable living conditions;
- parental mental health difficulties;
- limited family time due to work commitments.

Belgian stakeholders particularly highlighted the effects of chronic stress, socio-economic hardship, and adverse childhood experiences on children's emotional functioning. Similar concerns were reported in Romania, Poland, Hungary, and Germany, where participants described family stress as an important contributing factor to anxiety, behavioural difficulties, concentration problems, and emotional dysregulation among children.

Across countries, stakeholders emphasised that schools increasingly encounter children affected by complex family circumstances, thereby reinforcing the need for holistic and family-sensitive approaches to mental health promotion.

Parental Separation and Family Instability

Parental separation, divorce, and broader family instability were frequently identified as important risk factors influencing children's mental well-being.

Participants across all countries reported that children experiencing changes in family structures may demonstrate a range of emotional and behavioural responses, including:

- anxiety and emotional insecurity;



- sadness and withdrawal;
- behavioural difficulties and aggression;
- concentration problems;
- reduced school engagement;
- difficulties in peer relationships.

German respondents specifically highlighted challenges related to children living across multiple households following parental separation. Belgian stakeholders similarly emphasised the impact of family disruption, domestic conflict, and instability on children's emotional security and overall functioning.

The findings suggest that family transitions may represent particularly sensitive periods during which children require additional emotional support, both within the family and at school.

Diversity, inclusion and cultural adaptation

Migration and increasing diversity emerged as particularly important themes in Belgium and Germany, although issues related to inclusion, cultural diversity, and social vulnerability were also evident in other countries.

Belgian stakeholders reported that schools increasingly support children from migrant and refugee backgrounds who may have experienced war, displacement, loss, trauma, and significant life transitions. Participants described challenges related to:

- language barriers;
- cultural adaptation;
- social inclusion;
- trauma-related emotional difficulties;
- interrupted educational experiences.

Similarly, German stakeholders emphasised the growing diversity within school populations and highlighted the need for culturally sensitive educational approaches and enhanced intercultural competencies among professionals.

Participants across countries stressed that diversity should be recognised not only as a challenge but also as a valuable resource that enriches educational communities. However,



they also acknowledged that children from migrant, refugee, and minority backgrounds may require additional support to ensure successful integration, inclusion, and emotional well-being.

Digital wellbeing and balanced technology use

Digitalisation and excessive screen exposure emerged as one of the most prominent societal concerns across all participating countries.

Stakeholders consistently reported that children are spending increasing amounts of time using digital devices, often from a very early age. Teachers, parents, and specialists expressed concerns regarding the potential impact of excessive screen use on children's development and well-being.

Across countries, participants associated excessive screen exposure with:

- reduced attention span and concentration;
- emotional dysregulation;
- lower frustration tolerance;
- sleep disturbances;
- reduced face-to-face social interactions;
- difficulties developing social competencies;
- increased dependency on digital stimulation.

Belgian, Hungarian, and Polish stakeholders particularly emphasised concerns regarding digital overstimulation and excessive reliance on digital devices in everyday family life. Belgian respondents referred to the phenomenon of the "digital nanny", whereby digital devices are frequently used to occupy or calm children.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that digital technologies also provide valuable educational opportunities when used appropriately. Consequently, stakeholders highlighted the importance of promoting balanced and responsible digital use rather than advocating for complete restriction.

Social Pressure and Changing Childhood Experiences



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Participants across all countries reported substantial changes in children's everyday experiences and social environments.

Stakeholders frequently referred to increasing social and academic pressures, accelerated lifestyles, and reduced opportunities for free play and spontaneous social interaction. Many respondents expressed concern that children are increasingly exposed to high expectations regarding school achievement, behaviour, and social performance from an early age.

Polish and Hungarian participants, in particular, highlighted children's reduced resilience, fear of failure, and difficulties coping with setbacks and frustration. Teachers across countries reported that many children demonstrate:

- heightened sensitivity to criticism;
- low self-confidence;
- fear of making mistakes;
- limited coping strategies;
- difficulties managing disappointment and failure.

Additionally, respondents noted that opportunities for independent play, exploration, and unstructured peer interaction have decreased, potentially limiting children's opportunities to develop resilience, problem-solving skills, and social competencies naturally.

Overall, the findings indicate that children's mental well-being is shaped by a complex interaction of individual, family, social, cultural, and technological influences. These findings underscore the importance of adopting holistic, preventive, and ecosystem-based approaches that address not only children's individual needs but also the broader environmental contexts in which they develop.

The results further suggest that future MindPlay interventions should explicitly consider these contextual factors and provide practical resources that support children, families, and educational professionals in responding to the changing realities of contemporary childhood.

3.7 Existing Good Practices

Despite the numerous challenges identified across participating countries, the findings revealed that schools already implement a variety of promising practices aimed at promoting children's social, emotional, and mental well-being. Although the specific approaches differ across



educational contexts, several common practices emerged consistently across the five countries, demonstrating a strong foundation upon which future MindPlay interventions can build.

Overall, stakeholders emphasised that effective practices are characterised by their preventive nature, child-centred approach, active participation, and integration into everyday school life. The findings also suggest that schools increasingly recognise the importance of creating emotionally supportive learning environments that foster children's well-being alongside school achievement.

Emotional Circles and Daily Emotional Check-ins

One of the most frequently reported practices across countries was the use of emotional circles, morning meetings, and daily emotional check-ins. Teachers described regular opportunities for children to express their feelings, discuss emotions, and reflect on their experiences in a safe and supportive environment.

These activities typically involve:

- sharing emotions at the beginning or end of the school day;
- discussing classroom experiences and interpersonal relationships;
- identifying emotional needs and concerns;
- fostering empathy and active listening.

Stakeholders reported that such practices strengthen emotional literacy, improve classroom climate, facilitate early identification of emotional difficulties, and enhance children's sense of belonging.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Programmes

Many schools reported implementing various social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes and activities aimed at developing children's social competencies, emotional awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and relationship skills.

Examples identified across countries include:

- emotional literacy activities;
- social skills training;
- resilience-building programmes;



- psychoeducational workshops;
- classroom-based prevention programmes.

Participants consistently highlighted that SEL approaches contribute not only to children's well-being but also to improved classroom behaviour, peer relationships, and school engagement.

Role Play and Simulation Activities

Role play emerged as a widely used and highly valued pedagogical approach across participating countries. Teachers reported using role-play activities to support children in exploring emotions, resolving conflicts, understanding different perspectives, and practising social skills.

Role-play methods were frequently used to:

- address peer conflicts;
- develop empathy;
- rehearse coping strategies;
- strengthen communication skills;
- discuss challenging situations in a non-threatening manner.

Stakeholders considered role play particularly effective because it allows children to learn through active participation and experiential engagement.

Integration Activities and Community Building

Integration activities designed to strengthen peer relationships and foster inclusive classroom environments were identified as important preventive practices across all countries.

Examples include:

- team-building activities;
- cooperative learning tasks;
- classroom integration games;
- peer support initiatives;
- collaborative projects and group challenges.



Participants emphasised that such activities contribute to stronger peer cohesion, reduced social exclusion, and a greater sense of safety and belonging within the classroom community.

Calm Corners and Safe Spaces

Several countries, particularly Belgium and Romania, reported the use of calm corners, relaxation areas, or designated safe spaces within classrooms.

These spaces typically provide children with opportunities to:

- regulate emotions;
- calm down following emotionally intense situations;
- reflect individually;
- practise self-regulation strategies.

Teachers reported that calm corners support children's emotional self-management, reduce behavioural incidents, and promote positive classroom climates.

Drama Pedagogy and Creative Expression

Drama pedagogy and creative methods were frequently identified as effective approaches for promoting emotional expression and social learning.

Schools reported using:

- drama activities;
- storytelling;
- theatre techniques;
- creative movement;
- artistic expression.

These methods enable children to explore emotions, process experiences, develop empathy, and strengthen communication skills in developmentally appropriate and engaging ways.

Belgian, Romanian, and Hungarian stakeholders particularly emphasised the value of drama-based approaches in supporting both emotional development and social inclusion.

Experiential Learning Approaches



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Experiential learning emerged as a common pedagogical principle underlying many successful practices identified in the study. Stakeholders consistently reported that children learn most effectively when actively engaged in meaningful, hands-on experiences.

Examples include:

- project-based learning;
- cooperative problem-solving activities;
- outdoor learning experiences;
- games and simulations;
- arts-based and movement-based activities.

Participants emphasised that experiential approaches facilitate deeper learning, increase motivation, promote active participation, and support the development of social and emotional competencies.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that schools across participating countries already possess substantial experience in implementing preventive and well-being-oriented practices. However, stakeholders also stressed the need for additional evidence-based, practical, and easily implementable resources that could further strengthen existing efforts. These findings suggest that the MindPlay project can build upon and complement current good practices by providing innovative, play-based, and user-friendly tools tailored to the everyday realities of educational settings.

3.8 Expectations Regarding MindPlay Tools

Across all participating countries, stakeholders expressed strong support for the objectives and proposed outputs of the MindPlay project. Despite differences in educational systems and national contexts, participants from Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania demonstrated remarkably similar expectations regarding the characteristics, content, and implementation of future MindPlay products.

Overall, respondents emphasised that future tools should be practical, engaging, evidence-based, and easily integrated into everyday educational practice. Stakeholders consistently highlighted the importance of developing resources that respond directly to the realities of contemporary classrooms while supporting both children's well-being and professionals' competencies.



Practical and Evidence-Based Tools

The strongest and most consistent expectation across all countries concerned the need for practical, user-friendly, and evidence-based tools.

Teachers, school leaders, psychologists, and parents repeatedly emphasised that existing resources often lack direct applicability to everyday educational practice. Consequently, participants expressed a clear preference for tools that provide concrete guidance, ready-to-use activities, and immediately applicable strategies.

Stakeholders particularly valued resources that:

- can be implemented in everyday classroom situations;
- provide clear instructions and implementation guidance;
- are based on scientific evidence and proven practices;
- address real challenges encountered by educational professionals;
- support both prevention and early intervention.

Across countries, respondents stressed that future MindPlay products should complement rather than replace existing professional practices and should strengthen professionals' confidence in supporting children's mental well-being.

Play-Based Approaches

Participants across all stakeholder groups strongly endorsed play-based approaches as particularly appropriate for children aged 5–9 years.

Stakeholders consistently recognised play as the natural language of children and highlighted its potential to support emotional expression, social learning, observation, and early identification of difficulties.

Respondents emphasised that play-based approaches:

- facilitate children's active participation;
- reduce stigma associated with mental health issues;
- create safe and engaging learning environments;
- support emotional expression in developmentally appropriate ways;
- enable professionals to observe children's behaviour in natural contexts.



Belgian stakeholders, in particular, emphasised the value of non-verbal and play-based methods for recognising emotional difficulties among young children. Similar preferences emerged in all participating countries, suggesting broad acceptance of the MindPlay conceptual approach.

Integration Games

Integration games emerged as one of the most frequently requested MindPlay products across all participating countries.

Teachers and school leaders highlighted the importance of strengthening peer relationships, social cohesion, and inclusive classroom environments. Participants believed that integration games could contribute to:

- strengthening group cohesion;
- facilitating inclusion of vulnerable and newly arrived children;
- promoting empathy and cooperation;
- reducing peer conflicts and social exclusion;
- fostering positive classroom climates.

Stakeholders particularly valued activities that encourage cooperation, communication, and relationship-building while simultaneously supporting social and emotional development.

Pedagogically Oriented and Observational Games

Participants from all countries expressed strong interest in diagnostic and observational games designed to support the early identification of emotional, behavioural, and social difficulties.

However, stakeholders consistently emphasised that such tools should not be understood as clinical diagnostic instruments. Instead, respondents envisioned child-friendly and non-stigmatising tools that would assist educational professionals in recognising potential concerns and identifying children who may benefit from additional support.

Participants highlighted that effective diagnostic games should:

- be non-threatening and engaging for children;
- support systematic observation;
- provide meaningful information about children's functioning;



- facilitate early recognition of difficulties;
- complement professional judgement rather than replace it.

Belgian stakeholders particularly emphasised the need for non-verbal and play-based observational tools suitable for young children and culturally diverse populations.

Teacher Training and Professional Support

Educational professionals across all countries strongly emphasised the need for comprehensive training and professional support accompanying the implementation of MindPlay products.

Participants consistently stated that tools alone would not be sufficient without opportunities to develop relevant competencies and implementation skills.

Stakeholders expressed interest in training related to:

- early identification of difficulties;
- emotional regulation support;
- behaviour management;
- communication with parents;
- crisis intervention;
- implementation of MindPlay tools in classroom settings.

Respondents strongly preferred training approaches that are practical, interactive, and based on real-life examples, case studies, and experiential learning methodologies.

Parent Materials and Family Support Resources

Parents, teachers, and school leaders consistently highlighted the importance of involving families in future MindPlay interventions.

Stakeholders expressed strong interest in parent-oriented materials that would support families in understanding and promoting children's mental well-being. Suggested resources included:

- practical guides for parents;
- information materials on child development and mental health;
- strategies for supporting emotional regulation at home;
- guidance on digital well-being and screen use;



- activities promoting parent–child interaction;
- communication materials facilitating school–family cooperation.

Participants emphasised that strengthening parental competencies may significantly enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of school-based interventions.

Easy Implementation and Minimal Additional Workload

One of the most important implementation-related findings concerns stakeholders' preference for tools that are easy to use and do not substantially increase professionals' workload.

Across all countries, participants stressed that educational professionals already experience considerable workload and time constraints. Consequently, respondents repeatedly highlighted that future MindPlay products should:

- require minimal preparation time;
- be intuitive and easy to use;
- integrate seamlessly into existing educational routines;
- avoid excessive documentation requirements;
- not create additional administrative burden;
- be flexible and adaptable to different educational contexts.

Teachers particularly emphasised that tools perceived as overly complex, time-consuming, or administratively demanding are unlikely to be used consistently in practice.

Overall, the findings demonstrate strong stakeholder support for practical, play-based, and user-friendly MindPlay products. The consistency of expectations across participating countries suggests substantial potential for the successful implementation of project outputs within diverse European educational contexts.

Importantly, participants across all stakeholder groups emphasised that future MindPlay tools should strengthen existing educational practices while remaining accessible, inclusive, evidence-based, and feasible within the realities of everyday school environments.

4. Cross-country Synthesis



The comparative analysis revealed substantial similarities across the participating countries despite differences in educational systems, social contexts, and available support structures. Stakeholders from Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania consistently identified comparable mental health challenges, competence needs, systemic barriers, and expectations regarding future interventions.

Across all participating countries, stakeholders emphasised not only the need for earlier identification of risks but also for strengthening protective factors that promote children's wellbeing. These include positive relationships, emotional safety, resilience, participation and a sense of belonging, all of which contribute to healthier and more inclusive learning environments.

The findings indicate that educational professionals across Europe face increasingly complex demands related to supporting children's mental well-being, while simultaneously operating within systems characterised by limited resources and insufficient specialised support. At the same time, the strong consistency of findings across countries suggests considerable potential for developing common European solutions and transferable educational tools.

The following tables provide a synthesis of the key findings emerging from the national studies.

Table 1. Main Risks Identified Across Countries

Risk Category	Belgium	Germany	Hungary	Poland	Romania
Attention and concentration difficulties	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓
Hyperactivity and impulsivity	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Emotional regulation difficulties	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓



Peer conflicts and social difficulties	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Anxiety and emotional distress	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
Social withdrawal and isolation	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Aggressive and oppositional behaviour	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓
Family-related stress and instability	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Digitalisation and excessive screen exposure	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓
Migration-, trauma-, and diversity-related challenges	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓	✓

Legend: ✓ = identified; ✓✓ = frequently identified; ✓✓✓ = highly prominent.

The findings indicate that emotional regulation difficulties, attention and concentration problems, peer conflicts, and behavioural difficulties represent the most common concerns across all participating countries.

Table 2. Competence Needs Across Countries



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Competence Area	Belgium	Germany	Hungary	Poland	Romania
Early identification competencies	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Emotional regulation support	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Behaviour management	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Communication with parents	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Crisis intervention	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓
Trauma-informed practice	✓✓✓	✓	✓	✓	✓✓
Inclusive and intercultural competencies	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓	✓
Teacher well-being and self-care	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Cooperation with specialists and referral processes	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓



The comparative findings demonstrate that communication with parents, behaviour management, emotional regulation support, and early identification competencies constitute universal professional development priorities across all countries.

Table 3. Systemic Barriers Across Countries

Systemic Barrier	Belgium	Germany	Hungary	Poland	Romania
Shortage of specialists	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Lack of time	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Insufficient training opportunities	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Lack of standardised procedures	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓
Large class sizes	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Excessive teacher workload	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Limited access to external support services	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Parental resistance or low engagement	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓



Administrative burden	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓
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The findings suggest that educational professionals across Europe face similar structural constraints, particularly regarding specialist shortages, time limitations, and insufficient systemic support for mental health promotion.

Table 4. Expectations Regarding MindPlay Products

Expected Product/Feature	Belgium	Germany	Hungary	Poland	Romania
Practical and ready-to-use tools	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Play-based approaches	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Integration games	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Diagnostic/observational games	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Teacher training programmes	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Parent materials and guidance	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓



Easy implementation	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Minimal additional workload	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Clear implementation guidelines	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Non-stigmatising and child-friendly approaches	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓

The consistency of expectations across countries demonstrates strong stakeholder support for practical, play-based, and evidence-informed interventions. Participants clearly indicated that future MindPlay products should be easy to implement, integrated into everyday school practice, and designed to support rather than increase professionals' workload.

Overall, the cross-country synthesis demonstrates substantial convergence in the experiences and needs of educational stakeholders across Europe. This high degree of consistency provides a strong evidence base for the development of common European tools, training programmes, and intervention strategies within the MindPlay project.

5. Implications for MindPlay Products

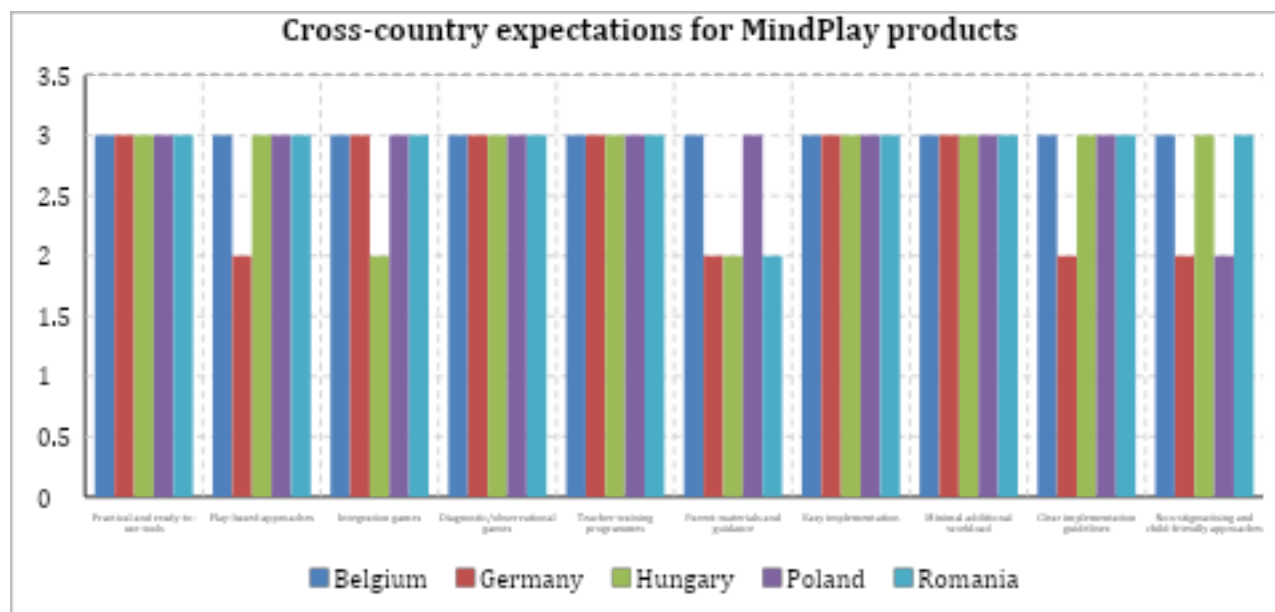
The findings of the cross-country research provide a strong evidence base for the development of the MindPlay tools and subsequent project activities. Despite differences in educational contexts, stakeholders across Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania demonstrated remarkable consistency regarding the challenges they face, the competencies they require, and the types of support they consider most beneficial.

The results indicate that future MindPlay tools should adopt a preventive, child-centred, practical, and play-based approach that can be easily integrated into everyday educational



settings. Moreover, the products should support educational professionals in responding to increasingly complex mental health challenges while avoiding additional administrative burden.

The implications of the research findings for each planned project output are presented below.



5.1 Competence Matrix

One of the main outcomes of WP2 is the development of a competence matrix that will serve as the conceptual framework for all subsequent project products.

The research findings suggest that the competence matrix should encompass the following key domains:

- early identification of emotional, behavioural, and social difficulties;
- emotional literacy and emotional regulation support;
- classroom behaviour management;
- communication and cooperation with parents;
- crisis intervention and safeguarding procedures;
- trauma-informed and inclusive practices;
- collaboration with specialists and referral processes;



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- teacher well-being, resilience, and self-care.

The matrix should clearly distinguish between competencies related to prevention, early identification, intervention, and referral. Furthermore, it should define the expected knowledge, skills, and attitudes required by different stakeholder groups involved in supporting children's mental well-being.

Given the similarities identified across participating countries, the competence matrix has the potential to serve as a transferable European framework for strengthening mental health promotion in primary education.

5.2 Training Programmes

The findings demonstrate a substantial need for practical and evidence-based professional development opportunities for teachers, school leaders, and other educational professionals.

Future MindPlay training programmes should therefore prioritise:

- practical application rather than theoretical knowledge alone;
- case-based learning and real-life scenarios;
- experiential and interactive methodologies;
- opportunities for reflection and peer learning;
- strategies that can be immediately implemented in classroom settings.

The training curriculum should specifically address:

- recognising early warning signs of mental health difficulties;
- supporting emotional regulation and resilience;
- managing challenging behaviours and peer conflicts;
- conducting sensitive conversations with parents;
- responding to crisis situations;
- implementing trauma-sensitive and inclusive practices.

Participants across all countries strongly preferred training approaches based on active participation, role play, simulations, and collaborative problem-solving. Consequently, the training methodology should reflect the pedagogical principles promoted by the project itself.



Teacher wellbeing should also be recognised as a key precondition for creating emotionally supportive classrooms and promoting children's wellbeing. Therefore training programs should include collaborative learning and reflecting practices.

5.3 Pedagogically Oriented and Observational Games

The research findings provide strong support for the development of pedagogically oriented and observational games as innovative tools that help teachers notice and respond to diverse learning, emotional and social support needs at an early stage. Such tools should not function as formal diagnostic instruments but rather as structured pedagogical and observational resources that support teachers and other relevant professionals in noticing potential concerns, reflecting on contextual factors and identifying appropriate educational responses. Where appropriate, they may support a teacher in considering whether consultation with an existing school support professional could be useful; they must not themselves determine that specialist referral is required.

Stakeholders consistently emphasised that such tools should not function as formal diagnostic instruments but rather as structured observational resources that support professionals in recognising potential concerns and identifying children who may require additional support.

The findings support the development of an integrated whole-school approach in which children's wellbeing is shaped through cooperation between schools, families, specialist services and the wider educational community. Consequently, MindPlay products should combine prevention and a timely pedagogical response with the promotion of protective factors that strengthen children's wellbeing and resilience.

The findings suggest that MindPlay diagnostic games should:

- be child-friendly, engaging, and non-stigmatising;
- support structured classroom observation while providing opportunities for children to express emotions, build trust, communicate and demonstrate social and emotional competences through play;
- help teachers reflect on observable externalising and internalising patterns without assigning labels or making diagnostic claims;
- facilitate identification of both externalising and internalising difficulties;



- help professionals notice subtle indicators of emotional distress or changing classroom participation that may warrant further observation, a pedagogical response or, where appropriate, consultation in line with school practice;
- complement rather than replace professional judgement; and
- minimise children's anxiety and avoid labelling.

Particular attention should be given to developing non-verbal and play-based assessment approaches, as stakeholders repeatedly highlighted their suitability for young children and diverse educational contexts.

Findings show that printable observation digital tools must constitute the primary format for classroom use, as they are the most accessible and practical instruments for teachers operating without specialist support.

At the same time, the design and validation of these tools must be underpinned by a digital platform capable of delivering automated, pedagogically validated feedback. This platform serves as the intelligent backbone of the observation system: it structures the content of the printed instruments, processes teacher-submitted observation inputs, and generates clear, actionable guidance distinguishing between cases where educational support is sufficient and cases where specialist referral is warranted. To ensure sustainability and avoid redundant development, this digital component must be built upon existing, proven AI-assisted educational management infrastructures — specifically, conversational AI interfaces and adaptive LMS platforms already developed and validated in prior Erasmus+ projects. The printable tool is the teacher-facing asset; the digital platform is the engine that makes it pedagogically sound.

5.4 Integration Games

The study revealed a strong demand for integration activities that promote positive peer relationships, social inclusion, and classroom cohesion.

Across all participating countries, stakeholders reported increasing challenges related to peer conflicts, social exclusion, loneliness, and reduced social competencies. Consequently, integration games should aim to:

- strengthen peer relationships, joyful interactions and classroom cohesion;
- promote empathy, cooperation, and mutual understanding and trust;
- support inclusion of vulnerable, migrant, and newly arrived children;



- encourage communication and collaborative problem-solving;
- foster a positive and supportive classroom climate.

The games should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate diverse classroom compositions and educational contexts while remaining easy to implement within everyday teaching practice.

In several participating countries, difficulties distinguishing between playful behaviour and intentional harm emerged as a common source of classroom conflict. Integration games should therefore explicitly develop children's ability to recognise social cues and differentiate between accidental and intentional actions.

5.5 Intervention Procedures

The findings indicate a clear need for structured and evidence-based intervention procedures that support educational professionals in responding to children's mental health needs.

Intervention procedures should provide practical guidance regarding:

- recognising and documenting concerns;
- responding to emotional and behavioural difficulties;
- communicating concerns to parents;
- determining when referral to specialised services is appropriate;
- cooperating with internal and external support systems;
- managing crisis situations and safeguarding concerns.

The procedures should be designed as clear, user-friendly, and accessible frameworks that can support consistency across schools while remaining adaptable to different national contexts and institutional arrangements.

Importantly, intervention procedures should promote a preventive and supportive approach rather than focusing exclusively on crisis management.

5.6 School Well-being Strategy

The findings strongly suggest that promoting children's mental well-being requires a whole-school approach that extends beyond individual interventions.



The future MindPlay school well-being strategy should therefore adopt a systemic perspective and address multiple levels of the educational environment.

The strategy should include recommendations related to:

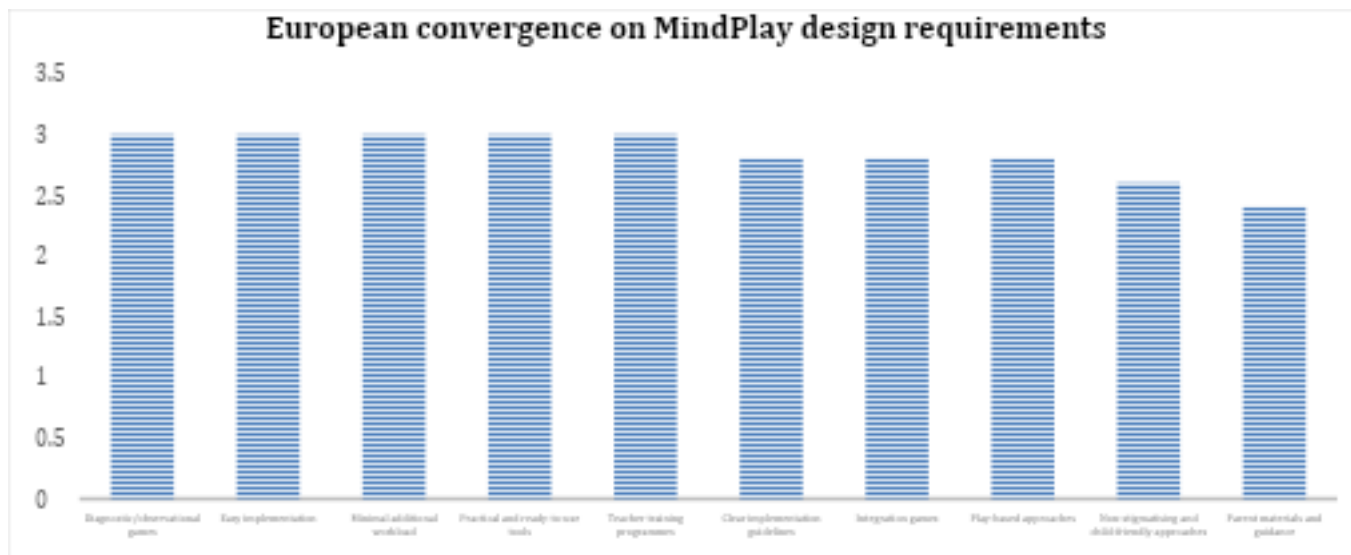
- creating emotionally supportive and inclusive school environments;
- embedding social and emotional learning within everyday school practice;
- strengthening school–family partnerships;
- promoting early identification and preventive approaches;
- establishing multidisciplinary collaboration and referral pathways;
- supporting staff well-being and resilience;
- fostering positive peer relationships and school connectedness.

The strategy should promote not only prevention and early identification but also protective factors that strengthen children's resilience, emotional safety, positive relationships and overall well-being.

Stakeholders across all countries emphasised that mental well-being should not be treated as an isolated activity but rather integrated into the broader culture, policies, and daily practices of schools.

Overall, the research findings provide strong evidence that the planned MindPlay products are highly relevant and responsive to the identified needs of educational stakeholders across Europe. The consistency of findings across countries further supports the development of common European resources that can contribute to strengthening prevention, early identification, wellbeing promotion and supportive school environments within primary education settings.





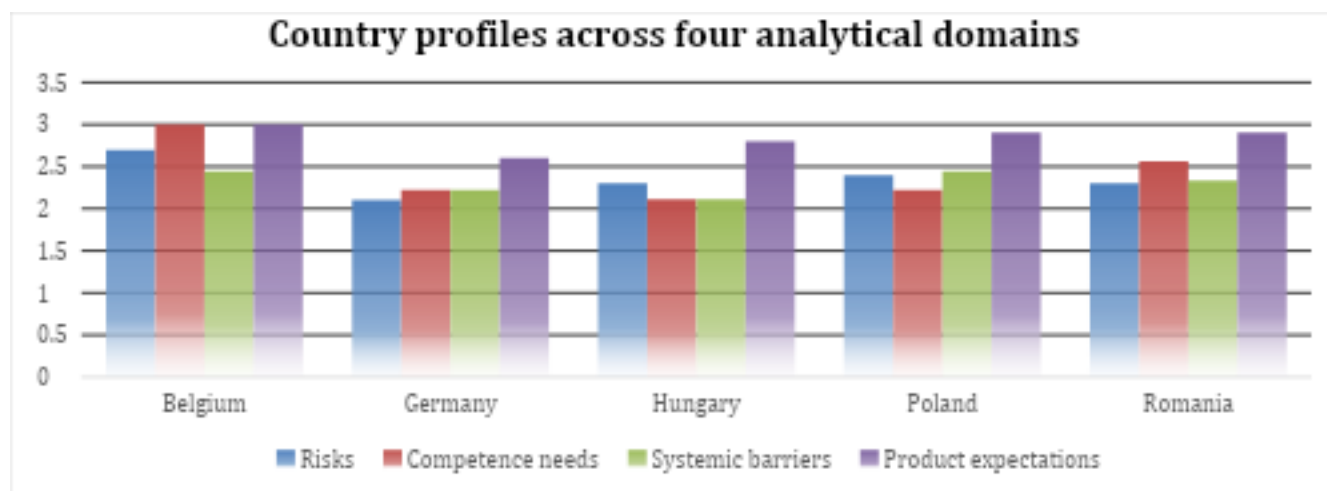
6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the cross-country research conducted in Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania, a set of recommendations was developed to support future efforts aimed at promoting children's mental well-being in primary education settings. The recommendations address different levels of the educational ecosystem, including schools, policymakers, teacher education providers, and the implementation of MindPlay products.



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6.1 Recommendations for Schools

Schools play a central role in promoting children's mental well-being and ensuring early identification and timely support. The findings suggest the need for a comprehensive, preventive, and whole-school approach to mental health promotion.

Schools are encouraged to:

- adopt a whole-school approach to mental health and well-being, integrating social and emotional learning into everyday school practice;
- strengthen preventive activities aimed at promoting emotional literacy, resilience, empathy, and positive peer relationships;
- establish systematic procedures for early identification, documentation, referral, and follow-up of children's emotional and behavioural difficulties;
- ensure regular opportunities for collaboration among teachers, school leaders, psychologists, counsellors, and other support professionals;
- create emotionally safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments that foster children's sense of belonging and connectedness;
- strengthen partnerships with families through regular, trust-based, and two-way communication;



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- provide opportunities for parents to actively participate in preventive and well-being-related activities;
- implement practical, play-based, and child-friendly approaches to supporting children's social and emotional development;
- promote staff well-being by creating supportive professional environments and opportunities for reflection, supervision, and peer support.

6.2 Recommendations for Policy Makers

The findings indicate that promoting children's mental well-being requires systemic support and long-term investment at policy level.

Policymakers are encouraged to:

- recognise children's mental well-being as a strategic priority within educational policies and reforms;
- increase investment in school-based mental health promotion and prevention programmes;
- ensure adequate availability of school psychologists, counsellors, special educators, and other specialist support services;
- strengthen intersectoral cooperation between education, health, social welfare, and child protection systems;
- support the development and implementation of standardised procedures for early identification and referral;
- reduce structural barriers that limit preventive work, including excessive administrative burden and insufficient staffing levels;
- provide sustainable funding for evidence-based mental health promotion initiatives in schools;
- encourage the implementation of inclusive, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive educational practices;
- support research, innovation, and international cooperation aimed at improving children's mental health and well-being.

Particular attention should be given to ensuring equitable access to mental health support for vulnerable groups, including children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, migrant and refugee families, and children experiencing adverse life circumstances.



6.3 Recommendations for Teacher Education Providers

The study findings demonstrate that educational professionals require additional preparation and continuous professional development related to children's mental health.

Institutions responsible for initial teacher education and continuing professional development are encouraged to:

- strengthen the integration of mental health promotion and prevention topics within teacher education curricula;
- provide training on early identification of emotional, behavioural, and social difficulties;
- include practical modules on emotional regulation support, behaviour management, and social-emotional learning;
- strengthen competencies related to communication and partnership-building with parents and families;
- provide training on crisis intervention, safeguarding, and referral procedures;
- promote trauma-informed, inclusive, and culturally responsive educational practices;
- ensure that professional development opportunities are practice-oriented and based on experiential learning methodologies;
- include opportunities for supervised practice, reflection, and case-based learning;
- address teacher well-being, resilience, stress management, and self-care as essential components of professional competence.

Continuous professional development should be accessible, evidence-based, and closely aligned with the realities and challenges of contemporary educational practice.

6.4 Recommendations for MindPlay Implementation

The findings provide strong support for the implementation of MindPlay products across diverse educational contexts. However, successful implementation will depend on ensuring that project outputs remain practical, flexible, and responsive to stakeholder needs.

The following recommendations are proposed for the implementation of MindPlay products:

- ensure that all MindPlay products are evidence-based, child-centred, and grounded in the identified competence needs of stakeholders;



- prioritise practical applicability and ease of implementation within everyday educational settings;
- develop play-based and non-stigmatising approaches that are developmentally appropriate for children aged 5–9;
- provide clear implementation guidelines and accompanying training materials for educational professionals;
- ensure that tools complement existing educational practices and do not create excessive administrative burden;
- design products that are sufficiently flexible to accommodate different national, cultural, and institutional contexts;
- actively involve teachers, specialists, school leaders, parents, and children in piloting and refining project outputs;
- promote integration of MindPlay tools within broader school well-being and prevention strategies;
- support sustainability by providing resources that can be used independently by schools beyond the project lifetime;
- develop teacher-friendly observation and diagnostic tools that are practical, printable where appropriate, and easy to use in everyday classroom practice;
- establish mechanisms for continuous feedback, evaluation, and further adaptation of project products;
- explore digital technologies that can enhance observation, feedback and long-term sustainability of MindPlay products..

Particular emphasis should be placed on ensuring that MindPlay products strengthen preventive practices, facilitate early identification, and foster collaboration among schools, families, and support services.

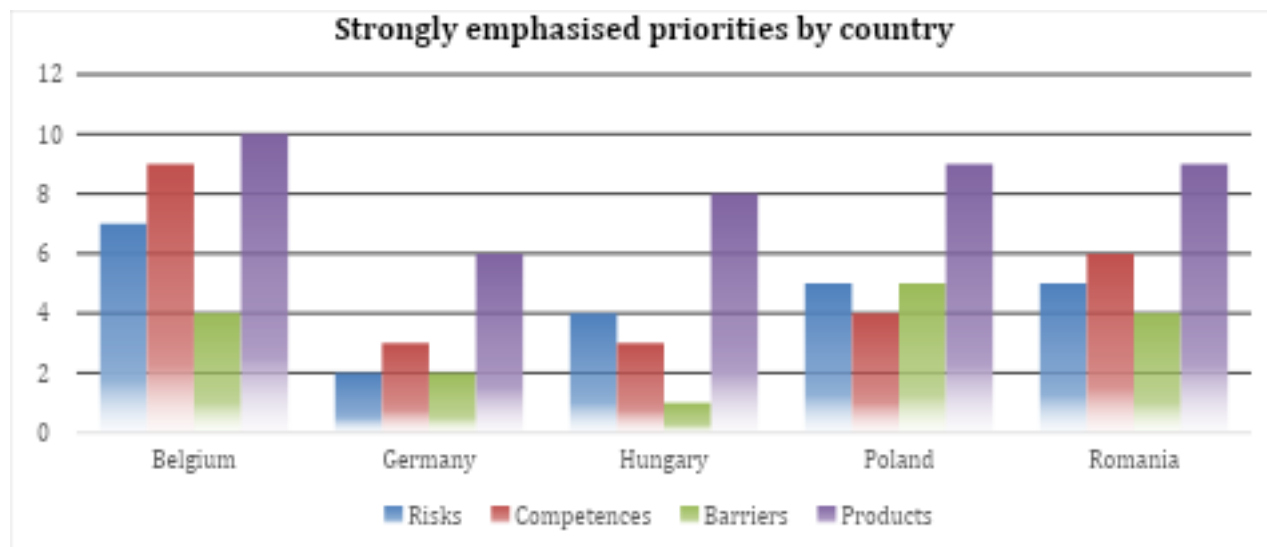
Overall, the implementation of the MindPlay products has the potential to significantly strengthen the capacity of schools to promote children's mental well-being and contribute to the development of more inclusive, supportive, and resilient educational environments across Europe.

6.5 Country-Specific Recommendations



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Belgium

- Develop and implement non-verbal and play-based tools for early identification of emotional difficulties among young children.
- Strengthen cooperation with vulnerable families through culturally sensitive communication strategies and low-threshold support approaches.
- Strengthen trauma-informed and culturally responsive educational practices, particularly in schools working with children from migrant and refugee backgrounds.
- Promote balanced digital use and support parents in managing children's screen exposure.

Germany

- Increase the use of structured and standardised tools for early identification of emotional and behavioural difficulties.
- Strengthen preventive approaches in schools by embedding social-emotional learning activities into everyday educational practice.



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- Improve cooperation between schools, families, and specialist services in order to ensure timely support for children experiencing difficulties.
- Provide teachers with practical resources and training focused on behaviour management, emotional regulation, and communication with parents.
- Reduce organisational barriers that limit teachers' capacity to engage in preventive and supportive activities.

Hungary

- Prioritise the development of children's emotional literacy and self-regulation competencies through everyday educational activities.
- Expand practice-oriented teacher training opportunities in the areas of supporting emotional regulation, de-escalation, classroom management, and communication with families, using experiential, low-time-demand formats that reflect the realities of teachers' workloads. Training materials should be available as digital self-paced resources, ensuring accessibility.
- Strengthen access to specialist support services and multidisciplinary cooperation within schools.
- Promote balanced use of digital technologies while increasing opportunities for play, social interaction, and experiential learning.
- Support schools in systematically integrating existing good practices related to social-emotional learning.
- Introduce non-clinical, teacher-facing tools for structured observation and pedagogical reflection on children's emotional, behavioural and participation-related needs, designed to support timely and appropriate classroom responses without increasing administrative burdens. Given the widespread shortage of school psychologists in Hungary, such tools should be practical for classroom teachers to use independently as part of everyday educational practice. Their underlying content, observation framework and structured guidance should be developed and validated by appropriate experts. Where a digital component is included, an AI-assisted platform may support teachers by organising observations, highlighting relevant evidence-based pedagogical strategies, and facilitating reflection on appropriate next steps, including when consultation with school support services may be considered. The platform must not diagnose children, determine that specialist referral is required, or replace professional judgement; decisions regarding educational support, consultation and referral remain with teachers and relevant qualified professionals in line with established school procedures.



Poland

- Strengthen school–family partnerships through improved communication strategies and increased parental involvement in preventive activities.
- Expand specialist support services and reduce waiting times for psychological and pedagogical assessment particularly through strengthening psychological and pedagogical counselling services and increasing the availability of school psychologists and special educators.
- Strengthen the consistent implementation of existing procedures for early identification and referral, while providing schools with practical tools and clearer operational guidance.
- Promote preventive and whole-school approaches to children's mental well-being.

Romania

- Increase the availability of school psychologists and other specialised support professionals.
- Develop and implement formal procedures and evidence-based tools for early identification of emotional and behavioural difficulties.
- Strengthen teachers' competencies in recognising internalising difficulties, including anxiety, withdrawal, and emotional distress.
- Enhance school–family cooperation through structured communication mechanisms and parental support initiatives.
- Expand access to practical, classroom-based tools supporting emotional regulation, social-emotional learning, and early intervention.

7. Conclusions

The findings of the cross-country research conducted in Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania demonstrate that promoting children's mental well-being has become an increasingly important priority for educational systems across Europe. Despite differences in educational structures, social contexts, and available support mechanisms, stakeholders across all participating countries identified remarkably similar challenges, needs, and priorities.

The study revealed that emotional, behavioural, and social difficulties are commonly encountered in early primary education settings and represent a significant concern for



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teachers, school leaders, specialists, and parents alike. Difficulties related to emotional regulation, attention and concentration, peer relationships, anxiety, behavioural problems, and social adjustment emerged consistently across all national studies. These findings confirm that children's mental well-being should be addressed as an integral component of educational quality and child development rather than as an isolated or specialist issue.

The research further demonstrated that educational professionals play a crucial role in the early identification and support of children experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties. Teachers, in particular, were consistently identified as the first professionals to recognise early warning signs due to their daily interaction with children. However, the findings also indicate that current identification practices rely predominantly on informal observation and professional judgement, while structured procedures and standardised tools remain limited across educational settings.

Across all countries, stakeholders expressed a strong need for practical, evidence-based, and easily accessible resources that would strengthen their competencies in early identification, emotional regulation support, behaviour management, communication with parents, and crisis intervention. At the same time, respondents highlighted numerous systemic barriers, including shortages of specialist support, lack of time, insufficient training opportunities, high workload, and limited access to coordinated support services.

One of the most important findings of the study concerns the central role of school–family cooperation in promoting children's mental well-being. Participants consistently emphasised that effective prevention and early intervention require strong, trust-based partnerships between schools and families, supported by clear communication and shared responsibility for children's development.

The findings also demonstrate that children's well-being is shaped by broader societal and environmental factors, including family stress, changing family structures, migration and diversity, digitalisation, and increasing social pressures. These findings reinforce the importance of adopting holistic, preventive, and ecosystem-based approaches that recognise the multiple contexts influencing children's development.

Importantly, stakeholders across all participating countries expressed strong support for the MindPlay approach and demonstrated considerable openness towards innovative, play-based, and child-friendly tools designed to promote mental well-being in educational settings. Participants consistently emphasised that future products should be practical, easy to implement, non-stigmatising, and integrated into everyday school practice.



Overall, the high level of consistency observed across countries provides a strong evidence base for the development of common European solutions aimed at strengthening mental health promotion in primary education. The findings confirm the relevance and timeliness of the MindPlay project and demonstrate its potential to make a meaningful contribution to improving children's mental well-being through innovative, evidence-based, and practice-oriented interventions.

By combining research evidence from diverse European contexts, the MindPlay project contributes not only to the development of project-specific products but also to broader European efforts aimed at creating more inclusive, supportive, and resilient educational environments for all children. The knowledge generated through this research offers valuable insights for schools, policymakers, teacher education providers, and other stakeholders committed to fostering children's mental well-being and ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive both academically and emotionally.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that strengthening children's wellbeing is not achieved solely through identifying risks but through building educational environments that combine prevention, early support, emotional safety, positive relationships and effective collaboration among schools, families and specialist services.

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8.3. MindPlay Project Documents

1. MindPlay Erasmus+ Project Application. (2024). *MindPlay – Supporting Children's Well-being through Early Identification, Prevention and Teacher Competence Development*. Erasmus+ Programme.
2. MindPlay Work Package 2 Research Protocol. (2025). Internal project document.
3. MindPlay Focus Group Guidelines. (2025). Internal project document.

