

PROMOTING CHILD HEALTH THROUGH RESEARCH AND INNOVATION



A KEY PRIORITY FOR EUROPE

Promoting Child Health through Research and Innovation

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Key Messages

- The foundations for lifelong health and healthy ageing are laid in childhood and adolescence.
- Investing in the health of children is a moral obligation, and it is essential for securing Europe's future productivity, competitiveness, wealth creation, and economic sustainability.
- The current European Union (EU) health research support dedicates an unacceptably low proportion of funding to research for child health. EU research programs should place a far stronger emphasis on child and adolescent health, ensuring that the nearly 80 million young people across the EU benefit from medical innovations that improve their health and quality of life.
- Europe is extremely well placed to advance research and innovation to promote child and lifelong health, thanks to a critical mass of related academic excellence, strong networks, and cutting-edge biotechnology.

Introduction

A group of European paediatric associations joined forces with the aim of strengthening research for child health in Europe by initiating an event at the European Parliament in Brussels, hosted by Tomislav Sokol, Member of the European Parliament (MEP), on June 4, 2026. The meeting was addressed by high-ranking European politicians, including Olivér Várhelyi, EU Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare, MEP Victor Negrescu, Vice President of the European Parliament, the host MEP Tomislav Sokol, European People's Party (EPP) Coordinator in the Committee on Public Health (SANT), and MEP Dr. Romana Jerkovic, Vice Chair of the SANT Committee (see box for comments of these MEPs). Representatives of the European Commission, the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations (EFPIA), and of the participating paediatric associations discussed the importance of research on child health and opportunities for improvements, along with around 100 participants in the audience. Here, we summarise the key aspects and conclusions on behalf of the Association for European Paediatric and Congenital Cardiology (AEPC), the European Academy of Paediatrics (EAP), the European Society for Paediatric Endocrinology (ESPE), the European Society for Paediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition (ESPGHAN) and the European Society for Paediatric Research (ESPR).

Why Europe Needs to Invest More for Supporting Research to Enhance Child Health

Europe urgently needs greater investment in scientific progress for child health. In the past, EU research policy and funding placed considerable emphasis on child health. However, in past EU funded research schemes, as well as the current research framework programme proposal (FP10), the word “child” is virtually absent (1). In the 2026–2027 Horizon Europe Health Work Programme, children are explicitly included in only 2 of 38 calls — just 5% of all funding opportunities (2). Thus, Europe dedicates an embarrassing 2.5-fold lower proportion of health research funding to children compared to the 13% of the US National Institute of Health budget invested in paediatric research (with the goal to increase this proportion) (3), in addition to even much lower absolute investment in Europe.



Figure 1. Cross-sectoral stakeholders, policymakers, and paediatricians gathered at the European Parliament in Brussels.

A substantially stronger investment in child health research is essential. Children and adolescents account for almost one-fifth of the EU population, totalling about 80 million people. They also represent 100% of Europe’s future. A moral obligation arises out of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by all EU member states (4). It stipulates that children have the right to the highest attainable standard of health, which depends on a solid and current scientific basis. The 2024 revision of the Declaration of Helsinki (Appendix 5) emphasises the ethical responsibility to ensure the equitable inclusion of vulnerable populations in research, while safeguarding their rights and wellbeing (5).

Moreover, it is of paramount importance for society not to leave children behind, since the economic prosperity of Europe depends on a healthy next generation of people that can effectively contribute to innovation, productivity, and wealth creation.

The central pillar of the European Union's economic and investment strategy, outlined in the Proposal for a Regulation for Horizon Europe for 2028-2034, is to promote healthy ageing (1). Ehler’s Draft Report on this proposal emphasised that advancing health research and developing innovative health solutions are essential to delivering mid- to long-term economic growth for Europe (6). Strong evidence shows that healthy ageing begins in early life. Health in pregnancy, childhood, and adolescence decisively shapes lifelong wellbeing and the burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), which cause 9 out of 10 deaths in Europe, and lifelong physical and cognitive performance. Therefore, the important goal of healthy ageing cannot be achieved solely through strategies applied in late adulthood. Results of previous EU Framework Programmes demonstrated that interactions between our genetic makeup and early environmental cues determine health throughout the lifespan, via metabolic, endocrine, epigenetic, and other pathways. Foetal life and childhood are critical periods during which environmental interactions profoundly affect lifelong health and the development of the most common chronic diseases in adults (7-9). The recognition that health and disease risks evolve throughout the life course, and that many major burdens of adult disease — including obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular conditions, inflammatory, allergic, and autoimmune disorders, and certain cancers — often originate in childhood, calls for a holistic approach to population health. Such an approach demands meaningful and sustained contributions from paediatric specialists and their multidisciplinary teams. Promoting child health is an essential part of a lifelong approach to health and wellbeing. Preventive strategies during childhood and adolescence are key to healthy ageing, optimal performance, and the ability to contribute to society's wellbeing and its economic success.

Investment in Early Life Generates the Greatest Benefits

Nobel Laureate in Economics James J. Heckman demonstrated that investment in early childhood yields the greatest returns, compared with investment at later ages, the so-called Heckman equation (10). Addressing challenges at the very outset is, from an economic perspective, far more beneficial than bearing the costs of inaction in later life. A viewpoint recently published on how the USA can become a global leader in promoting child health through National Institutes of Health-funded paediatric research stated, “As child health continues to deteriorate across multiple domains, bold steps are needed to protect children through research rather than from it, ensuring that children have the opportunity to grow into healthy adults who lead flourishing and meaningful lives” (3).

Research on child health has previously led to progress in many areas of biomedical science, benefiting also other population groups, and it can be expected to yield major breakthroughs in the coming decade. For example, open heart surgery and interventional cardiology were pioneered in children and subsequently adopted widely also in adult patients. These examples show that investing in child health research provides tangible results with practical benefits for outcomes.

Policymakers Need to Act

Raising awareness among EU decision-makers that targeted research promotes child health and disease prevention is more important than ever. Policymakers must take decisive action to significantly strengthen support for child health research, aligning with the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (11) to guarantee every child the best possible start in life, access to quality healthcare, and the opportunity to realise their potential and contribute meaningfully to society. They need to position research on child health as a central and indispensable pillar of the EU innovation strategy. Now is the time to prioritise and champion child health research to secure a healthier, prosperous future for Europe.

Opportunities for Successful Research in Children in Europe

Europe has a significant competitive advantage in driving innovation to improve child health, thanks to a critical mass of academic excellence, strong networks, and cutting-edge biotechnology. With strategic support and investment, Europe could become the global leader in advancing child health. Impactful research today is frequently conducted in multidisciplinary teams from different fields, working together on complex problems. The current FP10 proposal recognises the importance of sustainable networks, strong scientific leadership, and support for early-career scientists (1), but it overlooks the vital role of childhood in population health. To achieve healthy ageing and sustainable economic growth, research on child health and disease prevention needs to be given far greater priority and linked to biomedical research across the lifespan. Regardless of the location where researchers work, today teams can easily collaborate across Europe and connect with others. Pan-European collaboration is essential for advancing child health research, since pooling data and expertise across countries is often necessary to achieve excellence. Unlike adult health research, where national programmes can frequently secure sufficient patient numbers and robust datasets, child health research regularly requires a broader, collective approach to generate the evidence and impact needed to improve outcomes. This is especially true for rare diseases beginning in childhood. Therefore, in line with the principle of subsidiarity, EU research funding needs to place far greater emphasis on child health.

Development, Evaluation, and Market Access of Innovative Drugs and Medical Devices for Children Should be Facilitated

Lack of research investment, along with stringent regulatory requirements, has contributed to, e.g., deferrals and waivers in pharmacological studies, increased costs, and significant delays in paediatric drug approvals—often only occurring 8-10 years after adult approval. Furthermore, new regulatory requirements that impose very high costs and an exceedingly long and complex authorisation process cause the disappearance of high-risk paediatric and orphan medical devices from EU markets, and a lack of investment in innovative developments, with serious clinical implications (12-14). However, these problems have been detected, and the first corrective measures and new regulatory approaches have been proposed (15-17).



Figure 2. MEP Tomislav Sokol together with representatives of five leading European paediatric medical societies.

More public funding support should be made available for innovations targeting small patient numbers that do not promise a high economic return for commercial investors, following, for example, the grant support model established in the USA (18, 19).

Conclusions

Europe should take the lead in the rapidly developing area of child health research, both to promote the health of its population and to harness the huge economic opportunities offered by new technologies in this sector. Given that today's research is tomorrow's medicine, a much greater focus of European research funding in this field, along with promotion of public-private partnerships, is indispensable for achieving these important goals. Science-based improvements in child health will enhance healthy longevity and lifelong quality of life, and enable EU economic growth. Multidisciplinary research on child and adolescent health, closely integrated into a lifelong health promotion strategy, should receive targeted support.

Calls to Action



Figure 3. MEP Tomislav Sokol

- 1. Prioritise child and adolescent health in EU research funding** — EU research programmes (including FP10/Horizon Europe 2028–2034) should explicitly include child health as a central priority, not as an afterthought. The proportion of the health research budget invested in research for child health should reflect the proportion of children and adolescents in the European population, and the importance of protecting child health for the future wellbeing of the European population and Europe's economic stability.
- 2. Adopt a life-cycle approach to healthy ageing** — Policymakers should recognise that healthy ageing begins in childhood, and fund research accordingly, linking paediatric research to biomedical research across the lifespan.
- 3. Align with existing EU commitments** — Ensure research policy reflects the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the ethical obligations under the revised Declaration of Helsinki regarding inclusion of vulnerable populations in research.

4. **Enable input of experts and stakeholders** — The European Commission should establish a mechanism to enable structured strategic input of paediatric learned societies and other key stakeholders, such as parent organisations and biomedical industries, into the development of work programmes and calls for research applications, to identify key priorities and opportunities for research funding supporting child health.
5. **Make inclusion of children mandatory** — The inclusion of children and adolescents in EU health research should be made a binding requirement, whenever feasible and appropriate, similar to the established concept to achieve gender balance and inclusion of relevant subgroups of the population in EU-funded research. Effective monitoring and reporting mechanisms should be established to observe the success.
6. **Act now** — This document issues an urgent call for EU decision-makers to champion child health research as an indispensable pillar of Europe's innovation and economic strategy



Figure 4. MEP Romana Jerković

Statements of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs)

“If we are serious about reducing the burden of chronic disease, strengthening the resilience of our healthcare systems, and maintaining Europe's long-term competitiveness, we cannot focus only on treating disease later in life. We must better understand the factors that influence health from the very beginning of life. This is where paediatric research becomes essential.”

Dr. Romana Jerković, dr.sc., Member of the European Parliament and Vice Chair of the Committee on Public Health (SANT)

“Academia can help by making a clear, evidence-based case that paediatric research is essential for prevention, better treatment, and long-term health, and must therefore be explicitly prioritised in the next EU financial framework and research programmes.”

Tomislav Sokol, dr.sc., Member of the European Parliament, EPP Coordinator in the Committee on Public Health (SANT)

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