

## Jury report

### KHMW Jan Brouwer Thesis Prize 2026 – Law

**Vaishnavi Ramalingam, LLM, Leiden University**

*A Child Rights-Based Approach To Recognizing The Right To Positive Peer Relationships*

The jury has unanimously decided that the winner of the *KHMW Jan Brouwer Thesis Prize 2026 for Law* is Vaishnavi Ramalingam, for her thesis entitled *A Child Rights-Based Approach To Recognizing The Right To Positive Peer Relationships*.

The thesis written by Vaishnavi Ramalingam is of extraordinary quality. It is fair to say that the same is to some extent also true for a few of the other 20 theses submitted for the Jan Brouwer Thesis Prize for Law. However, at the end of the day, the jury concluded that Vaishnavi Ramalingam's thesis scored highest, based on criteria such as originality, level of complexity, topicality of the problem researched, methodology, structure, and clarity in writing. The thesis is remarkably original: children's right to have meaningful relationships with their peers has rarely been examined in legal scholarship. This is striking, given that the topic is of considerable societal importance, particularly in light of growing concerns about the mental wellbeing of children and young people. Vaishnavi has indeed recognised this and filled the knowledge gap. In doing so, she has also demonstrated a high degree of independent and original thought.

The thesis is remarkably concise, well written and well structured, reflecting high-level research in the fields of social sciences and law. What is truly distinctive about this thesis is that, drawing on insights from developmental psychology, it shows that children and adolescents have an empirically substantiated interest in strong peer relationships. By bringing this interdisciplinary argument into the legal debate, it provides a robust foundation for recognising children's right to meaningful peer ties. Moreover, moving beyond one's own discipline and integrating social-scientific and legal knowledge is a highly complex undertaking, which Vaishnavi has handled in an impressive and admirable manner. The thesis explains in great clarity the importance of positive peer relationships during early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence. Moreover, in doing so, this analysis is accompanied by poems from children. How illustrative, and moving, it is to read the poem written by Mia, 6 years old:

*I love summer  
It's my favourite season  
Going to my grandma's  
Or to the beach  
But my favourite thing is playing with my friends*

Poems such as this one effectively illustrate the conclusion that peer relationships are central to the development and mental health of children.

Against this background, one would expect that positive peer relationships are recognized in children's rights law. But the thesis convincingly shows that this is hardly the case. A right to positive peer relationships can only indirectly be derived from the Convention on the Rights of the Child and from the work of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Vaishnavi

Ramalingam leaves no stone unturned before drawing this conclusion, including by analysing all 626 Concluding Observations of the Committee. It therefore does not come as a surprise that she argues that a standalone right to positive peer relationships should be established. What is more, she also outlines the contours of such a right and responds to possible objections. Official, explicit recognition of this right is not something rather general or superficial, making the existing human rights framework more complete. As Vaishnavi Ramalingam states in her conclusion: this right “must be reflected in meaningful legal efforts and policies, as well as in public transportation, infrastructure, education systems, institutions, justice systems, digital environments, and every other relevant space related to childhood”.

For these reasons, the jury is convinced that the thesis written by Vaishnavi Ramalingam fully deserves the KHMW Jan Brouwer Thesis Prize 2026 for Law.

*Prof. dr. N.M. (Niels) Blokker, hoogleraar internationaal institutioneel recht Universiteit Leiden*

*Prof. dr. mr. V. (Vanessa) Mak, hoogleraar burgerlijk recht Universiteit Leiden*

*Prof. mr. W.M. (Wendy) Schrama, hoogleraar familierecht en rechtsvergelijking en directeur Utrecht Centre for European Research into Family Law (UCERF) Universiteit Utrecht*

*Prof. mr. dr. M. (Michel) Vols, hoogleraar openbare-orderecht Rijksuniversiteit Groningen*

The online meeting of the jury, chaired by KHMW social member mr. S.G. (Simone) Brummelhuis, took place on December 15th, 2025. Also present at the meeting was prof. W.B. (Wim) Drees, academic secretary for the social sciences and humanities of the KHMW.