



Supporting families to focus on abilities and not deficits

Country: Bulgaria, Sofia and Plovdiv Organisation: For Our Children Foundation/Open Society Foundation

MANAGEMENT SUMMARY: In the period 2012–2014 For Our Children foundation developed and implemented an Early Childhood programme within its “I Deserve Childhood” project, funded by the Open Society Foundation. The programme targets children aged 0–3 years, the prematurely born, and children with disabilities, at risk of developing a disability, or with developmental difficulties, as well as their families. At the end of 2015, the programme has supported the development of 352 young children in Bulgaria.

- The approach does not focus on deficits, but rather works with the strengths of the children and with their abilities.
- The child is measured against herself/himself by monitoring pre- and post-programme development and noting what has changed during the period of support and intervention
- Activities are planned and implemented based on an assessment of the child’s development and progress of the individual child’s development.



Parents are not excluded
but partners



Empowering families to have a better
understanding of their child

The “I Deserve a Childhood” programme provides services to children with disabilities, developmental delays, or deviations and their families in order to stimulate the development of the child. The Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) specialists use a family-centred approach focused on the strengths of the child and the family, rather than on their deficits.



THE PROBLEM:

Early Childhood Intervention is almost unknown

When the project started in 2012, the Early Childhood Intervention approach was unknown in Bulgaria, with the exception of one region of the country where a local organization was piloting a similar service (Karin Dom Foundation – see page 21 for details). Most people did not understand the need for continuous monitoring of a child’s development or for the provision of professional consultations.

The government did not recognize the fact that children in the youngest age group who have disabilities or developmental problems need support, and thus it did not provide any services for children in this target group. Support only began when a child entered the education system, which is similar to most of the former communist countries.

One of the most important barriers to be overcome was related to the changing of the attitudes and thinking of parents with whom the programme has been working. They were convinced that a specialist

is better suited to care for a child with disabilities as they know and understand more about the condition of their children.



THE DEVELOPED SOLUTION:

A family-centred approach

With the implementation of the “I Deserve a Childhood” programme, For Our Children Foundation provides an innovative and professional service that supports the specific target group of children aged 0–3 years, the prematurely born, and children with disabilities, at risk of developing a disability, or with developmental difficulties, as well as their families. The programme empowers families to care for their own children by helping them to have a better understanding of the needs of their children, by improving their parenting skills, and by supporting them to develop better relationships with their children. In some cases, this programme is the only support to the families of children with developmental difficulties in the period between birth and their third year.

The main objective of this ECI programme is to support parents to help their children to develop skills as much as possible within their home environment. The advantages of this approach can be described in terms of the differences between the old and the new approaches of interventions, as presented in the following table:

Old approach	New approach
Parents are excluded	Parents are partners
One approach for the entire system	Individualized services
Focused only on the child	Focused both on the child and the family
Focus on deficits	Focus on strengths
Fragmented services	Multidisciplinary teams
Intervention takes place in a clinical environment	Intervention takes place in the family environment

Early Childhood Intervention in Bulgaria can also support society to prevent the abandonment of infants. Currently, a significant number of young children with

ECI PRACTICE:

A proven methodology introduced from Oregon/United States

- For Our Children Foundation developed the ECI practice supported by Early Childhood CARES – an outreach unit of the College of Education, Oregon, USA. The Open Society Foundation, London, funded this initial project from 2012 to 2014.
- Early Childhood CARES has experience in providing early childhood intervention and early childhood special education services to children who have developmental delays or disabilities. The methodology and approach implemented and developed within the “I Deserve Childhood” project has been practiced in various organizations, but was new to the Bulgarian context.



Hippotherapy sessions are part of the educational programmes

By integrating the early intervention programme into the health and social systems, the number of abandoned children can be significantly reduced

disabilities are abandoned and are consequently cared for by institutions, which are detrimental to their development and carry significant and long-term costs for the state. By integrating the early intervention programme into the health and social systems, the number of abandoned children can be significantly reduced. This development model helps children to achieve better results, protects their human rights, supports families, and saves precious resources for the community.



THE MODEL:

Intense cooperation with families

The provision of early intervention services is realised in the following stages:

Initially, the ECI specialist provides the parents with information about the child's situation and condition in friendly and understandable language. They are also informed about the prospects of the child's development. For example: "Every child is born with a different potential and it is difficult to make precise forecasts, but when you love, support, and stimulate your child, they will progress." Parents are also informed about the availability of relevant services in the community, if any. Often, however, there are no other support services.



Each new activity is shown by the specialist and then tried by the parent to make sure they will be able to continue with it afterwards.

Assessment tools are used as an entry to the service. One of these is a screening test for emotional development called an ASQ-3 (Ages & Stages Questionnaire) which evaluates a child's development compared to their age standard. It is a developmental screening tool designed for use by early educators and health care professionals. Another tool is the ASQ-SE, which assesses emotional development and is used mostly by parents in the home when a child has not had a professional diagnosis.

Yet another tool is the Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System for Infants and Children (AEPS) test. The purpose of the AEPS is to assist professionals and parents/caregivers in identifying and monitoring children's developmentally appropriate educational targets and for planning individualized intervention. Moreover, regular re-testing is conducted (in six-month intervals) with both tools (ASQ and AEPS) to measure the child's progress in various areas.

The re-testing shows the achieved results against the defined goals in the individual development plan. All the information from these tests, medical documentation, observations, other expert opinions, and the resources of the family are taken into account, and an individual development plan is developed together with the parents. This plan includes goals and tasks within a certain period, which is revised and amended at three to six-month intervals. Importantly, the goals are realistic and achievable in the everyday environment.

The ECI sessions are conducted in the child's natural environment – at home or at the playground – which is why the services are mobile and are provided through home visits. The purpose of the home visit is that the ECI specialist can support and guide the family on how to use available resources/objects at home for stimulating the child's development. In this way, the development process is continuous and does not depend on the presence of the specialist. All members of the family are encouraged to participate. Parents can become their child's best therapists, since they know the child best and are with the child for the most time.

During each home visit, the specialist and parents discuss the child's progress, concerns, difficulties, and everything that has happened since the previous visit. New activities or approaches might be suggested. Each new activity is shown by the specialist and then tried by the parent to make sure they will be able to continue with it afterwards. This individual approach is applied to each child and family, and the everyday activities are adapted to the specific condition of the child.



We Deserve a Childhood...



observe children at their familiar environment



provide materials to support ECD at home



FACTS AND FIGURES:

Steady progress over the years

- The For Our Children Foundation's ECI programme has supported 352 children (152 girls, 200 boys) in the following age groups:

Up to 1 year: 145

From 1 to 3 years: 169

From 3 to 4 years *: 41

*Children older than four years are included in the programme if they joined the service comparatively late or if continuing support is necessary in order to develop the child's full potential.

- The total number of Foundation employees is 74, five of whom formed the ECI team.
- The Foundation has 22 support staff, a significant increase over the last three years.
- Five members of the staff conduct trainings for children and their parents, for other employees of the organization, and for external clients.

When necessary, the work of the ECI specialist is supported by a multidisciplinary team, including physical therapist, speech therapist, neonatologist, and others. The ECI specialist actively interacts with other specialists in order to respond to the complex needs of the child.

The teaching materials are specialised play items, as well as common household items such as bowls, boxes, balls, beans, and many other objects from



Hydrotherapy session: Parents are encouraged to work with the strengths of the children and with their abilities.

the home environment that can be used as support materials for training and skills development.

This early childhood intervention is the first integrated social-health service that is operating at the national level, and it is in sharp contrast to the traditional medical model that focuses on the child's deficits.



FUNDING:

Initial funding from the Open Society Foundation

In the period 2012 to 2015, the Open Society Foundation, with additional co-financing from For Our Children Foundation, funded the programme with the sum of \$181,350. Currently, there is no state funding or financial standard for the ECI services. There is funding available under a national EU-funded project, which will end in 2018, and state funding is expected to begin at that time. However, the direct beneficiaries of EU funding are municipalities and the service centres managed by them. NGOs need to rely to other sources of funding.



OUTLOOK:

Continue to grow and improve

For the period 2015 to 2017, the focus of the Foundation's work will remain on early childhood development. The organization will continue working in the same locations, trying to reach more children. Recently, the organization launched a specialised study of the impact of its services on children, seeking to measure the effectiveness of the services and to analyse the achievements and progress of the children.

Despite the progress made, there are still problems to overcome. One of these is the rigidity of the health system and its reluctance to recognize the importance of integrated social and health services, such as Early Childhood Intervention, as well as its tendency to view the Foundation's work as competition rather than as a supporting medical service. Another issue is the lack of state recognition for the need for early childhood development services and for financing them through the state budget.

The effectiveness of investment in early childhood development is seen through the visible differences in children who have been a part of an early intervention programme, both in the short and long term. They are more successful in school, their social and emotional adjustment is better, they experience fewer problems with the law, their physical health is better, and they are more able to find employment.

Children



- + with disabilities
- * prematurely born
- * risk of disability



0-3 years old

+ Parents support



- + Parents are partners
- * children & parents are focus
- * See strengths of children
- * children remain in families





ABOUT THE ORGANISATION:

For Our Children Foundation

For Our Children Foundation is a successor to the British organization for protecting children's rights, EveryChild, and has been working in Bulgaria since 1992. It is the first Bulgarian non-governmental organization to introduce foster care, starting as early as 1997. Today, the Foundation is working to make sure that no Bulgarian child spends the first years of his or her life in the isolation of an institution, but lives safe and loved in a family environment.

The services for children are provided in several specialized community support centres in the two largest cities of Bulgaria, Sofia and Plovdiv. The services are intended for children in the early age groups, specifically children 0–3 years, the prematurely born, and children with disabilities, at risk of developing disabilities, or with developmental difficulties. Over the last three years, For Our Children Foundation has provided a variety of services to more than 2,300 children. In 2015 alone, the organization worked with 1,095 children and their families, including 148 children in the Early Childhood Intervention programme.

The For Our Children Foundation offers more services, which are linked to the Early Childhood Intervention programme. These include the prevention of child abandonment in maternity wards, development of parental capacity, family support, and foster care. The clients of all the services provided by the Foundation have the opportunity to make use of the ECI services, if needed.

DEINSTITUTIONALISATION IN BULGARIA:

A long way to go

- Current deinstitutionalisation policies – for both children and adults with disabilities – provide for care in small group homes (SGH), which does not significantly improve the quality of life that disabled people live.
- SGH are managed as residential institutions. As such, residents are not in control of their daily activities and are not offered the opportunity to move to a community arrangement.
- The European Social Fund is helping municipalities to provide community residential services, such as monitored housing, protected housing, day-care centres, and centres for social rehabilitation and integration.



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ABOUT ZERO PROJECT ANALYSIS

In-depth Research of Innovative Practices

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This in-depth analysis can be downloaded for free at

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