

# Family-centred, Routine-based Practice of Early Childhood Intervention Provided in Natural Environment in Bulgaria.

Assessment Country Report of Piloting the  
Family-centred Practices.



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The present report is based on information provided by 10 pilot organisations involved in the ECI AGORA project, and namely Agency for Social Development "Vision" - Varna, Alternative 55 Civil Association - Stara Zagora, Day Care Centre for Children with Disabilities - Kardzhali, Complex of Social Services for Children and Families - Plovdiv, Health and Social Services Complex - Targovishte, Civil Initiatives-Lovech Association, Care for Children with Disabilities Foundation - Gabrovo, Centre for Social Support - Belene, Centre for Social Support - Burgas and Centre for Social Support - Sredets.

The report answers the questions down below, which aim at finding out if any changes have occurred, and if so, how the way the professionals work has changed after being introduced to the pilot concept of early childhood intervention within the framework of the ECI AGORA project.

### Question 1 | What kind of methods did you use when implementing the routine and family-centred approach, e.g.:

- work in the natural environment (e.g. at the home of the family);
- an ecomap, a routine-based interview;
- work with other family members apart from the child with the disability?

How did the attitudes of the professionals and the families change? What kind of challenges did you face, i.e. what was difficult and requires more knowledge, experience, etc.?

According to the information provided by the social services mentioned above, the family-centred practices are at the core of their work and something that they aim to implement. The professionals do also point out the benefits of their participation in the ECI AGORA project.

The team of **Centre for Social Support - Sredets** states that the family-centred approach is very useful as it supports the development of the child and encourages the participation of the parents. The intervention within the family-centred approach is individualised, flexible and corresponds to the needs of each child and its family, whereby it emphasises the strengthening of the family functioning. The parents have a leading role when it comes to the physical, psychological and emotional growth of their children as well as to acquiring important social skills. The home is the most appropriate place for bringing up children. The service team implements an approach that includes a first contact and an interview, testing of the child, family counselling and planning.

According to **Agency for Social Development "Vision" - Varna**, the team work is extremely important and it is the only way to achieve positive results in view of a child's development. The organisation's work is based on the information provided by the families as well as on maintaining a steady relationship between the professionals and the children.

**Complex of Social Services for Children and Families - Plovdiv** states that it uses a holistic approach in its work, whereby it does not only work with the child, but with everybody who takes care of it. Thus, the Complex is on the way to turn the family-oriented approach into a family-centred one, which seems to be a natural next step. The analysis of the daily routines of the child and its family is also a part of the child's needs assessment, the assessment of the parental capacity and the assessment of the environmental factors. In other words, the routine-based assessment and the assessment of the available resources and the existing challenges are a part of the working process as well.

**Centre for Social Support - Belene** points out that the family-centred approach is much appreciated by both the families and the professionals, who register positive results out of it.

In its work in the field of early childhood intervention, the team of **Health and Social Services Complex - Targovishte** uses various methods when implementing the family-centred approach.

**Civil Initiatives-Lovech Association** has successfully integrated the idea of the importance and necessity of early childhood intervention in its work. Each professional is familiar with the theory of the pilot concept and is convinced in the great potential for success of the work in the child's natural environment.

**Care for Children with Disabilities Foundation - Gabrovo** points out that the early intervention services are oriented towards strengthening the potential and the resources of the family in order that the child's development is enhanced. The early childhood intervention services are planned and implemented with the active involvement of the parents and are tailored to their needs, expectations and values.

The ECI AGORA project enabled the team of **Alternative 55 Civil Association - Stara Zagora** to get to know the assessment standards, the relationships between the families and the professionals, the implementation of individual plans in the other countries participating in the project.

Due to the specifics of the target group, early childhood intervention isn't really implemented at **Centre for Social Support - Burgas** and **Day Care Centre for Children with Disabilities - Kardzhali**, and it is rather provided by other services, which the mentioned above partner with.

The methods used by the pilot organisations when implementing the family-centred approach at this point are:

- work in the natural environment. According to **Centre for Social Support - Belene**, the work is done in the natural environment of the children (at home, in the city park) in order to prevent stressful situations and to build a trustworthy relationship with them with the help of their parents. Apart from implementing its main activities, and namely meetings of the social worker with the parents/caretakers, consultations of the child with professionals, meetings of the parents with the professionals who have done the consultations, discussions of the work plan, **Complex of Social Services for Children and Families - Plovdiv** does also conduct home visits. The service provider states that, after a brief moment of discomfort, the families do get quite comfortable in their natural surroundings, which makes the entire working process much easier. The team of **Alternative 55 Civil Association - Stara Zagora** visits the families at their homes by a prior arrangement. Some of the professionals at Health and Social Services Complex - Targovishte work in the children's natural environment, whereby the parents take an active part in the sessions. They monitor the process and ask questions. The professionals do also ask questions in order to fill in the corresponding reporting documents. Civil Initiatives-Lovech Association is strongly convinced in the success of the work in the children's natural environment. **Care for Children with Disabilities Foundation - Gabrovo** states that the early childhood intervention services are provided mainly in the natural surroundings of the families and their children.
- a routine-based interview. The professionals of **Civil Initiatives-Lovech Association** use routine-based interviews. They plan activities supporting the child and the family together with the parents. The support provided is individualised and based on the child's strengths as well as on the family's resources. The team of **Alternative 55 Civil Association - Stara Zagora** uses two types of questionnaires – one for evaluating the parental capacity and one for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the child.
- work with the parents and the extended family. The pilots do regard the role of the family and the caretakers as crucial as well as the importance to keep in touch with them on a regular basis. The professionals of **Agency for Social Development "Vision" - Varna** do have a contact with both the extended family and external experts working with the children with disabilities, which enhances the efficiency of their work. At **Centre for Social Support - Sredets**, the parents participate not only in the direct intervention, but also in the planning and evaluation of the intervention. The strong partnership between the professionals and the parents, the shared decision-making and assessment lead to greater results for both parties. According to the information provided by **Centre for Social Support - Belene**, the intervention involves the family members, who demonstrate a strong interest in the work of the professionals. The team of **Complex of Social Services for Children and Families - Plovdiv** reports that in many cases the children are taken care of not only by their parents, but also by other members of the extended family, and namely by the grandparents, who are involved in the working process as well. The **Alternative 55 Civil Association - Stara Zagora** experts point out that the child, the parents and the members of the extended family, e.g. the grandparents, are all taken into account when assessing the family environment. **Civil Initiatives-Lovech Association** states that some



steps have been made in view of including as many family members as possible to support the work with the child. Each visit of the child is followed by a talk with the parent accompanying it, whereby the progress and the difficulties are discussed as well as some further activities if such are needed. The team of **Care for Children with Disabilities Foundation - Gabrovo** shares that the parents and the members of the extended family do play an active role and are equal partners of the professionals in the whole process. According to the information provided by **Centre for Social Support - Burgas**, the service provider works in the field of prevention mainly, which requires the involvement of the entire family. **Health and Social Services Complex - Targovishte** does also share the view that the parents are active participants in the working process.

The professionals mention that there are both positive results as well as difficulties related to the methods listed above. Among the positive results are:

- change in the attitude of some parents related to understanding how important cooperation is. **Centre for Social Support - Belene, Agency for Social Development "Vision" - Varna, Centre for Social Support - Sredets, Complex of Social Services for Children and Families - Plovdiv, Care for Children with Disabilities Foundation - Gabrovo** are among the service providers stating that such a change has been noted among the parents they work with.
- inclusion of the extended family in the therapeutic process. **Centre for Social Support - Sredets, Centre for Social Support - Belene, Complex of Social Services for Children and Families - Plovdiv, Agency for Social Development "Vision" - Varna, Health and Social Services Complex - Targovishte, Alternative 55 Civil Association - Stara Zagora** claim that they include the extended family.
- more comprehensive and detailed assessment of the needs, daily routines, resources and worries of the families. Such an assessment is conducted by **Complex of Social Services for Children and Families - Plovdiv and Alternative 55 Civil Association - Stara Zagora**.
- improving the relationship between the parent and the child and developing the parental capacity. This is being done at **Centre for Social Support - Sredets**.
- strong partnership between the professional and the parent as well as shared decision-making, which leads to better results for both parties. This is the case at **Centre for Social Support - Sredets**.
- greater trust by the families towards the professionals and towards the idea of working in the natural surroundings of the child and planning together. This corresponds to the experience of **Civil Initiatives-Lovech Association and Care for Children with Disabilities Foundation - Gabrovo**, whereby the latter organisation points out that the families have started having more trust in the professionals as they notice the results of their work as well as reconsidering their role in view of their child's upbringing and development.

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With regard to the challenges, the pilots refer to the following:

- **Agency for Social Development "Vision" - Varna** points out that the parents feel like the work done at the social service is enough, and hence, they don't continue practicing at home. Additionally, often the relationships between the caretakers are complicated and related to disagreements about the work that is to be done with the child. In order to upgrade its expertise, the team of Agency "Vision" needs more knowledge and experience with young children and pregnant women. This could be achieved by establishing relationships with doctors and medical centres as well as by coordinating the work of health care workers, child protection departments and social service professionals.
- According to **Complex of Social Services for Children and Families - Plovdiv**, synchronising the activities at the social service with those in the child's natural environment requires flexibility and resources, which do not necessarily need to be human.
- The professionals of **Alternative 55 Civil Association - Stara Zagora** state that there is a lack of appropriate services in the small living areas. Moreover, the fathers do often stay away from taking care of a child with special needs.
- **Civil Initiatives-Lovech Association and Complex of Social Services for Children and Families - Plovdiv** point out that some parents refuse to let the professionals into their homes.
- At **Centre for Social Support - Burgas**, due to the specifics of the target group and the need to provide systematic medical care, the professionals are not able to fully respond to the needs of the children with disabilities and their families.

## 2 | Did any changes in both your service and the families you work with regarding the understanding of the "family-centred practice" occur? How would you describe these changes and how did they impact your work?

According to the information provided by **Centre for Social Support - Belene**, there is a change in the families' attitude towards the problems of the children, which is related to the understanding that through common care and empathy some of the children's deficits could be overcome.

The team of **Complex of Social Services for Children and Families - Plovdiv** finds out that sustainable results from the therapeutic work with children could be easily achieved when there is a good relationship between the professionals and the parents. There are often parents who have difficulties in collaborating, which is the case because the parents themselves are in a state of mourning. Nevertheless, even in such circumstances, positive results could be achieved by using the resources of the children. Hereby, it should be clarified that the Complex in the city of Plovdiv works with older children as well, incl. up to the age of 18 years, whereby support is provided also in order to help the parents overcome the state of mourning.

The professionals at **Alternative 55 Civil Association - Stara Zagora** state that they have improved their knowledge thanks to their participation in the ECI AGORA project.

**Health and Social Services Complex - Targovishte** has lots of experience in providing early childhood intervention services. In this regard, the Complex in the city of Targovishte is well aware of the concept and the methods of work in the field of early intervention, whereby the professionals work in a close partnership with the families and almost all parents give a positive feedback about the social workers' competences.

The team of **Civil Initiatives-Lovech Association** reports about a shared decision-making about the daily routines and other activities of the families related to optimising the care and support of the child. Furthermore, videos of the child's daily routines are shared and phone consultations take place when difficulties of an educational, emotional or another kind occur.

**Care for Children with Disabilities Foundation - Gabrovo** states that noticeable results in view of the behaviour of the children have been registered, which has led to an increasing trust in the competences of the professionals.

At **Centre for Social Support - Sredets** and **Agency for Social Development "Vision" - Varna**, the stronger collaboration between the professionals and the families could be seen as a positive change in the work of the service providers.

### 3 | How do you intend to disseminate the early childhood intervention pilot concept (e.g. among authorities, stakeholders, parents' organisations, etc.) in order to improve the ECI services in your country?

The pilots involved in the ECI AGORA project are very well-known in their regions, and their activities and events bring together a great number of stakeholders.

**Centre for Social Support - Belene** states that it has disseminated information about the project via its Facebook page as well as through personal meetings with the institutions having resources to support the early childhood intervention services. The pilot concept has been popularised via Facebook and it has been shared among the parents using services at the Centre. Moreover, the parents have been informed that the service provider has started working within a network of stakeholders who deal with the problems and deficits of children with special needs. Centre for Social Support - Belene does also state that information about early childhood intervention and its aspects as well as current trends is available among health care professionals, kindergartens and nurseries staff, other social institutions, the Child Protection Department, Belene Municipality, etc. Additionally, the Centre is recognised as a social service applying the family-centred approach in its work with children with special needs and their families.

The team of **Complex of Social Services for Children and Families - Plovdiv** has started disseminating the ECI AGORA project since 2019 by conducting meetings with representatives of the health care, education and social sectors.

In November 2019, the team of **Centre for Social Support - Sredets** started a „Workshop for Parents – Let's Grow up Together" initiative together with UNICEF. Within the workshop, the professionals make the parents familiar with the importance of early childhood development and early childhood intervention. In 2020, another „Workshop for Parents – Let's Grow up Together" is planned to take place as well as a parents' training called „The Family-centred Approach – an Opportunity to Explore and Improve the Quality of Child Care" and a meeting on the topic „The Parents – the Main Factor in a Child's Development". All of these activities are aimed at further disseminating the family-centred approach in the framework of early childhood intervention.

**Agency for Social Development "Vision" - Varna** plans to organise parents' support groups so that the families can share their experiences, whereby the professional plays the role of a moderator only. Some parents of children with disabilities could even get trained to provide support and information to other parents. Thus, the concept of the family-centred approach will be disseminated directly among the families. Generally, the idea is that all stakeholders become aware of the methods of work in the early childhood development through the exchange of promising practices. Furthermore, in order to improve the quality and sustainability of the service, Agency "Vision" could conduct trainings together with other social service providers and interested parties.

In October 2019, the professionals of **Day Care Centre for Children with Disabilities - Kardzhali** conducted an early childhood intervention training for parents as well as individual consultations with families. Currently, the service provider remains available for further consultations and work on cases.

The team of **Civil Initiatives-Lovech Association** has disseminated the idea and the concept of early childhood intervention in the municipality of Lovech, and among kindergartens and nurseries staff, general practitioners, pediatricians, and social workers from the Child Protection Department in particular. The service provider has also discussed the possibilities of the institutions to support the early diagnosis of children's developmental problems, the provision of quality early childhood intervention services as well as the improvement of the interinstitutional partnerships.

**Health and Social Services Complex - Targovishte** points out that the hospitals, the medical practices and the dentists could be very useful in the process of identifying future users of early intervention services. Various institutions in the field of education, e.g. kindergartens and schools, could also get involved in the dissemination of the pilot concept. The team of Health and Social Services Complex - Targovishte reports that probably the best way to make the methods of early childhood intervention popular would be by disseminating information from mouth to mouth. The parents who are happy with the results achieved would be great presenters of the concept of early childhood intervention. The professionals mention that the elaboration of flyers and brochures as well as their dissemination among social service providers, parents' organisations, the local authorities and other interested parties would further contribute to making the early intervention concept widely known. Moreover, a good idea would be the conduction of a round table discussion aimed at presenting the results of what has been achieved in the field of early intervention so far, talking through the existing problems as well as presenting the opportunities for establishing a network of interested parties.

The team of **Care for Children with Disabilities Foundation - Gabrovo** suggests disseminating the pilot concept by conducting meetings and round table discussions with other social services, parents, teachers, doctors, NGOs and all stakeholders working in the field of early intervention.

**Alternative 55 Civil Association - Stara Zagora** maintains an Internet page and a Facebook group, and has partnerships with local media that disseminate information about social services for children with disabilities, incl. about the implementation of the early childhood intervention concept. Additionally, each year, the organisation conducts trainings of students at the Medical and Pedagogical Faculties of the Thracian University in the city of Stara Zagora. Thus, it makes the future professionals familiar with the modern methods of work with children with mental problems as well as with the concept of early childhood intervention, which is very much needed during the early ages and is an important tool for involving families into the working process.

#### 4 | How will your organisation as a future ECI AGORA CENTRE deepen the understanding of the routine and family-oriented concept among the providers and families? What further activities do you plan, incl. after the end of the ECI AGORA project?

**Complex of Social Services for Children and Families - Plovdiv** has developed a programme involving work with children at a young age in general. During the working process, if difficulties, delays and/or issues concerning the child itself and its environment are encountered, intervention approaches based on family-centred practices and daily routine-related activities will be implemented. Through the programme, intervention will be applied in its broadest sense, whereby it will not only focus on children with special needs, but it will involve all vulnerable children. The only limitation will be regarding the age, i.e. only children from pre-school age until the age at which they are allowed to go to school will be eligible to join the programme. Nevertheless, families of older children will also be supported through an individual approach. The programme will be disseminated via promotional materials and meetings with representatives of all interested parties.

**Centre for Social Support - Belene** suggests further disseminating early childhood intervention as a tool for preventing the abandonment of children with deficits by periodically providing information to the community via its Facebook page, the local newspaper, the website of Belene Municipality as well as by sending information bulletins to the Child Protection Department.

In order to contribute to the sustainability of the ECI AGORA project, **Civil Initiatives-Lovech Association** will continue implementing its practices aimed at the dissemination of early childhood intervention. The service provider will further work on developing strong coordination and collaboration mechanisms among all institutions that have to deal with children and their families.

**Alternative 55 Civil Association - Stara Zagora**, which has many years of experience in the field of early intervention, will continue participating in the development of social projects, parents' trainings and programmes of Centres for Social Rehabilitation and Integration.

**Care for Children with Disabilities Foundation - Gabrovo** plans to deepen the understanding of the family-centred approach by conducting group sessions with parents who are in a similar situation and face similar problems in order to provide emotional support, exchange of experiences, information and ideas, as well as by organising groups for game therapy or art-therapy with the participation of children and their parents. The sessions will take place in an environment close to the domestic one. The parents are expected to increase their competences and to be able to better deal with the social and emotional problems related to the development of their children. The relationships between the parents and the children are also expected to improve. In addition, the skills acquired will further enhance the social adaptation of the children in the kindergarten or the nursery.

A similar type of activities, and namely conduction of group sessions for mutual support and exchange of experiences, is planned by two other service providers as well – **Agency for Social Development "Vision" - Varna** and **Centre for Social Support - Sredets**.

**Day Care Centre for Children with Disabilities - Kardzhali** will continue supporting the families by providing consultations and **Health and Social Services Complex - Targovishte** will aim at conducting a round table discussion in order to present the work it has done in the field of early childhood intervention so far.

**Centre for Social Support - Burgas** plans to deepen its engagement in the field of early intervention in the future.

**NASO** has more than 2,000 members and based on this we will make sure that early childhood intervention reaches every corner of Bulgaria. In order to contribute to the sustainability of the ECI AGORA project, NASO will continue implementing its practices aimed at the dissemination of early childhood intervention. Will further work on developing strong coordination and collaboration mechanisms among all institutions that have to deal with children and their families. NASO as an umbrella organization, there is desire and opportunity is to implement ECI throughout Bulgaria and to provide information. In this regard, during the Roadshow in Varna, Plovdiv and Gabrovo, where government representatives were present, the basis for inclusion in the legal framework was laid and we will continue to work in this direction.

## 5 | How many families are implementing the pilot concept of early childhood intervention?

The exact number of families implementing the pilot concept of early childhood intervention is difficult to be determined. However, if we consider that more than 50% of the pilots involved in the ECI AGORA project do, to one or another extent, work with families of children with disabilities according to the principles of the pilot concept, we could conclude that more than the half of the families using early intervention services are implementing the pilot concept.

## 6 | How many families did fill in the Family-Centred Practices Scale questionnaire by Carl J. Dunst?

In total, 60 families of children with disabilities filled in the questionnaire by Carl J. Dunst, whereby 6 families per pilot organisation got involved.



## 7 | How many services approximately did provide early childhood intervention in the natural surroundings of the families before and after the pilot training?

As mentioned under Question 1 of the present report, the majority of the service providers involved in the ECI AGORA project, and namely 6 out of 10, work in the natural environment of the children, whereby the methods of work differ depending on the capacity of the services. As it is difficult to achieve a real change in the methods of work within the project framework only, we believe that the number of services working in the natural environment would increase with time. However, in order to achieve that, further work needs to be done with both the professionals and the families. In this context, currently, we cannot report a real change in the number of services providing early childhood intervention in the natural environment because of the pilot training. Moreover, the professionals of **Complex of Social Services for Children and Families - Plovdiv**, who have realised home visits already before the start of the ECI AGORA project, state that the visits to the extended natural environment, which includes nurseries/ kindergartens, playgrounds, etc., impact their workload and lead to a greater commitment of a service provider that operates hourly only.

## 8 | How did Covid-19, and the work on-line in particular, impact the relationships between the professionals and the families and how did the professionals reshape their working methods?

The fact that the working processes took place on-line due to the Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on them. According to the professionals, thanks to the on-line communication, the parents were able to see their child in a different way, from another perspective, so that they found out how many things it could actually do. At the same time, they observed the way the professionals were working and communicating with the child in order that it better developed its skills. It also is important to note that the parents evaluated the way the on-line meetings were conducted positively and appreciated their usefulness and efficiency.

The professionals on their part did get many new impressions about the role of the parents and the way they were treating their child as well. This insight into the daily routines of the families provided extra information, which could be used for both a more comprehensive planning and for motivating the parents to be more active during the working processes. In this regard, an evaluation based on daily routines and a family-centred approach is considered quite valuable. Furthermore, according to the service providers, the on-line way of work is very likely to be further used after abolishing the restrictive measures, particularly in situations, in which there is an obstacle or an impossibility to hold a personal meeting.

## 9 | Is there any shift of the focus of the support from the child to the parents because of the Covid-19 pandemic? If yes, please explain how this shift has happened.

There is definitely a shift of the focus of the support related to a stronger engagement of the parents. Basically, it could be claimed that the parents and the professionals have become one single unit helping the parents to strengthen their role and be more confident during the working processes with their child.



## Project partners



EASPD, Eurllyaid and partners from Central and Eastern European countries: Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania. The ECI Agora project, supported by The Velux Foundations, aims to support the development of adequate ECI systems at a local and national level.



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