

Happy and calm - most of the time

Improving the living conditions affecting the
mental health of young people in transition

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Easy to Read Summary

What this paper is about

- This paper talks about young people with disabilities in Europe.
- Many young people go through important changes: school to training, training to work, living with family to living independently.
- These changes can be exciting but also stressful.
- Good mental health and good living conditions help young people feel safe and happy.

Young people today face many challenges

Young people today experience many pressures at the same time:

Health and mental health

- Many young people feel anxious, sad or under stress.
- Many wait a long time for mental health support.
- Some young people do not get the help they need.

Education and training

- Some young people leave school too early.
- Some young people cannot find training that fits their needs.
- Young people with disabilities are more likely not to be in education, employment or training.

Work

- Many young people cannot find a good job.
- Jobs may be low-paid, unstable or not inclusive for people with disabilities.

Housing

- It is difficult to find safe, affordable, and accessible housing.
- Many young people spend a lot of money on rent.
- Without stable housing, it is difficult to study, work and feel well.

Money and poverty

- Many young people do not have enough money for basic needs.
- Poverty makes daily life harder and limits choices.

Digital life

- Almost all young people use the internet every day.
- Digital tools can help with learning and connection.
- But they can also bring stress, bullying, or harmful content.

What young people told us

The paper includes many interviews with young people from different countries. They talked about:

What makes them feel good

- Having a job or daily routine
- Being part of a group
- Feeling supported
- Having hobbies like music, animals or sports
- Spending time with friends
- Working towards goals

What is difficult for them

- Feeling anxious or lonely
- Cleaning, cooking or managing money
- Finding a good job
- Understanding new tasks
- Being rushed
- Communicating with others
- Getting angry or stressed

What they dream of

- Having friends
- Having their own home
- Having a job
- Earning money
- Travelling
- Being more independent
- Sometimes starting a family

What help they need

- Support with daily skills
- Someone who listens
- Someone who believes in them
- Support when trying new things
- Help to find the right job
- Opportunities to practice living independently

What support workers told us

Support workers (social workers, therapists, instructors) explained:

What young people need

- Respect, trust and time
- Help that matches *their own goals*
- Support to learn life skills step by step
- Safe places to practice independence
- Emotional support as well as practical help
- Strong cooperation between families, schools, services and employers

Common problems

- Overprotective families
- Lack of services (housing, therapy, transport)
- Mental health issues like anxiety or depression
- Limited job opportunities
- Difficult transitions from school to work

What good support looks like

Good support means:

Person-centred

- The young person chooses the goals.
- Support workers follow the young person's pace.

Practical

- Young people learn by doing: cooking, cleaning, budgeting, working.

Coordinated

- Support systems work together: school, health, social services, employers.

Inclusive

- Employers and communities welcome people with disabilities.
- Young people get equal chances to learn and work.

Consistent

- Help continues over time, not only during short programmes.

Successful projects

The paper describes good practices from different countries:

Examples

- Slovenia: A project helping young people move from school to work.
- Germany: Social work in schools, youth centres and on the street.
- Spain: Supported housing for people with mental health conditions.
- Estonia: Transition Plan to plan education and work.
- Malta: A live-in experience to practice independent living.

What should be improved

The paper gives recommendations:

For services

- More life-skills training
- More supported housing
- More job coaching
- Continuous, long-term support

For organisations

- Better cooperation between services
- Centres for learning independence
- More community-based help

For society and policy

- Better public transport
- More accessible, affordable housing
- More inclusive workplaces
- Less stigma and more awareness
- More funding for mental health and disability support

8. Main message

Young people thrive when:

- They are listened to
- They receive the right support at the right moment
- They learn life skills step by step
- They feel included
- They have opportunities to practice independence
- Services work together, not separately

About the European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR)

EPR is a community of service providers working with people with disabilities committed to high quality service delivery and creating a society where every person can co-create quality services leading to equal opportunities, social inclusion and quality of life. Our mission is to build the capacity of our members to provide sustainable, high-quality services in a competitive environment through mutual learning and training.

About the publication

Young people with disabilities constitute an important group of clients and students for EPR members. Assistance for young people with support needs is offered in different ways and places. What they have in common is paying attention to the specific situation that a person is exposed to during childhood and adolescence. This is a period characterized by transitions. Transition from education to training, from training to employment, transition from living with the family to living independently and build a life.

Many young people, with and without disabilities, master those years very well and grow up to become qualified professionals, competent leaders, hard workers, also good friends, devoted life partners and loving parents. Some young people struggle and require attention and support. Others develop health issues that affect their personal development. Some develop mental health disorders that typically manifest during adolescence. Some seek help with finding out what it means to be neurodivergent. Either condition can make it difficult for a young person to participate in education and training, in family and community life, in friendships and partnerships. Service providers are particularly concerned about young people with multiple conditions and/or disabilities.

Mental health and wellbeing are vital for a young person's prospect of a meaningful adult life. Every penny spent on early intervention, preventive support, accessible and affordable services is an investment into the future of a young person and of society as a whole. Society needs capable next generations taking responsibility, ensuring continuity and promising progress. For this reason, authorities and organisations across Europe run numerous programmes tailored for the specific needs of young people, including young people with disabilities, with many aiming at autonomy, independence and self-sufficiency. A frequently mentioned objective is inclusion in mainstream education and training, employment in the open labour market, and full participation in social life.

Youth experts meet on a regular basis in the EPR Youth Working Group. They do not work for youth associations but social services specialised in medical, social and vocational rehabilitation for young people with disabilities and in vulnerable situations. This includes public and private non-profit organisations reaching out to thousands of young people across the European continent. The Youth Working Group follows policy developments in national and European context, including initiatives and programmes by the European Union institutions. Group members also monitor and implement own research and cooperation supported by the EU.

The working group wishes to share insights from own work in the community, from discussions and from visits to local places of work with young people. While exchanging first ideas on this paper, group members quickly agreed that the views of young people describing their life, their wishes and dreams ought to take centre stage. Just like they do in the daily work in service provider organisations. Valuable insights can be expected also from social workers, therapists and trainers working with the young people. Throughout the year, group members conducted interviews with young people and service workers in their organisation. Before sharing findings from these conversations, the paper lays out common characteristics of the living environment of young people, with and without disabilities, in communities across Europe. The paper concludes with a selection of good practices reviewed by the Youth Working Group in the year 2025.

Conditions and challenges for young people

The big picture

On the occasion of the European Year of Youth, Eurostat, the Statistical Office of the European Union, published a report¹ which counted 73 million young people residing in the European Union (EU) in 2021. Young people aged 15-29 years represented approximately 16% of the total population, which was a lower rate than for 2010, and it is expected to decline further until 2050. Surveys revealed that young people rate their overall life satisfaction as relatively high. More than 90% considered their health as good or very good, and various healthy lifestyle indicators showed better rates for young people than for older age groups. Young people exercise more, smoke less and struggle less with overweight. Youth unemployment, early school leaving, risk of poverty and social exclusion were of concern though with rates similar to previous decades. It seemed as if young people were doing relatively well. Since then, however, views on the well-being of young people shifted drastically. COVID-19 pandemic, Climate Change, war and displacement, housing crisis, cost of living, digital transitions, Artificial Intelligence (AI) – **young people grow up in an era of multiple changes, challenges and crises**, with direct impact on their everyday life and, possibly, lasting implications for the rest of their lifetime.

Poor mental health has become a major concern. UNICEF estimates 11-13 million children and young people in the EU have a mental health condition, and points out many live with unmet mental health care needs.² Looking at mental health alone, however, does not sufficiently help understanding the support and care needs of young people. The years of childhood and adolescence are characterised by more factors, conditions and challenges. “Mental health does not stand alone. It is shaped by the world around us - by our families and friendships, by schools and workplaces, by culture, technology and community.” the UN Youth Office points out, and proposes an *Ecosystem Model for Youth Mental Health and Well-being* that refers to eleven key dimensions including climate, housing, technology or decent work.³ These dimensions provide orientation for exploring the conditions which young people are facing and which potentially affect their mental health and well-being.

Education and training

Schools and universities play a vital role in shaping the personal and professional development of a young person. They are the places for acquiring knowledge and experience that can be measured, acknowledged and recognised, promising access to professional training, paid work and financial stability. Interruptions of education pathways can have lasting consequences. Governments therefore operate special programmes e.g. to reduce the number of early school leavers, though many EU countries continue reporting high numbers of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET). The NEET rate for the EU reached 11% in 2024, with notably different rates for different countries, and with higher shares for young women than for young men.⁴ Eurostat claims **the transition from education to work has become more complex**. More frequent going back and forth between employment and training, changing jobs frequently and prolonged time spans for getting established in the labour market are mentioned. Eurostat adds NEET data by degree of urbanisation. The rate of young people out of employment, education and training remains lower in cities and higher in rural areas. The national perspective provides further details e.g. the National Disability Agency in Ireland presents the Irish NEET rate for young people with disabilities as decreasing but still twice as high as for young people without disability.⁵ Whereas the Estonian NEET does not track young people with disability specifically, but state support systems consider low education levels as important factor for exclusion from employment and training, and aim to improve education levels for every young person by increasing the period of compulsory education to 18 years⁶.

¹ Eurostat: Young people in Europe - a statistical summary - 2022 edition, available [here](#)

² UNICEF: Child and adolescent mental health - The State of Children in the European Union 2024, available [here](#)

³ UN Youth Office: Youth Mental Health and Well-being, available [here](#)

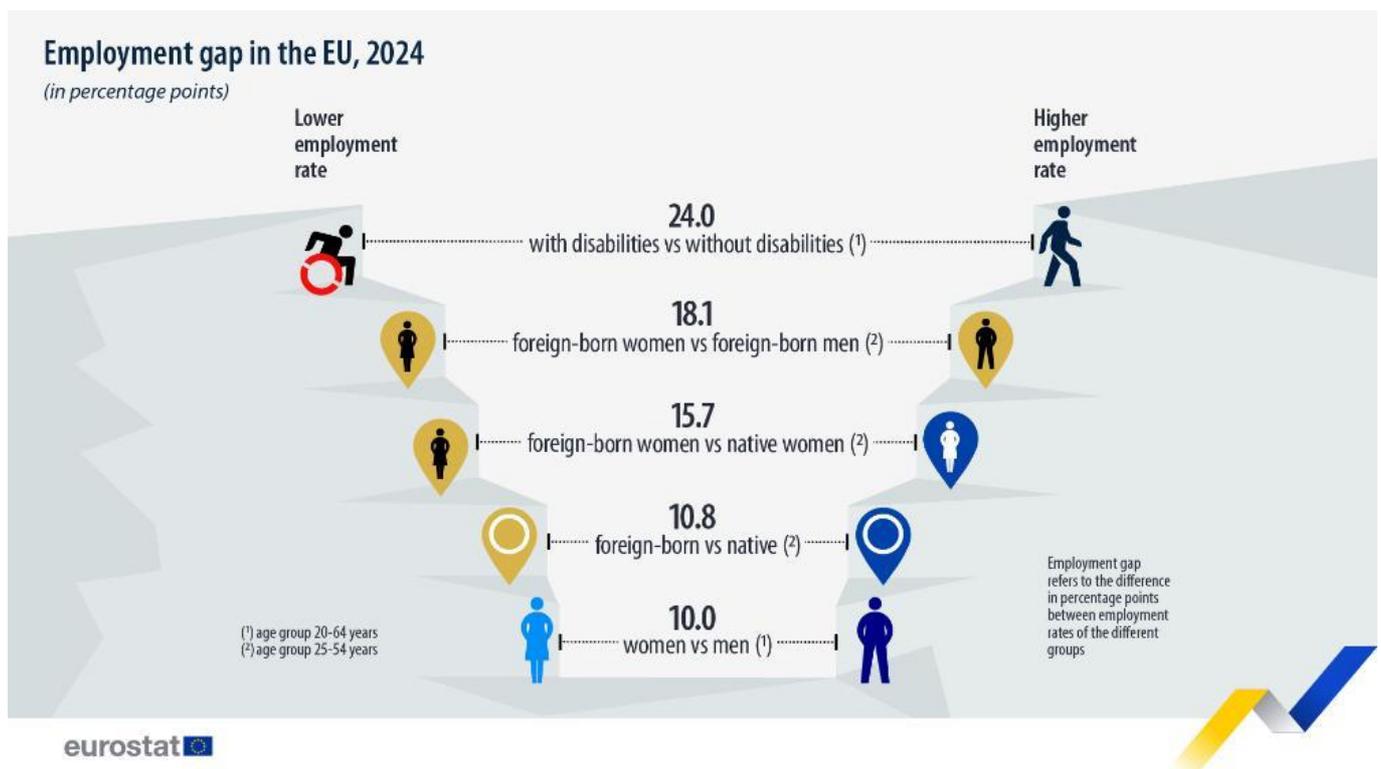
⁴ Eurostat: Statistics on young people neither in employment nor in education or training, available [here](#)

⁵ National Disability Agency: Factsheet: Young people not in Employment, Education or Training (2019), available [here](#)

⁶ See also Youth Guarantee Support System (NGTS), available [here](#)

Employment

Employment rates in the European Union vary significantly from country to country, as well as between age groups. Statistically, employment across all countries is reported to have improved, including a slight decline for long-term unemployment. A closer look to certain regions and the age group of the 15 to 24 year olds reveals that **millions of young people do not benefit from the bigger EU trends. 15% of young Europeans remain unemployed.** In addition, employment rates for people with disability are lower than among all people in working age, showing slightly higher employment rates for people with some disability and even lower for people with severe disabilities. The European Commission compares **employment gaps for disability, gender and origin**, and finds the highest employment gaps between people with disabilities and people without disabilities.⁷



Source: Eurostat 2025

Housing

European statistics on housing for young people often begin with the so-called emancipation age when a young person leaves the parents' home. But young adults may already look back to years of difficult living and housing environments during childhood. Eurochild presented a list of housing challenges experienced by children in Europe, which includes homelessness, overcrowded housing, inadequate housing, housing cost overburden, lack of affordable housing, forced evictions, limited access to services, environmental hazards, and cultural inadequacy.⁸ The report points out **certain groups of children are more likely to grow up in difficult living environment** i.e. children with an ethnic background, children with a migration background, child victims of domestic violence, and children with disabilities. By the time a young adult seeks to find their first own place, **some may have a very distinct understanding of suitable and safe housing.** Finding such a place has become difficult, too, against drastically increased cost of housing while income levels remain low and affordable housing rare.

The European Commission finds 26% of young people live in overcrowded places, and 10% of young people spend more than 40% of their disposable income on housing.⁹ The burden of living costs limits the options to rent

⁷ Eurostat: Employment gaps for women & people with disabilities (2025), available [here](#)

⁸ Eurochild: Housing challenges faced by children in Europe (2025), available [here](#)

⁹ Eurostat: Young people - housing conditions (2025), available [here](#)

accommodation or save up money for purchasing a property. Eurocities refers to a housing affordability gap and identifies key drivers such as demand exceeds supply, rising construction costs, limited land available, speculative investment, regulatory constraints, and short-term rentals.¹⁰ Altogether, those factors push young people out of cities into rural areas where prices are lower but jobs and services scarcer. Long distance commuting can offer solutions but it requires a high-quality transport infrastructure and income levels high enough to cope with mobility expenses. In combination, these factors can make it **very difficult for a young person to find housing, find work, find services and support, and build a life**. Obstacles and barriers are amplified for persons with additional support needs.

Poverty and social exclusion

Young people at the beginning of their adult life are exposed to a high risk of poverty and social exclusion. Eurostat estimates 17,3 million young people (15-29 years) in the EU live with poverty and social exclusion, noting the rates for 15–19-year-olds higher than for 25-29 year olds. Both age groups have higher rates than older adults. These numbers include estimations for at-risk-of-poverty, severe material and social deprivation, and living in households with very low work intensity. The risk of poverty and social exclusion is significantly higher for people with disabilities, referring to a poverty rate of almost 30% (people with disabilities, all ages) for the EU, with some countries showing wider gaps than others. **For young people with disabilities, living in poverty can impact the access to services and support, personal and professional development, and overall quality of life.** When the everyday concern is focused on basic living and housing needs, the choices for personal development may be limited. Poverty also challenges teachers, coaches, social workers and therapists to re-think how they offer services e.g. education support may have to include a meal before class, or mental health counselling a washing machine for clients to do laundry while in session.

Digital life and connectivity

Young people of today are “digital natives” who might know life only with the internet and the mobile phone. No other generation reaches such high intensity of internet use. 97% of the 15–29-year-olds in the EU report daily internet use. They are very likely to use social networks, create profiles and post messages. In 16 EU countries, at least 90% of the young people use social networking sites. While online learning, after a strong boost during the COVID-19 pandemic, returns to a lower uptake with user rates of up to 53% in some EU countries.¹¹

More and more areas of daily life embrace digital technology, and there is increased attention on digital skills required to access goods and services. **Are there young people at risk of being left behind?** Education systems are urged to include digital skills in their learning plans. They typically refer to information and data literacy skills, communication and collaboration skills, content creation skills, problem-solving skills and safety skills. The latter hints toward concerns about dangers that come with digital technology, linked to excessive use of phones and apps and their possible effects on human mind and human behaviour, or linked to other humans exploiting technology for bullying, harassment, abuse, violence and fraud. Digital technologies also lay grounds for the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) rapidly spreading out to many aspects of living, working and interacting. AI technology is advancing at breathtaking speed, raising questions what kind of personal, professional and social prospects the future may hold. Will AI help me do a better job, or take over my job? Will my new teacher be a human or a machine? Will I spend my free time with human friends or with a friendly AI companion?

Mental health and well-being

The COVID-19 pandemic had brought attention to a generation of young people struggling through long months in isolation, remote learning, living and working at kitchen tables, celebrating graduations in zoom meetings, passing job interviews on small screens, and spending first days in the first job sitting alone in the home office. **The UN Youth Office estimates the COVID-19 pandemic caused an increase of 30% of anxiety and depression in young people.**¹² The mental health of young people had been a concern already before, and experts had warned of unmet mental health care needs, leaving young people waiting for help over months with neither diagnosis nor support.

¹⁰ Eurocities: The state of housing affordability in European cities (2025), available [here](#)

¹¹ Eurostat: Young people - digital world (2025), available [here](#)

¹² UN Youth Office: Youth Mental Health and Well-being Flagship Initiative (2025), available [here](#)

It is also known that **the majority of severe mental health issues manifest during adolescence**. Knowledge and understanding for mental issues have improved in recent years. Unfortunately, stigma, discrimination and misinformation are persisting, too. And with particular attention to digital natives, there is a rapidly growing market of mental health apps and channels, some of them with questionable intentions. Whereas young people seeking in-person professional help find limited access to services, limited availability of qualified specialists and underfunded service infrastructure for mental health care. Governments commit to improving service and support for mental health yet fall behind in making it happen on the ground. **For professional support and care to be effective, adequate funding and proper regulation are crucial**. There is a clock ticking. In the EU, the second most common cause of death for young people aged 15 to 19 years is suicide. Any investment in care and support, any measure to improve the mental health, well-being and life satisfaction of young people is important. Because it saves lives.

Overwhelming challenges and underwhelming support

Poor mental health in young people can be caused by extreme pressures, leaving some to live for years under difficult circumstances. Some grow up with chronic illness, in unsafe housing environment, or in humanitarian and fragile settings. Others are exposed to harsh parenting, orphanages, early or forced marriages, abuse and violence, or severe discrimination due to ethnic background or sexual orientation. Combinations of the above are likely. **Each additional challenge on the path to adulthood can increase the risk of falling behind, dropping out or breaking down**. Life becomes a constant challenge, and anxiety, depression or behavioural issues the consequence. Emotional disorders, behavioural disorders, eating disorders, psychosis, suicidal tendencies and self-harm are typical for this age group. Poor mental health can also reduce the capacity to seek help, driving a young person further into a down spiral of feeling unwell, doing unwell, and coping less and less. In such state of mind, accessible and adequate care is vital. But many young people struggle finding adequate support. The WHO suspects **a large number of young people live with undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues**.¹³

How can we help you?

Service provider organisations across Europe are stepping up support and services for young people with mental health issues. Among them EPR members who keep advancing the design and delivery of assistance to young people in vulnerable situations. **The organisations place the interests and wishes of the young person at the centre of the services and supports**. Professional social work has moved from “knowing what is best *for* you” to ongoing dialogue *with* the young person about their expectations, interests and wishes, and suitable interventions. The following chapter offers findings from conversations with young people, who are clients of services and supports, about their views on living conditions and well-being.

Conversations with young people

The following summaries are based on interviews held between September and December 2025 with students and clients in EPR member organisations in Estonia, Spain, Malta and Greece. The conversations were conducted along prepared questions regarding person, current activity/occupation, living situation, feelings, likes and dislikes, dreams and wishes, and comments the interviewed person wished to add. Note: the names of some interviewees have been changed (see *) for protecting the interests of the person.

Feeling good, fulfilled and responsible

Sergio is 29 years old, lives with his mother and his two brothers, and works at a social enterprise offering employment for people with mental health issues¹⁴. His work is about preparing, cutting and sanding wood. **“What I like most about the job is putting things in place and being with my coworkers. I get along well with them and feel part of the group.”** he says. And adds that working helps him become more independent and earning his own money. Having a good instructor who is available is important and also working in a team. “I get along well with them. I feel included, supported, and comfortable in the group. (...) I like it better than working alone. Because that way we help

¹³ WHO: Mental health of adolescents (2025), available [here](#)

¹⁴ Find out more about ENSUMA, available [here](#) (in Spanish)

each other.” The work makes him feel good, more organised, and gives structure to his day, At the end of the day he feels good, fulfilled and responsible. His only problem is the noise of the machines that sometimes bothers him.

Enjoying the work and planning for the future

Mohamed is 23 years old and lives with his cousin. He works in the same company in a department that assembles walking aides for elderly and frail people. His job is to pack up the walkers. Mohamed enjoys the work because it is a calm work place and every worker has their own tasks. He knows he can rely on the team leader when he needs help to understand the task, and the team colleagues to keep each other company. They each have different roles, share responsibilities and help each other. The work gives structure to his day. **“I feel good because I have a routine.”** says Mohamed, which he prefers over doing nothing all day. There are also days when he feels bad because the work can make him tired sometimes. And he does not like it when the boss gets angry. Though what also helps through the day is the feeling of duty and obligation. Having a responsibility motivates to get the job done. Mohamed has plans: “My goal for the future is to find a more stable job with more hours because I need more financial stability.”

Feeling happy most days

Izan is 19 years old and lives with his family. He works. Music is what he likes the most. Studying not so much. Having his own room in his parents’ house is important. Whereas cleaning the house is no joy. On most days he is happy. Being on the phone makes him feel good. Running out of battery can be stressful. Izan has very clear plans for the future: he wants a job, friends, a home for himself, and he wants to travel. He knows he needs time and money for achieving his plans.

Knowing when you need help

Emilio is 27 years old and he lives with a roommate in supervised housing. They get along well and care for each other. After having completed a training, he now works as a gardener eight hours per week. He likes the work in the day centre, also studying for gardening and everything that helps becoming a professional. He knows it will help to save money for the future. He also attends driving school, because he likes cars and is already looking what car to buy when he has a driver’s license. Crowds of people can be difficult, he sometimes feels uncomfortable speaking up when many people are around, for example in the offices of the day centre. Doing new things can be difficult, too, and it takes extra effort to break down the barrier and lose the fear. Cooking is an issue for Emilio, he has never got to do it and for the moment he prefers the centre’s catering. Money is another issue. The work provides him with income that he can spend on coffee and cigarettes. But he needs help with organising the expenses, otherwise he runs out of money and cigarettes soon. Cleaning is another problem, and Emilio is aware that he sometimes neglects taking care of the house. He relies on staff who help cleaning his place. Emilio feels happy most days, especially when he is working and studying, when his family comes to visit, when he is surrounded by friends, or when people trust him and count on him. Emilio has clear future plans for working as a gardener, keeping friends and other social contacts, getting his license and getting a car. He also knows he needs help to achieve his objectives, especially when dealing with something new and having to overcome his fears.

You can do it!

Steve*, Kate*, Alex* and Theo* are between 25 and 36 years old, and they live with their families. During the day they attend courses at the foundation. They also go to choirs, theatres, dancing and to therapy. Arts activities are the favourites for everyone in this group, some with a preference for the shadow theatre project, others enjoy the video online learning project. One also likes a training course on internet safety. Asked about difficulties in life, responses are different. Two mention no problems. One finds it difficult to find a job. One explains difficulties with communicating with people. It is difficult to make yourself understood, it is tiring to be reminded about your disability, although there are others who encourage you. Living with the family has positive sides. You can enjoy watching TV, listening to music, playing video games. You can help with housework and learn to be independent, like cooking and laundry. Going shopping would be something to try. Having your own room, having time for yourself and no-one disturbing is important. Different ideas persist what are challenges in life. Steve has no problems. Kate has problems with managing money and dealing with loneliness. Alex is fine with cleaning and managing money but finds cooking difficult because the kitchen is a dangerous place. Theo does not mind cleaning and finds cooking difficult. His real

issue is with fixing things when they break. **Happy and calm is the feeling in the group most of the time.** Anxiety can be an issue, also getting angry sometimes. Going for a walk, being with friends, learning something new, seeing that people get along helps feeling good. Sadness comes with thinking of war, death, disappointments or someone treating you bad. **Dreams and wishes for the future** include having friends, finding a job, having your own place and travelling. Finding a girlfriend and starting a family is important for one in the group. When asked what kind of help they require, Kate would welcome help with preparing for activities she likes to do. Alex points out she needs to believe in herself. Whereas Theo finds it is important that someone believes in him and tells him **“You can do it”**.

Working with animals

Kateryna is 21 years old and lives in supported housing. She likes that there is a plenty of space and view spiders. She currently attends language school and spends time at home. She likes animals very much and hopes to work with animals one day. Animals, books and video make her feel good. She finds it difficult to talk to people, and difficult to talk about many things. She also struggles with cleaning and keeping the flat tidy. Kateryna has **clear wishes for the future that include a job, friends, her own home, and travel.** The job should be biologist and with animals. She knows that she needs money to be able to pay for studies and help with finding work.

Wake up in the morning and start a new day

Jane⁵ is 34 years old, has a job and currently lives in supported housing. She has some issues with cleaning, cooking, managing money and dealing with loneliness, but she also hopes to move into social housing on her own. **Having her own place is an important goal,** and she is looking forward to moving to a place soon. She enjoys going out and meeting with friends. Reading is difficult. Arguing with friends can upset her. She feels happy most of the time, it makes her feel good to wake up in the morning and start a new day.

Finding the right opportunity to work

John* is 24 years old, lives with his family and is attending a work training. He likes going out with friends, eating, taking care of clothing, and writing, and he enjoys living together and spending time with his big family. **Most days he feels happy. Music and slow breathing help him feel good.** Housework is not his thing. And he is afraid of horses. John does not like to be rushed; **he needs to do things in his own slow pace.** His big goal for the future is finding the right opportunity for work where people also understand his needs.

Like building a new platform

Remi is 18 years old and in the process of moving from his family’s home to his own place. The apartment is nearby, so the parents and the brother can come and help if needed. Remi has a full time job writing articles and organising content for a web portal¹⁵. The job includes many different tasks, is **adapted to his special needs,** but is not paid. He receives pocket money which he saves up for the future. Remi is looking forward to living on his own, but expects he still needs to learn daily routines like cooking or cleaning, and how to **adapt the routines to his abilities.** Like with many things at work, he sees not barriers but possibilities to learn and develop new skills. Remi usually feels calm and content, and he sees **difficulties as natural part of development.** Achieving something or helping someone makes him feel good. The absence of other young people in his life makes him sad sometimes. He is not used to be with people his own age and does not feel very comfortable in their company. Remi has very clear ideas about **the value of education and training for having work and building a future.** He believes more should be done and more should be offered for young people to get access to paid employment. For his own situation, he hopes to see the web portal grow and become profitable soon, and he understands **much will depend on him** to achieve this objective.

Suggesting more support for young people

Mart is 20 years old, and lives with his parents and younger brother most of the time. School was difficult because sitting at a desk and focusing on one thing is challenging for him. Mart feels better at work, though finding a job took a long time and the employment he currently has is not ideal. Long and tiring work hours, sleeping issues, high workloads, stresses and responsibilities, low staff numbers and low pay are making it difficult. He would prefer less

¹⁵ Find out more about TerviseTasku, available [here](#) (in Estonian)

work days, less stress and better pay. It would also help with getting his own place, which may take some time. Mart knows from summer months, when he lives on his own, that keeping the house in order, cleaning, shopping, cooking and spending money are a challenge. On the long run, however, he really wants to **have his own place**. He also enjoys being with friends and playing computer games. Both **help coping with stress from long work hours**. The experience of searching for work made Mart feel stressed and exhausted, and questioning what is needed for giving more people the chance to work for decent pay. He feels **companies should change their employment methods**, and the state should **do more to promote the employment of young people**.

Insights from working with young people

The following summaries are based on interviews held between September and December 2025 with therapists, social workers and instructors working in EPR member organisations in Northern Ireland, Estonia, Spain, Malta and Greece. The conversations were conducted along prepared questions regarding role in the organisation, types and formats of interventions, characteristics of clients and students, problems and solutions at work, and recommendations for improving the work. Note: the names of some interviewees have been changed (see *) for protecting the interests of the person.

Work on achieving what the client has chosen

Maria* works in support for adults and young people with autism living in two nearby towns in the region. She describes her job as to “help them meet personal goals that relate to social and communication skills, engaging in their local community and encouraging them to develop their personal independence skills”. The greatest difficulty for her clients is finding social opportunities in this very rural region. The local communities are small, there is a lot of social pressure at the schools and from peers, and public transport is very limited. Her clients often hesitate to leave their home. At home, some clients find it difficult to develop a healthy day routine. If they sleep all day and stay awake at night, social contacts become even more difficult. A combination of such barriers can lead to increased social isolation and anxieties, which leads clients to seek help from the mental health services. Working with young adults is very dependent on the individual situation and goals chosen. Establishing a positive collaborative relationship is crucial and takes time. Once there is trust, goals can be defined and small steps taken to accomplish them together, e.g. leaving the house and visiting calm public places like a library. Individual support strategies would aim at gradually increasing independent activities. Interaction with family or carers may be part of the work but not necessarily. Regular contacts with funders, referral agents and social workers is important. It is crucial that the goals of the clients remain at the centre of the support work. The support should ultimately help toward independent living, which includes both mental health support as well as practical daily routines such as doing the laundry or necessities such as local transport.

Offering guidance without imposing

Paul* has a job as social worker within the Young Adults Team in public services for people with disabilities. His clients are young people with an intellectual disability. His role is to help them determine their strengths and weaknesses, their interests and life goals. The clients often talk of major life incidents and issues like unemployment, poverty, violence, abuse, loss of family members or carers. Paul helps to find and contact services that can help the client to deal with the issues and accomplish their goals and wishes. Long periods of being overprotected by caregivers or parents is a frequent challenge. The young person had limited opportunities to learn things for life and become independent. Paul’s job is to find a good balance between psychiatric reviews, medication intake, skill-building, finding shelter, safety planning, finding employment, socializing and leisure time. Lack of self-confidence, anxieties and fears are typical for young people at this stage in their life. Many struggle with lack of motivation, decision making, dealing with emotions, and awareness of coping strategies. Paul’s approach to support work builds on his clients’ strengths, interests and aspirations. Life skills can be learned in small, manageable steps and with a form of assisting that is adapted to individual needs and wishes. It is important that the young people make their own choices and receive the support they need. It can be “offering guidance without imposing but rather letting the young take the lead”, says Paul. Ideally this involves not only the social worker but over time also the support systems available in the local community - even though he admits collaboration can be challenging when different support agents have different ideas what type of support is advised. In the broader national context, the work is difficult due

to lack of affordable housing for the clients, and lack of qualified staff to provide the support services that the clients need.

Promoting independence, and ensuring emotional and practical support

Kate* is a social worker in the same organisation. She describes her role as “providing holistic support that empowers young people as they transition into adulthood. This includes advocating for their rights, helping them access services, promoting independence, and offering both emotional and practical support through individualized care plans.” In her work, she sees young people with autism or intellectual disabilities demonstrating strong potential, creativity, and motivation. However, they may still encounter challenges such as limited employment opportunities, gaps in vocational training, and the need for more consistent formal and informal support networks. She notes that increased investment in specialised programs and personalised services could further unlock their abilities and aspirations. The young adults she supports commonly experience anxiety, low self-esteem, or social withdrawal—often tied to limited social inclusion or restricted opportunities. Nonetheless, with the right encouragement, many make significant progress in confidence, self-advocacy, and community engagement. Kate’s approach aligns closely with Paul’s, emphasizing teamwork among educators, therapists, and healthcare providers, as well as strong collaboration with families. She also actively works with potential employers to foster inclusive hiring practices and to highlight the many strengths and contributions that people with disabilities bring to the workplace. While she observes that some employers remain hesitant and that accessibility in community spaces can still improve, Kate believes that continued legal protections against discrimination, combined with greater investment in equality and inclusion initiatives, can lead to a more open and supportive environment for all young people. She remains hopeful that with these changes, more opportunities will emerge and young adults will be better able to thrive.

Integrating support for housing, employment and education

Natalia works in the Community Social Support Team of a foundation offering services to people with disabilities. She describes her role as support worker (in Spanish “Monitor”) in the social housing programmes, providing therapeutic support. The local health authorities refer clients to the foundation for supported housing and recovery. Guidance for learning household skills, for community participation and for attending therapy are at the centre of her work with the clients. Each of them can be in a very different life situation, which requires developing individual care plans with each client, the psychologist and the social worker. This plan is the basis for the support work, for building a relationship with the client and following through the support process. It can be challenging as each client is different. A problem for many young people is the low quality of employment. Another is the fragmentation of institutions and services, and of the funding systems. It makes it difficult to coordinate the support work. Depression is the most frequent health issue among Natalia’s clients. They struggle with social isolation, lack of family support, or trauma from forced displacement due to armed conflicts. Living alone as a refugee in a foreign country can make it very difficult to study, to obtain qualifications and to get recognition for degrees obtained in the country of origin. The processes for the recognition can take very long. The key issue for the young people is, however, access to housing, which makes every other aspect of life extremely challenging. Without a stable place to live, it is difficult to find stable employment. There is a definite need for support programmes tailored for young people that integrate support for housing, employment, education and recognition of qualifications.

Encouragement to engage in as many activities as possible

Michael* works as a trainer in the Transition Department in another foundation which helps young people with intellectual disabilities or autism to transition to adulthood. His work with clients includes developing professional skills and self-awareness, housekeeping skills for independent living, cooking and shopping skills, time and money management, social interaction, communication and conflict management skills, empowerment and encouragement, sex education and protection from online dangers. Michael observes that his clients face multiple barriers for transition. They do not have the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities, they feel insecure, and “Their parents (consciously or unconsciously) do not allow them to grow up, leave home, and become independent”. Lack of suitable housing and lack of opportunities to work make it extremely difficult to move on. In this situation, clients have or develop mental health issues including anxiety, depression, confusion, resignation and loneliness. His approach to support work is about activation and encouragement to engage in many activities with minimal/necessary guidance, motivating the client to seek solutions in their own pace, with help from their peers, with regular assessing and realising their progress. Regular meetings with the family, collaboration with the team and close cooperation with the

employment services are important, also because his clients face prejudice, indifference, and aversion from society. There is a definite need for more awareness raising and informing the community, and for more state support “with adequate funding, specialized staff, modern material and technical infrastructure for the social integration and autonomy of people with disabilities”.

Struggling with anxiety and insecurity

Andrea* has a background in psychology and works in the same department at the foundation. She confirms “there are young people who are very capable of working, quite independent, quite competent, but often a difficult family situation acts as a hindrance, as an obstacle.” Whereas other young people can rely on a supportive family but the individual capacity for everyday life is limited. She says “we try various methods, using a lot of supported decision-making to find out what the young person wants, what the family can support, what the demands are, what the job market is like and what it offers, so that we can see what can be done for each young person.” Depression is not a very common issue but many students are anxious and insecure. It creates a true challenge and prevents them from taking up jobs even with very good preparation, training and support. This is why learning through experience and trying things in simulated work places is so important. The accompanying support system is flexible and may, depending on the individual situation, involve the social services, the psychologist and the parents. Parents also participate in training, learn about autism or intellectual disability, and in supported decision-making. But it is the young person who takes decisions, chooses to participate in activities, taking on roles and responsibilities. The team ensures there are opportunities to engage, also to reach out, visit work places, learn social skills or learn about self-care. The issue with this form of support work is continuity, says Andrea. The young people and their families receive support to build a life for the young person but the long-term prospect is not ensured. Existing programmes for transition to adulthood are limited, while independent living is about an entire lifetime. The state support does not reach far enough.

Learning gradually to live and work independently

Helma works as an activity instructor at the centre, helping young people develop independence through learning life skills and adapting to independent living. She works with students who live in the dormitory of the centre, which is offered to students coming from places outside the capital city. There are also students who choose the dormitory to try out living away from their parents and see how they get along on their own. She notes from initial needs assessments that the students arrive with very different backgrounds, abilities and needs. Some were overprotected at home, lacking essential life skills such as personal hygiene, housekeeping, finding your way around town or using public transport. She observes an increasing number of behavioural disorders and difficulty understanding or adjusting to social norms. Being rude or disruptive, then being withdrawn and anxious alone. Anxiety, suggesting underlying mental health challenges, is quite common. She confirms it becomes complex when mental support needs are not immediately apparent, like they are for physical disabilities. You miss hidden emotional struggles that manifest in behaviour. Helma describes her approach to enhancing independence as individualized support, building trust and offering practical learning experiences. The key is to build confidence and autonomy. “It may require catching those moments when you can offer support.” and taking up different roles, like as listener, protector or even chef. “Perceive their needs and tailor your support, so they feel the achievement of self-reliance, though gently directed by us.” she adds. Together with the group instructors, she also works with the families and service providers to ensure integrated support. The families often give valuable positive feedback about progress that the instructors do not always notice. Helma is on this job for eleven years and sees an improvement of the living conditions for the young people and the working conditions for her. There are, however, gaps in the transition pathways, and important services and supports are missing. She recommends establishing transitional centres, for expanding life skills programs, providing social skills support, offering better guidance and preparing for employment, and ensuring ongoing support.

Carrying a deep fear of not meeting expectations

Birgit works in the same centre, already for twelve years, as group instructor with students in woodwork training for carpenters, woodworkers and assistants. Since two years she has an assignment as employment specialist who is “not just an advisor or job-search assistant, but someone who truly understands what is happening in a student's life on a broader scale.” Birgit says she always sees the student as a whole person. Knowing what they think and how they function, she can approach them as individuals and not as elements in a system. She sees their joys, anxieties,

failures and small victories. “That makes me more empathetic and helps me build trust more quickly.” She works within a multidisciplinary team that aims to help young people to become independent and work-ready. Birgit points out her work is still person-centred. When basic needs like stable housing, good health and a positive social environment at home are not met, she cannot turn a blind eye and work only on job-placements. The biggest challenges at Birgit’s work are related to transitions in the life of a young person. Moving on from a structured school environment to a work environment, often unpredictable and full of surprises, can be a major shock. It can be very difficult for a young person with additional support needs, especially when having experienced bullying, failure or fear. “Many lack confidence in their abilities.” she points out. “When someone has been hurt many times, it becomes very hard to try again.” In recent years, mental health issues have increased significantly. More students suffer from depression and anxiety, often without being diagnosed. Societal pressures have intensified, the students are very sensitive and feel this, too. “Many carry a deep fear of not meeting expectations, which leads to stress and sadness.” Support for them is available but often too rigid for adapting to individual needs, especially in the public education system. The labour market had improved a lot in this regard. Job opportunities for people with special needs used to be very limited. But the economy grew, labour shortages emerged and employers became more flexible, more willing to make adjustments. COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine interrupted all the positive developments. “A setback for our students” she says. Now they face great difficulties in finding work. Birgit is concerned the problems will become even more severe with technologies and ways of working changing rapidly. Work is becoming more unavailable, unstable, unstructured and un-adaptable. As an employment specialist, Birgit is in favour of (a) employment quota for people with special needs, (b) better support systems for employment, including tax incentives and unemployment insurance, and (c) more support infrastructure such as day centres and work-training facilities.

Listen to the voices of the people affected

Claudia explains her job is to accompany young people on their journey towards stable and lasting employment. The first step is to help discover own abilities and motivations, so that the young person feels in control of their own process. “I want them to understand that achieving their goals depends on them, and that employment can be a way to fulfil themselves and feel useful in their daily lives.” she says. Throughout the process, she provides guidance and teaching practical and personal skills that prepare for the world of work e.g. writing a CV, contact employers and learn skills that help getting and keeping a job in the long term. When a client finds a job, Claudia accompanies them through the job integration phase, and offers personalised support that helps adapting to the new environment and building confidence. The more confident the young person feels, the less support from Claudia is required. She makes sure that the young person can continue to rely on occasional support and help to cope on their own. Each young client has their specific capabilities and needs, which requires highly individualized support for personal and professional development. The most common issue is insecurity with entering a new stage in life. New living and working environments, new tasks and new people can generate fears and doubts. Building confidence, learning to adapt to change and cope with unfamiliar situations is key. Mental health issues are frequent. Most common are mood disorders like depression, sometimes as a side effect of medication, anxiety disorders, psychotic disorders, adjustment problems or emotional difficulties resulting from stress or lack of support. Support strategies have to be adapted to each individual situation, at the same time share common features such as progressive support “where support is gradually withdrawn to encourage the young person’s independence and empowerment”. Claudia also believes in positive reinforcement “with every small achievement being valued in order to increase confidence and motivation.” and encouraging active participation that allows a young person to take decisions, do things on their own terms and also learn from mistakes. It is crucial that emotional and close support is available, creating an environment of trust and security. A key feature of the employment support is accompanying the young people also on the work floor and with qualified job coaches. There is a lot of stigma and non-understanding of people with special needs, and for creating an inclusive and understanding environment, businesses and communities need to be better informed. Policies should be improved towards promoting the employment of people with disabilities. Training should be improved to promote the access to skilled jobs for people with disabilities. More funding is needed, and more listening to the voices of the people affected.

Always take into account the person's overall situation

Miriam works in the same foundation. She believes her background in social education taught her about the importance of paying attention to each person and offering individual support to enhance their autonomy. Self-

awareness is key, so a person knows own abilities and skills and their weaknesses. They can decide what they wish to improve and what kind of support they require. Miriam observes many young people in their social and educational environment are confronted with negative labels expressing rejection, exclusion and manifesting social stigma. Family life can be cause for issues, too, either though overprotection or absence of any protection and support. Miriam notices a wide variety of health issues among the young people, including apathy, isolation, depression, suicidal thoughts, disruptive behaviour, or negative thoughts triggered by substance abuse. What is cause or effect can be different from person to person. In her work, Miriam uses the full arsenal of social worker tools that help young people build confidence and strengthen autonomy. “The important thing is to think about the person, talk and plan based on their interests, tastes, abilities and barriers. Always take into account the person's overall situation.” she points out. Working with the young person must involve the family, reach out to school, free time and social activities. However, the service and support systems in place struggle with frequent staff turnover and shortage of life-essential services, in particular supported housing. Miriam’s suggestions for improvement include: (1) Implementation of individual plans (2) Increase family programmes from organisations (3) Raise awareness about disability in all areas (4) Increase funding to promote new jobs and hire people who are trained and qualified to work in this field.

Facilitating the transition from education to employment

Noe works in the Training and Employment Support Service in the same foundation, and has various roles as trainer and support coordinator. He describes his work as to “help participants shape their future through various tasks” which include interventions that promote personal and professional development through training, guidance on employability, such as registering with employment agencies or developing action plans, support in entering the job market including preparing for interviews and following up on the selection process, initial support in the workplace through analysis of the specific tasks and skills required for the job and creation of a detailed list of tasks to be performed, and monitoring in the workplace. Noe observes the problems at his work are often linked to long lasting struggles with education, training and work, difficult family history, protective parenting, challenging living conditions and in particular high costs of living. He observes many clients show signs of mental health issues including anxiety and depression, lack of interest, social isolation, mood disorders, attention and behavioural disorders, and eating disorders. For an integrated approach to supports and services the foundation operates interdisciplinary support teams, comprehensive training programmes, and a special employment centre, next to network of supervised housing, occupational centres and psychosocial rehabilitation centres. Noe points out that the services are open to people of all ages and he wonders why not set up a special centre for young people “boosting the employability, social inclusion and professional development of this group”. He noticed that funding regulations appear to favour older people and limit the access to services for young people. This may prevent the creating of services specifically for young people. Also the collaboration between administrations, educational centres, companies and social entities should be improved in order to design practical training programmes that facilitate the transition from education to employment.

Good practices in services and supports

The following summaries are based on presentations reviewed by members of the EPR Youth Working Group for sharing experience and expertise from practical work with young people in communities in different European countries.



The Transition of Youth with Disabilities from Education to the Labour Market URI Soča – University Rehabilitation Institute, Slovenia

In Slovenia, as in other EU countries and worldwide, the transition of young people with disabilities from school to the labour market presents a challenge compared to their non-disabled peers. They are at high risk of suffering long-term unemployment, which can result in a decline in their basic skills, professional knowledge or working habits and negatively impact their Quality of Life. For this reason, the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities developed a national project to facilitate and increase the social inclusion of young people with

disabilities and to create a unified supportive environment as an interface between school and the labour market for the empowered entry of young people with disabilities into the labour market. The project started in January 2018 and lasted until August 2022. 2077 participated in the project. The project consortium consisted of all 13 national vocational rehabilitation providers implementing project activities across all Slovenian regions. The European Social Fund (ESF) and the Slovenian Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities supported the project financially.

Guiding principles

The project partners agreed on guiding principles for the participation of the young people in the project: (1) Participation in the project is voluntary (2) Young people actively participate in the project activities including the preparing of an individual transition plan (3) The project activities involve parents and caregivers (4) The project promotes the cooperation between different institutions incl. schools, social services, health services, employers, and youth organisations.

Education backgrounds

Almost half of the participants were enrolled in primary school and one fifth in specialised primary school. 13% were in vocational, vocational/technical education and grammar school, 10 % in secondary vocational education, 7% in lower vocational education and universities. A few of the participants were not involved in formal education or were at first but left at later stage.

Disabilities

26 % of the participants were young people with a combination of two or more disabilities, among them the most common were mild intellectual disabilities, long-term illness, autistic disabilities and physical disabilities, and young people with intellectual disabilities. Significantly fewer young persons had emotional and behavioural disorders (7%), autistic spectrum disorders (6%), physical disabilities (6%), deafness or hard of hearing (6 %), speech and language disorders (6 %) or visual impairment (2 %).

Professional support

During the project implementation, the consortium kept track of support worker time spend for different types of activities with the participants. Participants stayed for an average of 15 months in the project, and each participant received an average of 70 hours of professional support during the project. More than a third of the total work time was spent on motivation and empowerment, followed by developing individual support plans, cooperation with parents or caregivers. Other areas included cooperation with schools, cooperation with vocational rehabilitation providers, cooperation with employers, recruitment of participants and administrative work.

Project results

In view of the main objective of activating young people through the support of a unified support system, the project was very successful. 75% of the participants decided to continue education (64%), register with the employment services (10%) or take up employment (1%). It should be noted that most of the young people who continued education attended primary school or a specialised school with a special school curriculum for young people with special needs. Most of the young people registered with the Employment Service of Slovenia were previously enrolled in a vocational or secondary education programme.

Project benefits

- (1) Young people with disabilities benefited from the project by receiving psychosocial support, guidance and information; and through the process gained improved motivation, self-confidence and empowerment.
- (2) Parents benefited from the project by receiving additional support and help as well as information about educational programmes, vocational rehabilitation and the labour market.
- (3) Educational institutions received information about the future possibilities for young people with disabilities, which had good and many times positive effect on the young people..

Project Youth Transition+

The project consortium got approval for a second project named “Youth Transition+” which will be implemented between August 2025 and September 2029, led by the Association of Vocational Rehabilitation Providers and cofinanced by the Ministry of Labor, Family, Social Affairs, and Equal Opportunities and the EU (ESF+). The target group includes young people aged up to 26 years with intellectual disabilities, blindness and visual impairment, deafness and hard of hearing, speech and language disorders, physical disabilities, long-term illness, autism, emotional and behavioural disorders. They are enrolled in the final grades of elementary school, elementary schools for children with special needs, high school or university. The main objective is addressing high rates of inactivity among young people with disabilities, by systematic and professional support work, training and education through practical work with employers, and awareness raising among employers about the usefulness of employing young people with disabilities. The overall ambitions are to prevent unemployment of young people with disabilities, transition young people with disabilities as quickly as possible from formal education into the labour market, establish the project as a regular national programme.

See also project promotion video on [Facebook](#).



Interconnected and integrated support for young people during phases of change
Mariaberg e.V., Germany

Mariaberg operates a variety of services for young people in places where support is offered to young people who do not participate in traditional organised youth activities and are hard to reach. This includes social work in schools, outreach (mobile) work and open youth centres. Together, they form a network that accompanies young people in school, leisure time, and the wider community.

Adolescence is known as a period of life full of transitions, from being a child to becoming an adult, from school to training or university, from living at home to moving into own housing. These transitions bring opportunities, but they also carry risks for mental health. When living conditions are insecure, stress can quickly turn into crisis. Social work for young people acts here as a resource. It creates safe spaces, supports young people in crises, and opens up new perspectives. Mariaberg operates variety of services for this purpose including:

School social work

School Social Work operates directly in schools, but remains independent from the school system. It is part of the youth welfare services, offering confidential counselling, crisis intervention, and prevention. School social work is a socio-pedagogical service located directly in schools, but independent of teachers and school management. Confidentiality and developing trust are key. Services include individual counselling, support in conflicts, crisis intervention, and prevention of bullying or violence. School social work stabilises young people in a place where they spend most of their everyday life, at school.

Outreach work

Outreach or mobile youth work (in German: “Streetwork”) goes to the places where young people spend time with their peers in public spaces. Outreach work is offered to young people on the basis of voluntary participation, acceptance, advocacy, and confidentiality. For hard-to-reach young people, outreach workers are often their only reliable contact point in the community. They are licensed social workers who reach out to young people in their own environments, at the skate park, the train station, or a public meeting point. The young people can trust their outreach workers will be available there for them. The young people then decide if and how they want to engage. There are no obligations, no sanctions, just trust, acceptance, and support, individually or for groups. Outreach work also has a community dimension: it brings the voices of young people into local politics and builds bridges between youth and the adult world.

Inclusive open youth work

Open youth work takes place in dedicated facilities, community or youth centres which are accessible to everyone. These are spaces designed and equipped for young people to spend their leisure time, join activities or follow projects, and get counselling. A special form is inclusive open youth work: youth centres that intentionally open their doors to young people with disabilities. Here, young people, also biologically older people who still share youth-typical interests due to their cognitive development, can meet. One important principle is equal participation regardless of disability, origin, or life situation.

Integrated support

Mariaberg operates school social work, outreach work and open youth work within one network of services. They complement each other by offering support to young people in the three locations they spend much of their day time: school, street and free time. They form a network that supports young people across their different living environments. This creates protection, participation, and opportunities to address issues in context e.g. related to mental health. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health crises among young people have significantly increased. Many struggle with anxiety, depression, or self-doubt. Poverty, migration, and discrimination intensify these burdens. Transitions, from school to work, from the parental home to independent housing, are critical. Assistance and support is then needed most, and this is where strong and reliable youth services have high value.

Examples:

- A school social worker supports a young person in a severe crisis, sets up a network involving teachers, parents, and counselling services – and prevents a school dropout.
- Outreach workers build trust with a youth group spending most of their time on the streets. Step by step, they succeed in connecting some of them to vocational training or sports projects.
- In the youth centre, an inclusive project is created where young people with and without disabilities jointly organise an event. Everyone gains self-confidence, enjoys participation, and grows from it.

Early warning in times of crisis

High quality social work with young people never acts alone. It is part of a network involving youth welfare, schools, municipalities, and health services. School social workers, outreach workers and youth centre workers often serve as first point of contact. They listen, advise, and can refer to further services. They often serve like an early warning system e.g. when a young person loses their home or develops a health condition. Social workers are often the first to notice and can provide early support that prevents an escalation of the young person's problems. In this way, they become an important protective factor for housing security, or for mental health and well-being.



The Rey Ardid Foundation manages a network of supervised apartments for people undergoing psychosocial rehabilitation, with housing located within the social environment of the municipalities of Zaragoza and Calatayud. These apartments constitute a community-based residential resource integrated into the mental health network of the Aragonese Health Service and are registered in the Register of Social Action Entities, Services, and Establishments. The aim is to facilitate the recovery of people with mental health conditions, ensuring their integration and active participation in the community through comprehensive support. This includes the acquisition of instrumental and daily living skills, both at a personal and social level, related to coexistence and community life.

The program offers two types of housing depending on the level of support required: one with intensive and continuous care, providing close accompaniment and direct intervention to accelerate the learning of daily living activities and the development of autonomy; and another with less intensive support, focused on consolidating achievements and fostering more independent community integration. Typically, people begin in the intensive

modality and, in a planned way, transition to a temporary apartment where training, employment, or other forms of occupation are encouraged, with the goal of eventually accessing independent housing. This gradual approach makes it possible to adapt the intensity of support to each person's progress, ensuring a process of emancipation oriented toward independent living, with individualized accompaniment that promotes personal and social autonomy, supported by flexible supervision and intervention levels adapted to individual needs.

The Independent Living Apartments represent the final stage of this residential alternatives program. The process includes continuous follow-up and intervention in all areas affecting a person's mental health, actively encouraging the planning of a life project toward independence. The intervention progressively focuses on consolidating independent living in the community, promoting integration into training, employment, and healthy leisure activities.

It should be emphasized that housing is a key factor in mental health recovery. Without a decent, safe, stable, and adequate home in which to settle, many rehabilitation efforts may be compromised. Persons with mental health conditions face significant challenges in accessing and maintaining suitable housing due to insufficient income resulting from situations of vulnerability or poverty—often linked to limited opportunities for training that would enable stable employment under fair conditions—together with difficulties and deterioration in social skills, as well as discrimination and stigma associated with mental illness diagnoses.

The service includes accommodation, training in instrumental, functional, and technological skills, nutritional support, integration of healthy habits, domestic economy and financial planning, community accompaniment in accessing health, social, educational, employment, and occupational resources, and the creation of individualized therapeutic plans.



The Transition Plan is a structured, individualized document developed at Astangu Vocational Rehabilitation Centre to support students with special needs as they move from school to further education, vocational training, or employment. Its primary purpose is to ensure a smooth, well-supported transition that meets each student's unique abilities, goals, and challenges.

Purpose and use

For the student: The plan provides a clear roadmap for personal, educational, and vocational development. It identifies strengths, areas requiring support, and step-by-step guidance for achieving goals. It also highlights necessary accommodations and resources, ensuring the student can develop independence, confidence, and work readiness.

For the support team: The plan serves as a communication tool among teachers, therapists, social workers, employment specialists, families, and other relevant professionals. It outlines each team member's role, facilitating coordinated support and consistent guidance.

For workplaces and external partners: The plan provides employers, vocational trainers, and service providers with relevant information about the student's abilities, support needs, and optimal working conditions. This ensures safe, productive, and inclusive participation in work or training environments.

Key elements of the plan

- Curriculum Vitae: Personal details, educational background, work experience, additional information e.g. skills and languages
- Student Profile: Overview of academic history, social skills, personal strengths, challenges, and preferences
- Educational and Vocational Goals: Short- and long-term objectives tailored to the student's interests and abilities

- Action Plan and Support Needs: Specific steps to achieve goals, including guidance, supervision, and adaptive strategies
- Monitoring and Review: Regular evaluation and adjustments to reflect progress, challenges, and evolving needs
- Daily Life and Social Services: Recommendations for accessing social care, health services, rehabilitation, and community support
- Health and Well-being: Guidance on therapies, mental health, and maintaining physical and social health
- Details for further contact incl. for group leaders, social workers, therapists, teachers and employment specialist

Flexibility

At any moment in time, the Transition Plan can be modified according to the student's needs. Every student moves and evolves in a different tempo so the plan needs to be flexible.

Benefits

The Transition Plan provides students with a structured approach to achieving independence and work readiness. It supports individualized learning and vocational pathways. The Transition Plan ensures coordinated communication among family, school staff, and external partners. It increases the student's confidence, social participation, and engagement in community and work life. The Transition Plan also helps workplaces and external service providers understand how to best support the student's participation.

In summary

The Transition Plan is both a roadmap for the student's future and a practical tool for the entire support network. It ensures that each student's unique needs are met while promoting independence, skill development, and successful integration into education, work, and society.



Path2Independence – pilot project
Agenzija Sapport (Malta)

Background

Young adults with disabilities often face limited opportunities to develop independent living skills, particularly when living in residential settings or under overprotective care with parents. This gap in service provision can hinder autonomy and community integration. Therefore, some youth might be interested in living independently but have never had the opportunity of trying it out. Young people who live in a residential setting or with caregivers, can get a taste of what independent living requires. Young adults living at home especially those who face overprotectiveness from family or have limited chances to explore independence.

Objective

Path2Independence is a 3-day experiential pilot designed to support young people with disabilities who aspire to live independently but have never had the opportunity to try. It bridges a critical gap by offering a structured, short-term live-in experience combined with professional support and evaluation. The Path2Independence pilot project aims to provide a structured, experiential learning opportunity. The initiative seeks to foster confidence, skill acquisition, and self-determination through real-life practice.

What makes it a good practice:

- Evidence-Informed Approach: Based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, the project uses real-life experience as a foundation for skill development and reflection.
- Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Social Workers, Occupational Therapists, and Youth Workers work together to provide holistic support from different perspectives, ensuring physical, emotional, and social needs are addressed.

- Structured Evaluation: Skills assessment during the live-in informs future support plans and service development.
- Person-centred approach.

Method

The three-day pilot combines informal preparatory meet ups, a supported live-in experience, and post-intervention evaluations. An interdisciplinary team - comprising social workers, occupational therapists and youth workers - assesses the participants' current abilities, identifies support needs, and facilitates reflective learning. Therefore, the journey starts with a series of meet ups so that the pair of the young people get to know each other in an informal way and prepare for the journey ahead. It is being organised by the interdisciplinary team as well as the Family Support Unit and Transition Team. The professionals are present during parts of the live-in to assess the current skills of the participants and identify the support needs required moving forward. The data collection includes observational recordings, ADL (Activities of Daily Living) performance measures, and qualitative feedback from participants and caregivers.

Intervention Components:

- Informal Meetups: Build rapport and prepare participants for the live-in.
- Supported Live-In: Safe environment to practice independent living skills. Supervised independent living trial.
- Evaluation & Follow-Up: Identify strengths, areas for growth, and support needs.
- Ongoing Collaboration: Sustain progress through continued engagement.
- Expected Outcomes: Enhanced autonomy, improved daily living skills, and strengthened empowerment processes. Findings will inform scalable models for community-based transition programs. We're empowering young people to gain confidence, skills, and the freedom to thrive independently.

This project is an opportunity for experiential learning in practice. This theory by Kolb uses experience as the source of learning and development.

Significance

The project represents a replicable good practice for bridging the gap between dependence and independence, aligning with contemporary social work, youth work and occupational therapy frameworks. It demonstrates how experiential interventions can promote inclusion, resilience, and rights-based empowerment for youth with disabilities.

Outcome

The first cohort of participants provided positive feedback about the overall experience, as it provided them with an initial exposure to the meaning of living independently. They also suggested to increase the duration of the live-in and reduce the staff to service-user ratio at one time.

Impact

The project demonstrates how short-term, experiential interventions can foster independence, reduce family overprotection, and inform long-term transition planning. It serves as a replicable model for inclusive, community-based service innovation bridging the gap between dependent living and independent adulthood.

Recommendations

The observations gathered in this paper reflect that support work for young people in transition to adulthood, in different places and organisations, is at its best when person-centred, when facilitating personal and professional development, when enabling autonomy. Developing life skills is key for the young people, the support workers and the service developers alike, including social skills, money management, mobility, self-care, and employment readiness.

Young people experience that their institutional, social and family environment can have lasting impact on their mental health and well-being, sometimes be the cause for issues and sometimes be the helper for getting and feeling better. Support workers often describe their role as intermediary, coordinator or advocate, negotiating between the clients and the parents, caregivers, social workers, therapists, teachers, coaches, co-workers and employers. This role, however, requires building a relationship with the young person, where they find trust, long-term engagement, support for decision-making, and respect for the specific pace that individuals need for pursuing goals and achieving objectives.

Young people and their support workers describe living situations where social isolation can become a threat to well-being. Inclusion and participation are vital. Mental health issues can lead, be linked or caused by anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, low self-esteem and lack of confidence; they can be both cause and consequence of isolation, unemployment, and failed transitions. Frequently mentioned barriers to living independently can be overprotection by the family or caregivers or, conversely, lack of family/caregiver support. It can make it difficult for a young person to build routines, lead to disrupted sleep, inactivity, and disengagement. Some young people struggle due to lack of opportunities to *practice* living.

For a young person with additional support needs, the support workers and the young people themselves point out structural challenges that hinder the level of personal and professional development that is necessary for transitioning into adult life:

- High cost of living and lack of affordable, accessible housing
- Low-quality or unstable jobs with low pay
- Limited inclusive employment opportunities and employer reluctance
- Fragmented systems (education, health, employment, social care operating in silos)
- Insufficient funding and lack of specialist staff

Interviews point out specific gaps in support systems:

- Lack of supported or transitional housing, especially for people who could live semi-independently with light support
- Insufficient life-skills training spaces (e.g. practical environments to learn cooking, laundry, budgeting)
- Poor public infrastructure e.g. transport in rural regions
- Limited disability-sensitive mental health services
- Shortage of qualified therapists, assistants and coaches
- Inadequate continuity of support once individuals leave structured programmes

Support workers describe approaches that demonstrably work in their daily interaction with the client:

- Strengths-based and goal-led planning
- Breaking complex skills into manageable steps
- Gradual reduction of support (“scaffolding” independence)
- Experiential learning and simulation of real-life/work situations
- Supported decision-making (rather than directive control)
- Consistent emotional support alongside practical skill-building

Key Recommendations

Service-Level: Increase funding for social activities/groups, life-skills programmes, supported employment and job coaching. Develop practical training spaces for independent living skills. Ensure long-term, continuous support rather than time-limited interventions.

System-Level: Improve coordination between disability, mental health, housing, and employment services. Create transitional centres and supported living pathways. Expand community-based services rather than institutional solutions. Offer services and supports where young people spend their time e.g. in school.

Policy and Community-Level: Improve public infrastructure that enables young people to get around and have places to meet e.g. transport and youth centres. Incentivise inclusive employment and protect against discrimination. Invest in affordable, supported housing. Raise awareness in the community to reduce stigma.

Overall Insight: Young people thrive and develop well when they are listened to, supported at their own pace, given opportunities to practice independent living, and backed by coordinated, compassionate support systems.

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