

**Sure Start programme
in Bulgaria - practical model
for integrated child and family support
in the early years**

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„The participation of parents is what critically contributes to the development of children. We are not talking about their education or income. We speak of interaction.“

James Heckman
Economist and Nobel laureate

The beginning

- A concept that addresses a need
- A model that has been applied in different places for some time
- Evaluated and demonstrates social impact
- Financial and resource effectiveness

The need

- The first 1000 days are the most important for the development of a child!
- The first 1001 nights are exiting and highly emotional for the parents
But also quite stressful - everything is new...
- Sure start family centres offer different services under one roof - available, accessible, multidisciplinary essential services

Why this approach?

- Children could be reached via kindergarten, school or parents
- Early childhood development starts in the family
- Holistic approach – information, health, education, social & administrative services, sports, local initiatives...
- Empowers children and families – they participate & decide & initiate & organise
- Provides practical ground for preventative work
- Functions as an early warning / early identification system
- Research shows that ECEC services are most effective if/when these are connected to an integrated local service system

The family centres are run by local organisations in various places - city, towns, villages, neighbourhoods.

Variety of activities aimed at:

- physical, social, emotional, cognitive development of children according to their age
- building the capacities and skills of children and parents
- support for the family as a system

Children's house / House of the family & the community
is open for all

- Pregnant women and their partners
- Parents / families with children 0-6 years old
- Parents / families with children can visit at any day or time they want and join an activity of their choice

The activities

Various joint activities for children and mothers / fathers / family members

- Information, presentations and advice on various topics - importance of play, breastfeeding, health, education, family planning, violence, administrative documents & procedures...
- Visits and lectures from specialists – doctor, midwife, speech therapist, psychologist, representatives of local services...
- Groups for pregnant women (and their partners)
- Individual / group meetings with a specialists on request
- Individual / small groups work, consultations on various issues, contacts with institutions, help in filling in documents, accompany visits to agencies
- Exchange visits with local kindergartens & schools
- Joint activities for children and families – playing, reading, cooking...
- Birthdays, cultural and sport events, puppet theatre...

The impact

External evaluation September 2025

Know How Centre at the New Bulgarian University

- Effective model for integrated support for children and their families
- Serves as a bridge between families/communities and services / institutions by providing flexible access to needed support and specialists (even if these are not present in the community)
- It is highly appreciated by parents and children
- Safe friendly environment helps children to integrate and adults to strengthen the links and create supportive community
- Especially effective in vulnerable communities
- Contributes to the goals of the European Child Guarantee – reduction of child poverty and social exclusion by providing equal access to health, education, ECEC

Impact for children

- Gain knowledge and skills in various fields
- Develop cognitive, group communication and social skills
- Enjoy easy integration in the education system - kindergarten & school
- Have quality care at home
- Early identification - specialised intervention in cases of developmental delay / disability

Impact for parents

- Learn/develop understanding about the full spectrum of needs of their children – beyond food and sleep; improve parental skills and practices and provide better quality care
- Enhanced intensity & quality of relationships and communication between children and parents / members of the family
- Improved parental skills for supporting the complex development of their children and understanding of the importance of the early years
- Parents seek full social integration of their children

Impact for the community

- Available flexible integrated access to services and specialists
- Contact point for addressing needs that other services do not offer – information, exchange with other parents, emotional support, self-help groups, contacts with specialists, material support...
- Positive attitude of children and especially of parents towards the importance of education and health
- Decreased mistrust towards institutions
- Overcoming negative effects of poverty and social isolation by creating space for social interaction
- Smooth transition from home to kindergarten / school for children and parents

Services

- The programme is highly efficient in terms of finances and human resources
- Changes the traditional approach in services by replacing the formal sanctions with a more human and engaging manner
- Entry point – families are supported at a very early stage and connected with the respective health, social, educational or specialise service

Key factors

- Physical presence in the community
- Flexible complex support addressing complex needs
- Friendly non-judgmental approach builds durable trust
- Practical daily activities stimulate the development of children
- Prevention instead of sanctions
- Respect from the staff to families
- Strong partnerships with other stakeholders – maternity clinics, health services and GPs, kindergartens, schools, community clubs, social services, agencies, other NGOs, municipalities ...

Main characteristics

- Two generations - children & parents (grandparents)
- No stigma - for all families in the community
- Integrated approach – health, education, social, administrative services & community initiatives
- The activities continue long enough time so that practical change can be measured and evaluated
- Based on local needs, implemented in consultation and participation of parents and the local community
- Culturally appropriate and sensitive for the needs of children and parents

Principles

- Focus on the family as a system, not only the child/children
- Cross-sector collaboration - involvement of all local stakeholders - health, education, social, cultural and other institutions and organisations
- Special attention to vulnerable groups
- Takes into account specific local needs
- Focus on missing services in the local community
- Participation of families with children is not compulsory

Thank you for your attention!