

# Youth Policy in the Netherlands



An overview of policies, structures and provisions concerning children and young people living in the Netherlands

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# I. A General Overview

## Introduction

In the Netherlands, the term *youth* is applied to children and young people from 0 up to the age of 24. Approximately one-third of the Dutch population falls into this category, and one in five young people have an ethnic background. As in most other industrialized countries, the proportion of youth in the total population is decreasing.

The vast majority of young people (85%) present no cause for concern: their average level of education is rising, they are healthy and happy, and they get on well with their parents.

However, the remaining 15% do need some additional support. A small number of young people (5%) may be said to have serious social and/or psychological problems for which they may use child and youth care services. These services include ambulant care, day care, residential care and foster care, both in youth protection and youth mental health care.

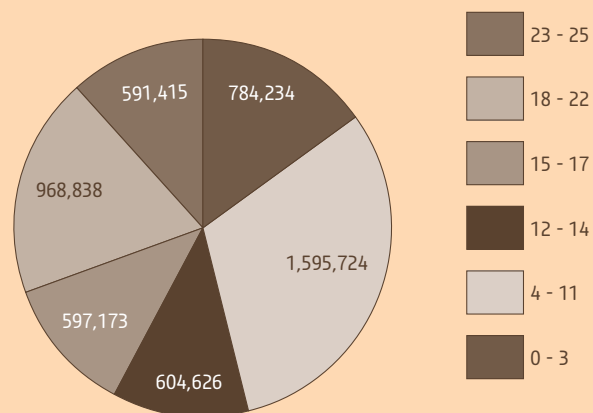
Youth policy is high on the political agenda in the Netherlands. There are a number of distinguishing characteristics. Firstly, since the late eighties, a large number of tasks formerly managed by central government have been transferred to local and provincial administrative levels. This decentralisation is meant to facilitate a broader spectrum of policy instruments for local and provincial authorities, so that they can manage and find solutions to local issues, needs and demands.

Secondly, a distinction is made between general and preventive youth policy – for which the local authorities are responsible – and the youth care system, the responsibility of which lies with the provinces. Local preventive youth policy includes education, leisure time, health care, but also specific preventive tasks, such as access to help and care coordination at the local level (with special focus on parenting support).

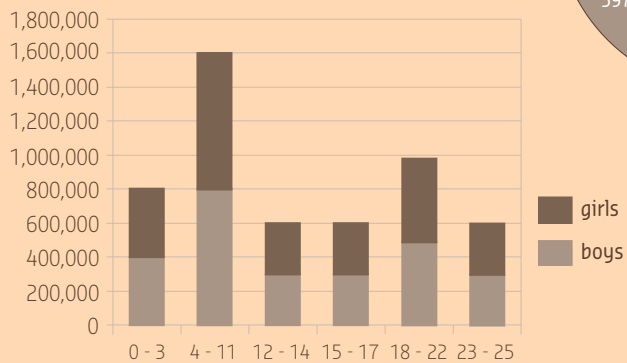
The youth care system covers all forms of care available to parents and children in order to support with serious development and parenting problems.

### The Number of Children and Young People aged 0 to 25

Total number of children and young people 2006



Number of boys and girls 2006



Source: CBS, Netherlands Youth Monitor

## Ministry for Youth and Families

For the first time the Netherlands has a Ministry for Youth and Families. In February 2007, Mr André Rouvoet was appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Youth and Families in the Dutch government. The objective of the Ministry for Youth and Families is to integrate the different Ministries involved in elements of youth policy and to tackle issues related to the upbringing of children through concerted effort. This advice was also one of the main outcomes of Operation Young, a three-year governmental programme aimed at taking away barriers in the policy and practice of supporting children and young people at risk and their parents (2004–2006). The objectives of Operation Young were to achieve greater cohesion in youth policy, to identify and resolve sticking points, and to create better cooperation between the national ministries and other levels of government. The main goal was to reach a strong and result-based youth policy. Many of the recommendations have been taken up in the Youth and Family Programme published by the Ministry for Youth and Families in June 2007.



### Administrative responsibilities

The Netherlands is a *decentralised unitary state*. This means that decentralised authorities at provincial and municipal level assume certain tasks and responsibilities with a certain degree of autonomy, including general and preventive youth policy and youth care.

The Netherlands contains 12 provincial (regional) authorities and 450 local authorities (municipalities). The provinces have the responsibility for child and youth care and the municipalities for general youth policy.

Coordination of youth policy is the responsibility of the Ministry for Youth and Families. Within this four departments cooperate:

- Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports
- Ministry of Justice
- Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
- Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment



## Youth and Family Programme

The Youth and Family Programme *Every Opportunity for Every Child* (2007–2011) represents a new approach by the Dutch government. One that uses coordination, cooperation and a focus on common outcomes for the benefit of all children and their families. The programme clearly states the preconditions for the development of all children, which should be the guideline for everyone working with children, both privately and professionally:

1. Healthy upbringing: physical and mental well-being, healthy lifestyle, continuity in upbringing and care.
2. Safe upbringing: security, unconditional love, respect, attention, boundaries, structure and regularity, a safe home (free from violence, mistreatment and sexual abuse) and a safe outdoor environment.
3. Contributing to society: social engagement, contributing ideas and taking part, active involvement in the local community, positive attitude and citizenship.
4. Developing talents and having fun: being educated or trained, the opportunity to pursue hobbies: sport, culture and leisure, and freedom to play.
5. Being properly prepared for the future: obtaining a qualification, finding employment, the capacity to earn a living, access to a stimulating environment.

The government's new programme will consist of three strategies, seeking to confirm and support the family's natural role in bringing up children. It will focus on prevention by identifying and tackling problems earlier and imposing binding commitments to all stakeholders working with children and families.

### 1. Growing up is something you do in a family

Families are important to society. Most children are raised in a family. A family is defined as 'any unit consisting of one or more adults who are responsible for raising and caring for one or more children.'

Families come in many forms: some consist of several children, others of only one, some have one parent or two, others combine children from previous relationships, some children are brought up by grandparents or foster parents.

In all these families, adults raise children and provide them with a secure environment. They impart key values and norms, create an atmosphere of reciprocal care and consideration, and facilitate personal development and recreation. To do all this, parents need sufficient time, resources and skills.

The government is promoting this through a family-friendly policy. Not only does a properly functioning family provide a stable background for children, it also makes a positive contribution to society, schools and neighbourhoods.

## **2. Focus on prevention: identifying and tackling problems earlier**

The need for specialist support for children has continued to rise in recent years. The demand has increased for provincial youth care services, special education, mental health care and care for children with moderate learning difficulties, and so has the number of young people applying for disability benefit. Delinquents are also getting younger.

The problems of children and families must be detected and addressed as early as possible, to prevent them from becoming more serious when they grow older. Essentially, this calls for a focus on prevention. Early identification, and above all, early intervention.

## **3. Binding commitments**

Solving the problems of children and families requires input from many different stakeholders: parents, professionals, agencies and young people themselves.

Undesirable situations cannot be allowed to continue. Everyone must take responsibility if there are signs that a child or family is in difficulty. Simply monitoring the situation, providing an ad hoc response or even turning a blind eye is no longer acceptable.<sup>1</sup>

The policy document of the Ministry for Youth and Families is an ambitious strategy based on nine priority areas. In *Every Opportunity for Every Child* these priorities are described in result-oriented terms and activities. Through this policy document new and better integrated services will be introduced, for example:

- Youth and Family Centres  
These centres will be set up in every municipality. Every centre will offer basic preventive youth policy services, youth health care and parenting support. They will be easily accessible for parents and children.
- Youth Monitor  
The youth monitor will present data about children and young people in the Netherlands and provide a coherent view of the state of Dutch children. Key indicators will introduce an overview of domains such as population, education, health, justice and labour. Many of these indicators can be subdivided into municipal and provincial data, and classified according to cultural background.

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<sup>1</sup> Youth and Family Programme *Every Opportunity for Every Child 2007–2011*. [www.jeugdengezin.nl](http://www.jeugdengezin.nl)

## Legislation on Children and Young People

In the Netherlands there is no encompassing law for issues on children and young people. The Youth Care Act, introduced in 2005, is the legal framework of youth care services for youth at risk and their families. Child day care is organised in a different law. This is also the case for education, the juvenile justice system, working conditions for young people and many other issues. A new development is the introduction of the Social Support Act (*Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning*) that has become effective in 2007. This law replaces the former Welfare Act.

### The Youth Care Act (*Wet op de jeugdzorg*)<sup>2</sup>

After a long period of negotiations and preparations, the Youth Care Act became effective in January 2005. Its aim is twofold: to ensure that better care is made available to young people and their parents (the clients in the youth care process) and to strengthen their position. The client is at the centre of a more transparent, simpler youth care system. This principle is reflected in five policy objectives. These are:

- The needs of the client come first
- Entitlement to youth care
- A single, recognisable access point to the youth care system (a youth care agency in each province)
- Integration of other services such as child abuse and neglect reporting and consultancy, (family) guardianship and probation
- Introduction of family coaching

### The Social Support Act (*Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning*)

General provisions (at local level) for children and young people were subject to the Welfare Act. From January 2007, this act is replaced by the Social Support Act (which also incorporates other legislations and provisions). The main aim of the Social Support Act is the participation of all citizens in society and to create a coherent supply of social support services at the local level. Although the Social Support Act is not directly aimed at children and young people, they are affected by this law. The act will create one window for local citizens where they can receive support. Municipalities have to develop a four-year plan for the services.



There are nine targets; one is directly aimed at support for young people with developmental or behavioural problems and parents with parenting problems.

With the introduction of the Social Support Act youth policy will be decentralised to the level of the local authorities.



# II. Family Policy and Child Protection

## Family Policy

Family policy in the Netherlands is characterised by:

- Recognition of the best interest of the child
- Support for the family and development of parenting skills

The majority of families in the Netherlands provide a healthy child-raising environment. Family relationships are characterised by stability and harmony, according to both parents and children. Parent-child relationships tend to be based on mutual affection rather than parental authority over the child. There has been a shift away from the authority-based family towards the negotiation-based family.

Most children grow up in two-parent families. About 97% of children aged between 0 and 4 live with two parents. This figure is 91% for children aged between 4 and 12.

Most children aged between 8 and 12 are part of a family with parents and one brother or sister. Almost as many children live with two parents and two or more siblings. Only 6% of all children are a single child with two parents.

Each year ± 200,000 babies are born. The average age of women becoming mothers for the first time is among the highest in the world (29.4 in 2004). Women have on average 1.7 children. Each year the parents/carers of approximately 51,000 children get divorced or split up. Approximately 8000 of these children will lose contact with one of the parents (mostly the father). In 2006 a law has been introduced forcing parents to make arrangements for the practical and financial care of their children in case of a divorce. Children have a right to see both parents, unless this is not in the best interest of the child.

### Type of households in the Netherlands 1995-2004<sup>3</sup>

	1995	2000	2004	1995	2000	2004
	*1000			in %		
One-person household	2109	2272	2424	33	33	34
Multiple-person household	4360	4529	4628	67	67	66
Couple living together (no kids)	1843	2016	2053	28	30	29
Not married	419	495	497	6	7	7
Married	1425	1521	1557	22	22	22
Couple living together (with kids)	2112	2082	2091	33	31	30
Not married	100	163	231	2	2	3
Married	2012	1920	1860	31	28	26
One-parent households	361	384	435	6	6	6
Mother in one-parent household	305	326	364	5	5	5
Father in one-parent household	56	58	70	1	1	1
Other	44	46	49	1	1	1
<b>Total households</b>	<b>6469</b>	<b>6801</b>	<b>7052</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

The Ministry for Youth and Families will be focusing more at family policy during the coming years. These are activities that will be implemented:

- Present a bill introducing a means-tested allowance for children as of 2009. In the meantime, in 2008, each household will receive a fixed allowance not based on the number of children.
- Introduce a parenting plan and measures to alleviate the effects of divorce on children.
- Explore supplementary incomes policy/child-related schemes, such as abolishing the job-search requirement for sole-parent benefit claimants with children aged up to five, and introducing an allowance for single-earner households with a chronically sick or disabled child or foster child.

<sup>3</sup> CBS, Netherlands Statistics, Yearbook 2005/CBS Statline

- Provide accessible, locally available advice on parenting (through the Youth and Families Centres).
- Extend statutory parental leave for all employees from 13 to 26 weeks.

### Work and family life

Parents have to combine work and family life. They can decide for themselves how to combine these tasks. It is quite common in the Netherlands that parents, mainly the mothers, work part-time. Part-time work is well-organised with pro-rata benefits. The government wants more people, and hence more parents, to enter the workforce. That is why measures have been implemented that makes it easier combining the two tasks: the Work and Care Act, the Working Hours (Adjustment) Act and the Child Day Care Act. In the Life Course Plan (Levensloopregeling) employees can save money to take time off, for example to take care of their children.

### Child Day Care Act

The Child Day Care Act has been introduced in 2005. The two key objectives of the legislation are the joint financing of child day care by parents, employers and government: quality guarantees and their regulation. The act does not provide an entitlement to a child day care place. Inspection of the services is carried out by the Municipal Health Care Services (GGD). The responsibility for Child Day Care has been transferred from



#### Use of day care facilities

The number of Dutch children spending part of the week in childcare because both parents are working is increasing steadily. Day care or babysitting facilities are used for 61% of all babies. Childcare is organized for four in five 2- and 3-year-olds. At this age many children go to playgroups.

The use of childcare diminishes once the children are in school. One in 15 children aged between 4 and 12 go to childcare after school.

the Ministry of Health to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment in 2002, and then to the Ministry of Education in 2007.

### Parenting Support

Legally, parenting support is partly an obligation of the health service (e.g. the baby well clinics) and falls under the new Social Support Act. This means it is the obligation of local governments to provide parenting support. Their role in relation to the law on Youth Care has also been more clarified. Municipalities are now responsible for five areas: information and advice, 'spotting' potential problems, guidance and counselling, light pedagogical support and care coordination at local level.

All parents, young people and children must have access to an approachable, recognisable point of contact close to home where they can get advice and support on a wide range of parenting issues. During the coming years Youth and Family Centres will be set up in every municipality. Every centre will provide basic preventive children's services, health care, parenting support and family coaching. The municipalities will be responsible for setting up the Youth and Family Centres, including conclusive agreements on the coordination of the care provided.

### Ban on corporal punishment

An important development in the area of children's rights is the legislative proposal to prevent childhood violence. The article concerned reads as follows: 'Parents are under an obligation to take care of their children and to raise them without using either mental or physical violence or any other type of humiliating treatment.' The proposal should contribute to the reduction of child abuse and its primary goal is to set a standard. In addition, the new article must make parents aware of the way they lay down boundaries for their children. The penalisation of child abuse in the Dutch Criminal Code will not change because of the legislative proposal. However, the government expects that the explicit standard to be set will have a reflection on Dutch criminal law. Due to the standard, someone accused of child abuse calling on parental disciplinary powers as a ground for justification will have more difficulty before a judge. In the past this ground was sometimes accepted. The expectation is furthermore that the legislative proposal will make it easier for childcare professionals to speak to parents about the use of violence and to convince or force them to accept parenting support.

## Child Protection

The Netherlands has an extensive system of child protection in place. This system is carried out by the Child Protection Council. The responsibility for the council lies with the Ministry of Justice. It has three main tasks: to provide protection, to arrange child access and other matters following parental divorce, and to oversee the course of criminal proceedings involving minors. Upon receiving a referral, the council will determine whether the child's development is indeed at risk, and if so, to what extent. The council will then advise the juvenile courts, which can impose a child protection order on the parents, impose a supervision order, or overrule the normal parental authority. A supervision order restricts the parents' authority, part of which is then assumed by an official guardian. When the parental authority is removed outright, a guardian is appointed.

The number of child protection orders has increased over the last years and the expectation is that this increase will continue. The reasons for this are more social attention for child abuse and domestic violence. The previous government has launched the Better Protection programme which will be continued by the Ministry for Youth and Families. This programme is aimed at improving the child protection system. For example, it introduces the Delta method of family supervision, which decreases the caseload of family guardians. It will also speed up the decision-making process of child protection orders.

## Child Abuse

Child abuse in the Netherlands is approached primarily as a family, medical or psychosocial problem. Criminal law only appears in the case of sexual abuse or serious physical abuse. The provisions of the Dutch Criminal Code are tailored to these forms of child abuse. Unless deliberate harm to health can be demonstrated, legislation provides no opportunities to prosecute parents who have neglected or psychologically abused their child. Based on studies in other countries, it is estimated that yearly between 50,000 and 80,000 children in the Netherlands become victim of child abuse and 50 children die.

In the Netherlands there is no legal obligation to report child abuse in general. Recently a reporting code has been developed. The reporting code is a set of rules of conduct and instructions for citizens and professionals when they suspect or identify a case of child abuse. Medical professionals or social workers who come across, or suspect there is a case of child abuse, have to decide for themselves whether it is in the child's interest



to report it. There is a lot of awareness training for professionals dealing with children to detect signs of abuse. By adapting the reporting code professionals feel supported in their efforts to tackle child abuse and it allows scope for professionals to exercise their own personal judgement.

The Advice and Reporting Centre for Child Abuse (ARCAN) is the central agency for requesting advice about or reporting child abuse and neglect. The ARCAN offers advice and answers questions in cases of child abuse. It also collates reports of child abuse. Each province (and major urban region) has its own Advice and Reporting Centre for Child Abuse and Neglect, part of the Youth Care Agency. There are 14 such centres in the Netherlands. Anyone who suspects child abuse can (and should) contact the centre for advice, either by phone or in person. The centre will then provide appropriate support, but will not take any action in the first instance. If the person reporting the problem finds it difficult to take action, a formal report of child abuse can be made. The centre then assumes responsibility for investigating the circumstances and determining whether there is indeed any question of child abuse. If this proves to be the case, the centre will attempt to ensure that appropriate action is taken. Where those involved are willing to accept help on a voluntary basis, the centre can refer a case to a social worker from the Youth Care Agency. The number of calls to ARCAN has been increasing over the years. There is one national telephone number.

Children can also contact the Children Helpline. The national phone number is free for children and the help lines receive 500,000 calls a year (and website enquiries). The governmental policy will focus at preventing child abuse during the coming years. The Youth and Family Centres will play an important role in this.

#### Child Abuse; age of the child (2005)

Age	%
15 - 17	8.8%
12 - 14	14.9%
9 - 11	16.8%
6 - 8	18.8%
3 - 5	21.0%
0 - 2	19.7%

#### Nature of Abuse\*

Nature	%
Physical abuse	20.9%
Physical neglect	22.3%
Physical violence	21.8%
Emotional neglect	4.2%
Sexual abuse	7.4%
Witness of domestic abuse	27.8%
Other	18.8%
None	0.2%
Not known	4.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>165.4%</b>


\* The total percentage is higher than 100% because more than one type of abuse can be reported.

Source: Advice and Reporting Centres on Child Abuse (ARCAN)

## Juvenile Justice

The objective of the juvenile justice system is to reduce criminal behaviour of young people. The aim is to prevent the first offence and to avoid recurrence. The starting point of the system is that quick, effective and early intervention is needed. There is not one risk factor that leads to criminal behaviour; it is usually an accumulation of causes. Nevertheless, certainly the younger the offender the worse the outlook is for further criminal behaviour. Young offenders not only commit more crimes, but also more serious ones. Young migrants are overrepresented in the statistics.

A number of facilities are dealing specifically with the implementation of juvenile criminal law, which applies to young people aged 12 to 17 years. Juvenile sentencing is historically largely pedagogic and corrective in nature. Juvenile criminal law can also be applied to 18-to-21-year-olds if the Court decides that this is appropriate for the particular offender, or if there were special circumstances relating to the crime. By the same rationale, 16-to-17-year-olds may be subjected to adult law.



### Separation of child protection and youth justice placements

Young people that have committed a crime and have been sentenced are placed by a judge in a juvenile justice institution. Up till now, young people with severe behavioural problems were – with a child protection order – placed in the same institutions. This was not a satisfactory solution. At this moment new forms of care for the group of young people with severe behavioural problems are being created (closed institutions).

One of the policy developments in relation to juvenile justice has been the 'justice to young people' programme (*Jeugd Terecht*). The objective of the programme is to prevent first-time offending and to reduce recidivism. Customisation, effectiveness and chain cooperation are priorities in this respect. *Jeugd Terecht* consists of concrete actions that must contribute to a considerable reduction in juvenile crime.

The government aim for the coming years is to reduce youth crime by 10%, in line with the *Safety Starts with Prevention strategy*.

## Integration and Radicalisation

There has been a focus on the integration of migrants in Dutch society during the previous years. Special attention has been given to migrant families (parenting support) and young children (Dutch language programmes in pre-school and primary school). Campaigns on anti-discrimination have been funded and the Ministry for Immigration and Integration has launched the & Campaign, focusing at positive contacts between native and migrant Dutch inhabitants.

Also there are a growing number of migrant young people that radicalise in name of Islam. These young people reject an open, pluralistic and tolerant society and in the worst case they are willing to use violence to meet their goals. The average age of this group is going down. The Dutch government – both at the local and national level – cooperates with (Islamic) organisations to reach out to these groups and avoid radicalisation. Programmes have been started, also on professionalising youth workers and police to detect signs of extreme behaviour.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs together with other ministries involved has launched an action plan against radicalisation. Although the plan is not exclusively aimed at young people, they are an important target group. The plan is focussing at empowering potential groups and individuals prone to radicalise, increasing the skills and competences of parents and people working with young people, and work on early detection of signs of radicalisation.

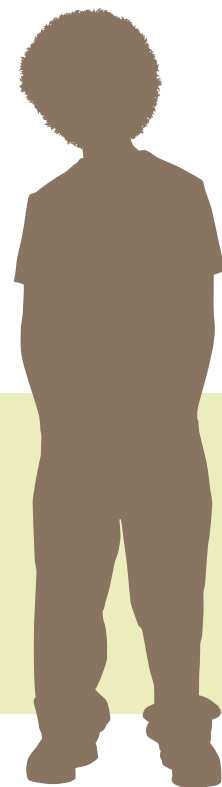
# III. Health Services and the Child and Youth Care System

## The (Local) Health Service

### Health Insurance System

As of January 2006, a new insurance system for curative health care came into force in the Netherlands. Under the new Health Insurance Act (*Zorgverzekeringswet*), all residents of the Netherlands are obliged to take out a health insurance. The new system is a private health insurance with social conditions. The health insurance for children up to 18 is free.

The Netherlands has a health service in place for children from 0 to 19 years, which falls under the responsibility of the municipality and is carried out by the local health service (GGD). The health service includes the baby well clinics and toddler, primary and secondary school health care. Until the age of 19 there are regular check-ups and screenings. The role of the local health service is monitoring development, vaccinations, screening, information and advice, and referral to more specialised health services when necessary. The local health service also has specific tasks such as inspecting the health and safety regulations at child day care centres and introducing specific programmes on the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse of children and young people. The local health services will work very closely with the newly created Youth and Family Centres. In most municipalities they will be integrated in this central children's service. Also a national system of a digital child dossier will be developed (to be used locally), which will contain all data on the health and other relevant information of each child between 0 and 19 years.



In the Dutch Public Health Status and Forecast<sup>4</sup> it was stated that the main factors contributing to the burden of disease in children (0-14 years) are injuries due to (traffic) accidents, asthma and COPD, congenital abnormalities and intellectual disability. The relevant factors in young people (15-24 years) and young adults (25-44 years) are depression, anxiety disorders, alcohol dependence and suicide, though traffic accidents also continue to play an important role.

There is still much unhealthy behaviour among young people, in spite of the attention devoted to this group in recent years. This is true, among other things, for smoking (44% of 15-to-19-year-olds), the consumption of five or more glasses of alcohol the last time they went out (39% of secondary school students), and unsafe sex (6%-9% of secondary school students). Furthermore, 9 out of 10 youngsters eat insufficient amounts of fruit and vegetables. In general, there has been an unfavourable trend in almost all lifestyle factors in the past ten years, with the use of cannabis, for example, increasing by approximately 30%.

Data on child health in the Netherlands are collected through for instance the Child Health Monitoring System. Data on risk factors and behaviour come from regularly conducted youth surveys .

### **BOS**

A special incentive grant has been released by the national government under the name of Community, Education and Sport (*Buurt, Onderwijs en Sport / BOS*). The aim of this grant is to tackle sport and physical mobility deficits of children and young people between 4 and 19 years in relation to welfare, sport, exercise and education, and to diminish problems of nuisance caused by youngsters. Municipalities were able to apply for this grant in cooperation with partners from schools, welfare and health organisations. The projects (at the local level) will be carried out until 2011. Many of the projects that have received grants involve community schools.

### **Teenage pregnancies**

The Netherlands is among the countries with the lowest number of teenage mothers. In 2004, 3000 children had a mother younger than 20 years old. More than one-third of children with a teenage mother live in a one-parent family. A little over half of all teenage mothers have a migrant background. Girls from an Antillean / Arabian background are most likely to become a teenage mother. They have also the highest chance to become a single parent. Girls from Moroccan or Turkish background also have a higher chance to have their children at a very young age, but they are usually married.

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<sup>4</sup> Netherlands Institute for Public Health (NIGZ), 2003

### **Medical conduct towards minors**

The legal position of patients who are minors is set out in the Medical Treatment Agreement Act. The act differentiates between three categories of under-age patients. The first group consists of patients aged 16 and 17. This group has the same position as those patients who are aged 18 and above: they are regarded as completely independent. In principle, patients aged 12 to 16 years can only be treated with the permission of their legal representatives (parents or guardian). They exercise their own rights as patients, but in general, the parent or guardian is entitled to all information. The last category, patients who are younger than 12 years of age, must be represented by the person(s) legally charged with their care (parent or guardian). The patient is not able to exercise any rights. The physician is required to provide the child with as much information as possible.

### **Euthanasia and minors**

Under a law introduced on 1 April 2002, doctors who perform euthanasia are no longer punishable, provided they have followed the prescribed procedures and reported death by non-natural causes to the authorities.

The due care requirements stipulate, among other things, that:

- the patient's request to die must be voluntary and well considered;
- his condition is hopeless and his pain unbearable;
- a second doctor must be consulted and
- the euthanasia or assisted suicide is performed with due medical care.

Furthermore, the physician is obliged to report that the cause of death is euthanasia or assisted suicide. The physician's action is then examined by a regional review committee to determine whether it was performed with due care.

The legislation also includes regulations regarding termination of life on request and assisted suicide involving minors. It is generally assumed that minors too have the discernment to arrive at a sound and well-considered request to end their life. Regarding the various age groups, the new legislation links up with the existing legislation concerning medical conduct towards minors. Children of 16 and 17 can, in principle, make their own decision. Their parents must, however, be involved in the decision-making process regarding the ending of their life. For children aged 12 to 16, the approval of parents or guardian is required.

Furthermore, the doctor must comply with the due care requirements mentioned above when he agrees to help a minor commit suicide.



## The Child and Youth Care System

Key priority of youth policy in the Netherlands is the support for children and young people at risk and their families. This is organised in the child and youth care system, which legislative basis is the Youth Care Act.

Yearly, about 5% of all children and young people receive a type of youth care ( $\pm$  160,000). Of these children and young people some 5,500 are supervised by the state and 25,000 receive residential care.

The child and youth care system has gone through many structural changes during the previous years. One of the key developments is the introduction of a Youth Care Agency in all of the 12 provinces. The Youth Care Agency is the access point to the youth care system. Young people and their parents can approach a youth care agency on their own accord, if local agencies are unable to support them with their problems. The office will then decide whether assistance is indicated.

The new law on youth care gives the youth care agencies a legal status. Each of the Netherlands' provinces and major urban regions has an agency. To ensure easy access to the agency, there are also a number of field offices around each province. These annexes will be able to undertake some or all of the tasks of the main provincial agencies.

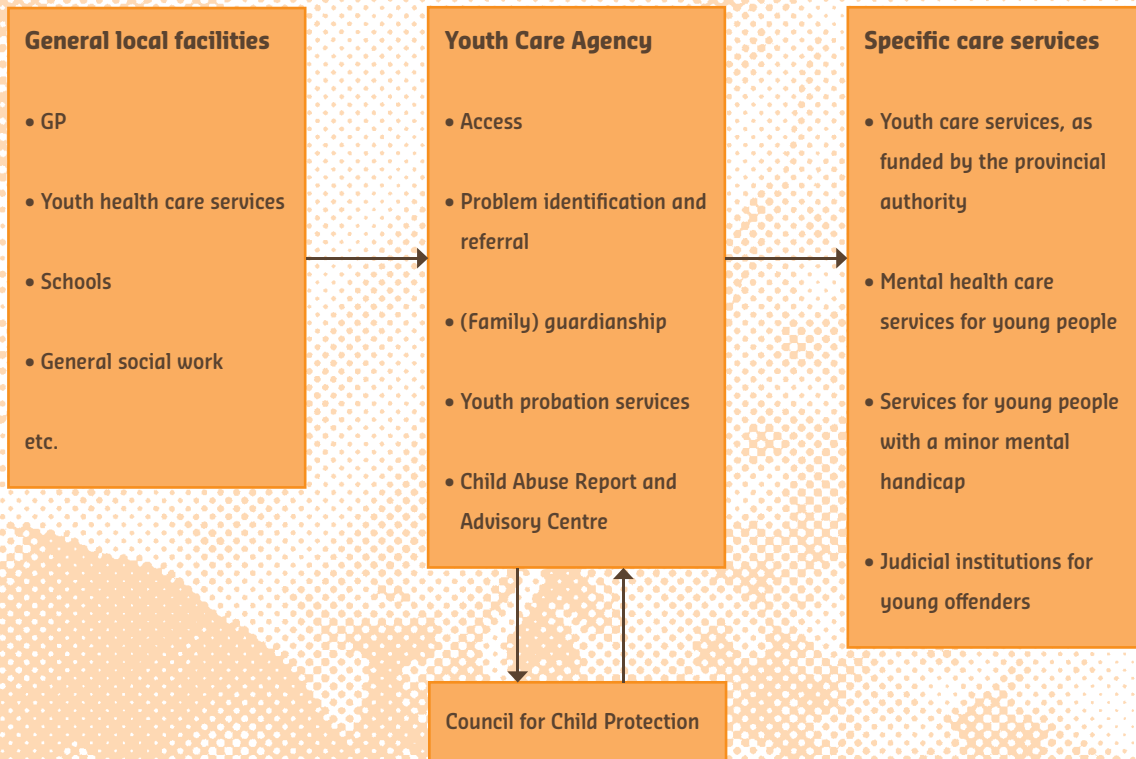
A Youth Care Agency's most important job is assessing requests for assistance and deciding what kind of care or support (if any) is required. The client's needs are considered in their own right, rather than in the context of the available forms of youth care. If the youth care agency concludes that the client is in need of care, a referral document is drawn up. This is a formal statement to the effect that a particular type of care is required. When assessing a case, a youth care agency will always consider whether family coaching is appropriate.



## The role of the Youth Care Agency in the care chain

The care that a young person and his or her family receive is provided via a chain with various links. The primary responsibility for the upbringing of children lies with the parents. In case of problems the Youth Care Agency has a central position in the chain of care. It forms the link between local general facilities and care services of a more intensive and specialised nature.

This is the chain of care services for children and their parents, in which the Youth Care Agency has a central role:



# IV. Education, Leisure Time and Participation

## The Education System

Children in the Netherlands are obliged, from the moment they reach the age of 5 until the end of the school year they turn 16, to participate in full-time (five days a week) education. Thereafter, education is partially compulsory up to age 18. The compulsory school career consists of eight years in primary education, followed by a minimum of three years in further education. This is statutorily laid down in the Compulsory Education Act. School entrance is possible at the age of 4. Approximately 95% of all children start school when they turn four (entrance is possible at any day of the year, except of course for weekends and school holidays).

## Pre-school and primary education

As in many other countries early childhood education has experienced a surge of policy attention over the past decade in the Netherlands. Policymakers have recognised that equitable access to quality early childhood education can strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning for all children and support the broad educational and social needs of families.

There is an increasing concern that a growing group of children enter school with an educational deficit, especially because of problems with the Dutch language. There is more cooperation between the playschools and first years of primary education to ensure a smoother transfer. Special (evidence-based) programmes have been introduced. The Ministry of Education has also introduced a 'weight' system in primary school, where children receive a certain weight based on the education level of the parents. Schools with many children whose parents have low educational standards receive more money than schools with, for example, many parents having a university degree. In the past the 'weight' system was also based on ethnicity, but research has shown that the educational level of parents is a better indicator for children's success or failure at school.

The Ministry of Education will work during the coming years on harmonising the playgroups and child day care centres. A special law to enforce this integration is being prepared. This will ensure a more equal pre-school period for all Dutch children.

### Secondary education

Secondary education has different levels in the Netherlands and prepares for either work and further vocational training or further education (e.g. university). Secondary education consists of a first and second phase. The first phase is of a founding nature (basic education). The second phase of education is part of the school type that prepares for further and university education. Major educational innovations have been introduced in this phase during recent years. For example, the *Studiehuis* concept that involves pupils becoming much more independent in choosing their subjects, in planning their educational activities and in working (alone or in groups) on specific projects. Key objective of this fundamental change is to prepare these pupils better for the next phase in their education and for their future functioning as independent individuals in society and in working environments.

### Community Schools

An important development is the concept of Community Schools. The Community School is a way of integrating other community-based activities and services. The Community School links education with other services that are important to children and parents, such as education support, childcare, health centres, etc. By combining these services in one location, they become more accessible and the various services can be made more compatible with one another.



The Community Schools concept relies heavily on participation – both by the children and by the parents. Parents are much more involved and pupil input is welcomed. The various activities at the Community School encourage children and young people to enhance their social skills, and to learn interactively through participation. The Community School is vital in the fight against social and educational development disadvantage.<sup>5</sup>

## Leisure Time and Voluntary work

Leisure time and voluntary work are primarily the responsibility of the local authorities in the Netherlands. The way young people spend their leisure time has changed dramatically over the past decades. One important change is that where in earlier times many leisure time activities took place in public places – in the street or on the sports field – and often involved other people, today leisure time activities are far more individual in nature. Social-cultural facilities and volunteer youth work have suffered a decline in interest because of this change. Another change is that young people have less leisure time than ten years ago – in other words, time that does not have to be spent on compulsory activities such as homework, school and household tasks. On average, school-age children have about 40 hours a week of leisure time. It is becoming increasingly common for this time to be spent away from the family.

<sup>5</sup> Please see [www.bredescholnizw.nl](http://www.bredescholnizw.nl)

<sup>6</sup> *Youth & Policy in the Netherlands. Ten Years of Developments.* NIZW International Centre, 2001

## Freedom of education

One of the important characteristics of the education system in the Netherlands, which is described in article 23 of the constitution, is the freedom of education and educational institution. This means that civic organisations have the right to establish schools based on religious, lifestyle or pedagogical-didactical principles, and that they are entitled to determine how they wish to organize and design their education. Thanks to the constitution, the Netherlands has a broad range of schools based on a wide variety of denominations. These may be public or private schools; public schools are non-affiliated. Private schools may be either parochial (based on religious principles) or general special schools that are based on lifestyle or pedagogical-didactical principles. Public schools may also be based on pedagogic-didactic principles, such as Dalton and Montessori schools.

In terms of financing, article 23 of the constitution does not differentiate between public and private schools. All schools are required to meet the quality standards set by the Ministry; these standards reflect things like core goals, number of class hours per year, training and certification requirements for teachers and parent participation<sup>6</sup>.

After school two-thirds of all children are active in clubs. Sport is a favourite pastime for children: 85% of all children between 4 and 12 participate in sports at least one hour a week. Watching television is also a major leisure activity. Six out of ten children aged between 4 and 12 spend ten hours a week or more watching TV.

Of the age group 16 to 25 approximately 20% perform some form of voluntary work. For the purpose of comparison, 34% of those aged 26 to 64 are involved in voluntary work and 39% of those aged 65 and over.

### **Incentive scheme young volunteers and social training**

From 2004 to 2006 the Ministry of Health, Care and Welfare initiated the incentive scheme for (long-term) voluntary activities of young people. The scheme was aimed at voluntary organisations that work for and with young volunteers at local level, such as (national) youth organisations and sports clubs. From 2007 a new scheme is in place.

### **Social Practical Training**

The Ministry for Youth and Families will introduce an obligatory social training placement during secondary education. These placements that will take place during school hours are primarily designed to familiarise young people with the society in which they live and to encourage them to make a contribution to it.

Sports are the most popular form of leisure activity among young people, with a few reservations. The interest in sports declines with increasing age. Young people are also less interested in traditional sports – they are more drawn to modern sports. Relatively few ethnic minority young people or young people with disadvantaged backgrounds are involved in organized sport activities. The Dutch government has recently announced a new programme especially targeted at stimulating sport activities by migrant young people.

Local authorities are responsible for the environmental planning. Child-friendly planning is a growing concern. Together with the Ministry for Environmental Planning the Child Friendly Network in the Netherlands has developed a manual on play-friendly areas.

### **Voluntary work by young people**

Especially young people (18–25) seem to be less interested in voluntary work. An explanation is that young people nowadays find ‘having fun’ and financial comfort more important than philanthropy. A lot of them have a job after school and in the weekends, therefore less time for voluntary work. On the other hand, more young people are involved in ‘informal’ care, helping friends and relatives.

A number of programmes have started to ‘modernise’ voluntary work in order to meet



the needs of young people. This means e.g. short, flexible activities, changing organisations to become more open, lowering the age of the boards of organisations, etc.

## Participation

Participation policy is aimed at enabling young people to develop into independent and socially committed citizens, so they can function effectively at school, work and society in general. Participation in a narrower sense, that is, participation in political activities, is a means to this end. As in the case of other policy sectors, it is important to involve stakeholders in decision-making. For young people this is more difficult, because they are often unorganised, relatively inexperienced, and need to be addressed in a way they can relate to. Nevertheless, if youth participation is successful and creative, it can be an example to other sectors.

Young people cannot do all this alone. This is also true for the government in its social task of enabling young people to develop. Schools, for instance, have an important role to play in this respect. However, a strong involvement of citizens in social organisations – ‘civil society’ in the widely used shorthand – is also very important. The Netherlands does not have a general statutory definition of ‘youth participation’, let alone legislative obligations. However, many initiatives have been supported.

The Dutch National Youth Council (*Nationale Jeugdraad*) started work in 2001 with the financial support of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. The National Youth Council represents more than 25 national youth organisations including political youth organisations, student organisations and social organisations. The National Youth Council is responsible for:

- improving youth participation at national and local level;
- advocating the best interests of young people and youth organisations.

The Ministry for Youth and Families will introduce an annual youth award to the municipality with the best youth participation initiative. It will also set up an agreement with municipalities on ways to promote youth participation. In this respect, there will also be a focus at creating a child-friendly environment. By 2011 all municipalities have to have means of consulting young people, partly with a view to creating a child-friendly environment.

# V. Youth and Employment

Youth unemployment is twice as high as adult unemployment. The number of unemployed youngsters grew from 10% in 1997 to 12.1% in 2004. The unemployment of young ethnic minorities (15–24 years) is between 20 and 30%. Now that the economy is picking up again, youth employment is slowly decreasing.



## Youth Unemployment Task Force

The current focus on youth unemployment in the Netherlands started in 2003 with a *Youth Unemployment Action Plan* submitted to Parliament. From this emerged the Youth Unemployment Task Force. It was charged with promoting the implementation of policy at national, sectoral, but especially regional and local levels. The task force was established in 2004.

The primary goal of the task force is to achieve 40,000 youth jobs for young unemployed people during the current cabinet period. On the one hand, by stimulating employers to make youth jobs available. On the other hand, by mobilising the participating organisations to place as many unemployed youths as possible. The year 2004 also saw the start of a strategy to return unemployed youths to school or work within six months. The focus of the task force is harnessing existing resources, summarised in the 'three C's' of: Cooperation, Communication and Campaigning.

A special tax arrangement has been introduced to encourage businesses to employ young people. It enables employers to take on unemployed youth and have them retrained until they get a starting qualification. Meantime, various businesses – also in the SMB sector (small, medium enterprises) – have promised to create 20,000 youth jobs. These will be special jobs where young people can gain work experience for periods ranging from three to 12 months (while retaining benefits).

The main organisation for job mediation in the Netherlands is the Centre for Work and Income (*Centrum voor Werk en Inkomen / CWI*). The CWI gets 8 million euros a year to organize short-term activities, such as job application trainings and individual counselling projects, especially for young people who have personal difficulties finding employment. The CWI is also the organisation where job seekers apply for unemployment benefit or social security. Many CWIs have a special unit for young people.

Another initiative designed to help young people find employment is the 'job passport'. Many youngsters leave school with no certificates, so they have no basic qualifications. Their competencies and talents are not recorded 'on paper', so their position on the labour market is weaker than it should be. The job passport is based on competencies gained elsewhere: besides specifying any training courses, it describes the experience and talents of the holder, such as the ability to work in a team, creativity, technical skills, etc.

## School Drop-outs

Quite a high number of young people in the Netherlands are leaving school without having enough starting qualifications that enable them a smooth transition into the labour market. Part of the Youth Agenda of *Operation Young* has been to reduce the number of school drop-outs. In 2003 the government set the target of decreasing the number of school drop-outs by 30% in 2006 and 50% in 2010. The Ministry for Youth and Families will continue with this approach and has also introduced a compulsory combined work and learning scheme for young people up to 27 and will introduce a broad, inclusive system countrywide to ensure appropriate education.

# VI. Dutch Youth Policy and International Developments

## Convention on the Rights of the Child

In the Netherlands, the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1995 was an important step in boosting youth policy higher up the agenda. The elements of the convention – participation, protection and provisions – were already present in youth policy in the Netherlands, but were never defined as such. In recent years, the convention has become more and more important as the foundation on which youth policy in the Netherlands is based.

The CRC provides a basis for the concept of youth participation as it is interpreted and implemented in the Netherlands, where it is defined primarily in terms of children and young people being actively involved in and sharing responsibility for their living environment. Youth participation is associated with having a certain degree of freedom and with taking initiative. The important thing is that children and young people are involved both in the thinking process and in the activities and discussions concerning them. It all starts with joining in. Society cannot tolerate a situation in which children and young people stay on the side, do not get an education or join the work force, and do not become part of the social structure. Young people are the future of society, and society has high hopes for the young. When a young person leaves school before getting a basic diploma, that young person's chances of succeeding in society drastically reduced, but there is also a higher risk of a waste of talent and investment. Therefore, children and young people have to be fully involved to the best of their potential. If the education offered fails to capture the interest of the young, it is more likely that they will drop out, as opposed to when education is matched to their experiences and their interests. Young people need to be taken seriously and be involved in giving input and taking part in the debate. Youth participation can, for instance, be achieved through youth panels and youth councils that focus on joining in the discussion, exerting influence, having a say and standing up for young people's rights. These formal structures are not the only or most important ways for young people to participate.





Youth participation allows children and young people to exert an influence on and be involved in their community.

Protection is another cornerstone of the CRC. The Netherlands has many regulations and facilities that serve to protect children and young people. This responsibility lies primarily with the parents or carers, as stipulated in the Civil Code. If things threaten to go wrong, then the government is responsible for providing support and protection. It is further responsible for developing policies that stimulate the positive development of all children, while at the same time pursuing a policy of support and protection for those groups that are vulnerable. A notable youth policy development in the Netherlands, as far as protection is concerned – particularly for vulnerable groups – has been the adoption of the Youth Care Act in 2005. This legislation for the first time reflects the right of children and young people to youth care. It also simplifies and improves access to youth care, for both children and parents.

The convention also addresses the right to provisions such as education and health care. Again, there have been many developments in this field in recent years. More possibilities have been created for parenting support. New legislation on local social support will enhance the potential for municipalities to create structures that are more coherent. The law on child day care supports parents to reconcile work and family life. There is also much more emphasis on general facilities for children and young people at a local level, such as playgrounds.

## European Union developments

The youth agenda of the European Union also has an effect on the policies concerning children and young people in the Netherlands. Recent developments such as the White Paper on Youth, the European Youth Pact and the Communication on a Strategy on the Rights of the Child are related to and have an impact on policy areas in the Netherlands, such as youth work, youth employment and participation. EU funding programmes, e.g. the *Youth in Action* Programme, have enabled thousands of Dutch young people to gain international experience abroad, which has given them many valuable experiences and competencies.

# VII. Information

## Websites

For more information on youth policy please visit the website [www.youthpolicy.nl](http://www.youthpolicy.nl). This website gives information on youth policy, practice and provisions in the Netherlands. It covers a wide range of subjects – from general information on the organisation of youth policy in the Netherlands to more specific themes and policy areas. It includes fact sheets, useful addresses and links to relevant organisations for children and youth (governmental and non-governmental) in the Netherlands.

Information about the policies and activities of the Dutch government concerning youth can be found at the website of the ministry for Youth and Families: [www.jeugdengazin.nl](http://www.jeugdengazin.nl).

More information on the implementation of the Rights of the Child and reporting in relation to the Convention in the Netherlands can be found at [www.kinderrechten.nl](http://www.kinderrechten.nl).

Data on children and young people in the Netherlands can be found at the website of the youth monitor, which is hosted by Netherlands Statistics: <http://jeugdmonitor.cbs.nl>.

Most websites of relevant organisations for children and youth in the Netherlands contain little or no information in any other language than Dutch.



## Relevant Organisations

Ministry for Youth and Families  
PO Box 16166  
2500 BD The Hague  
The Netherlands  
Telephone: + 31 (0)70 340 54 97  
Fax: + 31 (0)70 340 62 93  
Website: [www.jeugdengezin.nl](http://www.jeugdengezin.nl)

Dutch National Youth Council  
Kromme Nieuwegracht 58  
3512 HL Utrecht  
The Netherlands  
Telephone: + 31 (0)30 230 35 75  
Fax: + 31 (0)30 230 35 85  
Email: [info@jeugdraad.nl](mailto:info@jeugdraad.nl)  
Website: [www.jeugdraad.nl](http://www.jeugdraad.nl)

National Coalition on The Rights of the Child  
c/o Defence for Children International / The  
Netherlands  
PO Box 75297  
1070 AG Amsterdam  
The Netherlands  
Telephone: + 31 (0)20 420 37 71  
Fax: + 31 (0)20 420 38 32  
Email: [info@defenceforchildren.nl](mailto:info@defenceforchildren.nl)  
Website: [www.kinderrechten.nl](http://www.kinderrechten.nl)

Netherlands Youth Institute  
PO Box 19221  
3501 DE Utrecht  
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Email: [infojeugd@nji.nl](mailto:infojeugd@nji.nl)  
Website: [www.nji.nl](http://www.nji.nl)



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The Netherlands Youth Institute is the Dutch national institute for compiling, verifying and disseminating knowledge on youth matters, such as youth care, parenting support and child education. The Netherlands Youth Institute's main aim is to improve the physical, cognitive, mental and social development of children and young people by improving the quality and effectiveness of the services rendered to them and to their parents or carers. As an expert centre, the Netherlands Youth Institute connects scientific research to the practitioners' need for knowledge. It supports the youth sector by advising on policy, programmes and implementation, and by training professionals in evidence-based methods.

The Netherlands Youth Institute / NJi started work in 2007 as a result of a merger of former institutes engaged in youth issues.

For general questions on the Netherlands Youth Institute or one of its subjects, please call the Netherlands Youth Institute, Infolijn, +31 30 230 65 64, or send an email to [infojeugd@nji.nl](mailto:infojeugd@nji.nl).

For questions on international partnership and exchange programmes, please call the Netherlands Youth Institute, International Department, +31 30 2306 550, or send an email to [internationaal@nji.nl](mailto:internationaal@nji.nl).

For English information on youth policy in the Netherlands, please check our website [www.youthpolicy.nl](http://www.youthpolicy.nl).

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