



Early Childhood Support Services in Bulgaria: What Works and What are the Needs

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Knowledge Sharing Partnership for Empowerment of Parents of Children with Disabilities through Mutual Learning



Karin Dom Foundation is a modern, functional center providing a comprehensive range of social, health, and educational services for children with special needs and their families.

What Works and What are the Needs in Bulgaria?





M•POWER

Knowledge Sharing Partnership for Empowerment of Parents of Children with Disabilities through Mutual Learning





Scale of the Challenge (Key Numbers)

~30,000+

Estimated children with disabilities

22,248

Officially recognized (0–17)

1,116

Social services working with
children

2,672

Children in complex care centres
(2023)

45,858

Preventive services users (2024)

~80%

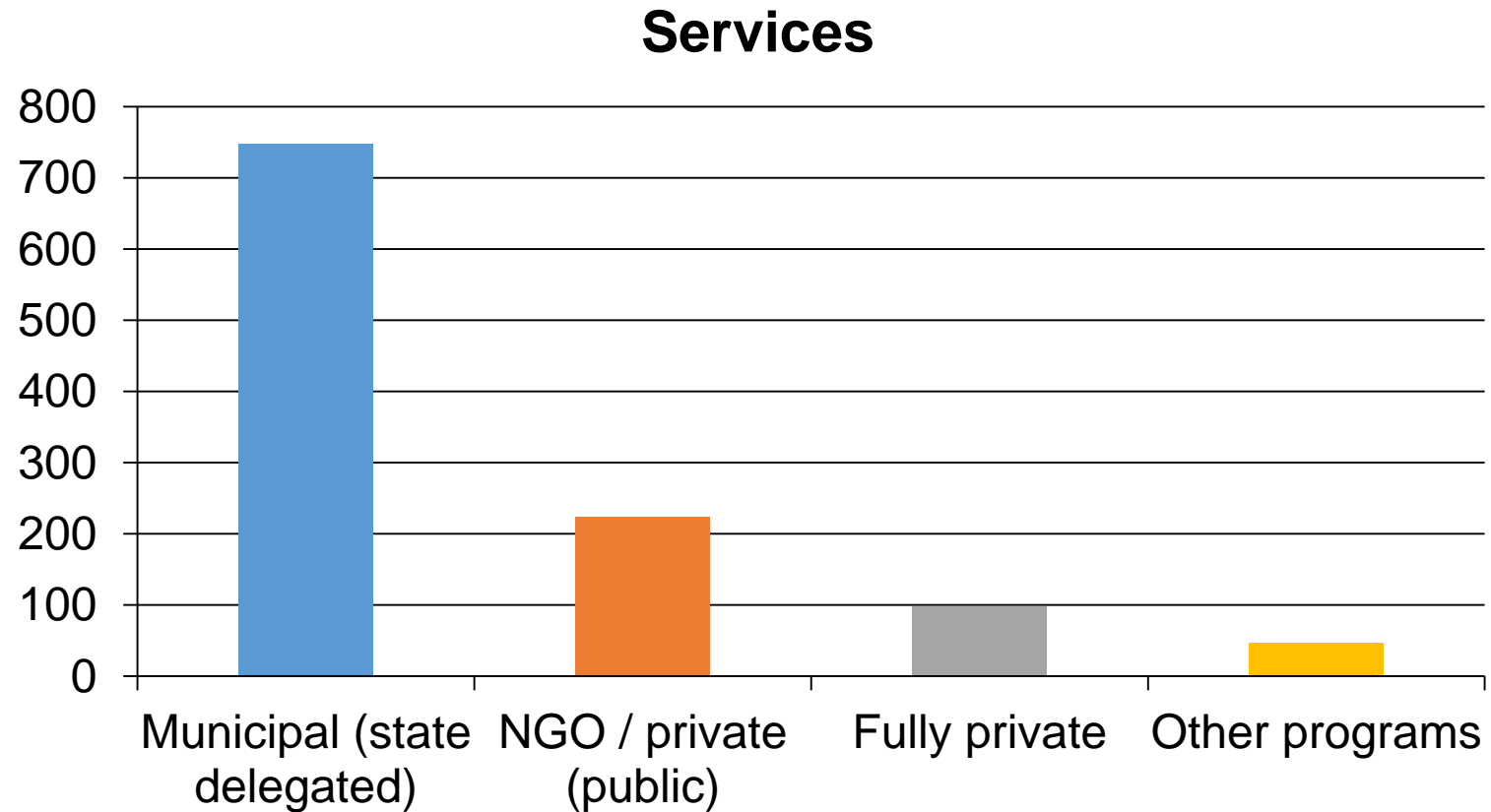
Parents seeing negative attitudes

Institutional Framework (Simplified)

- Ministry of Labour and Social Policy – policy making
- Social Assistance Agency – implementation and coordination
- Agency for Quality of Social Services – licensing and control
- Municipal Services and Child Protection – work with families

Early childhood intervention services were introduced in Bulgaria starting in 2010 by several NGOs located in the larger cities of the country during a period when a process of deinstitutionalization was underway and there was a need for alternative services in the community. In 2010, a National Strategy “Vision for the Deinstitutionalization of Children in the Republic of Bulgaria” was adopted, which has as its main goal the gradual closure of all tasks for children, the prevention of the condition and upbringing of children from 0 to 3 years in residential care of any type and the development of a system of services in a family environment and in the community throughout the country.

Who Provides the Services





Early Intervention Services in Bulgaria

- ★ Although early intervention services are not formally separated as a distinct type of service, they have proven to be effective. Most of them are home-based and family-centered. A significant contribution to their development has been made by UNICEF through the *European Child Guarantee*, as well as by the *Early Intervention Program of Karin Dom*.
- ★ The partnership between these organizations evolved into a national training initiative supported by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.
- ★ Today, early intervention trainings continue to be delivered both by UNICEF and Karin Dom and other NGO's, ensuring sustainability and ongoing capacity building in the field.



ROAD TRIP!

Health System and Early Intervention

- No unified national early intervention system
- Limited access to speech therapy, rehabilitation, psychological support
- Services often start only after formal diagnosis (usually after age 3)
- Many families pay privately for therapies





Ministry of
Health

There are certain policies and practices in Bulgarian healthcare that affect children with special needs, but they are not fully systematic and do not always function as an integrated strategy.

In Bulgaria, the primary care system (general practitioners and pediatricians) is responsible for the preventive care of all children, including early developmental assessment. This includes routine check-ups and discussions about growth and development.

There are mandatory screenings for newborns in Bulgaria:

- Blood screening for certain metabolic diseases;
- Vaccinations (e.g. hepatitis B);
- In many cases, hearing screening at birth



Ministry of
Health

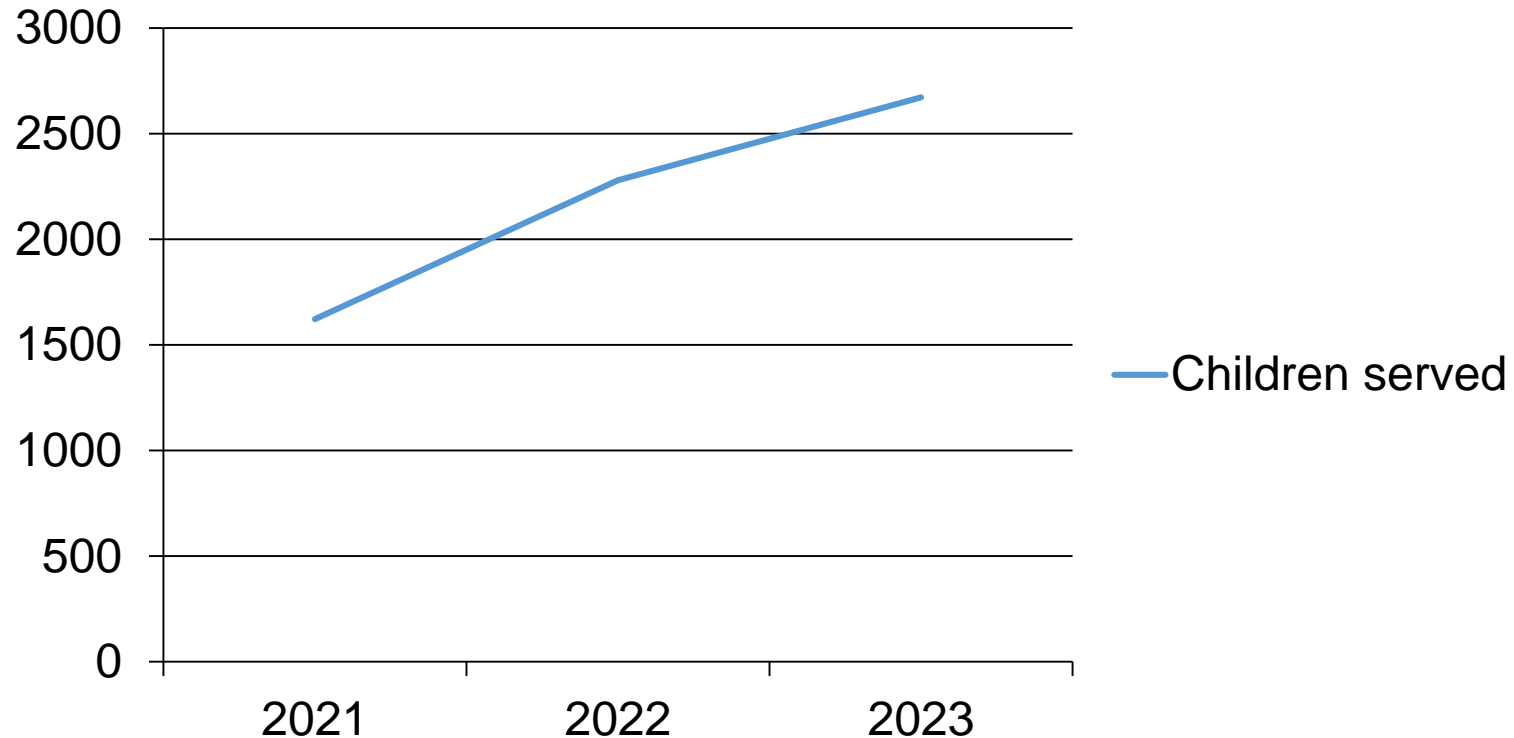
The Bulgarian healthcare system offers diagnostics, treatment and medical/psychosocial rehabilitation for specific conditions (without a single national framework for all types of disabilities) and disabilities of children through standard healthcare services.

The National Pediatric Strategy (part of the “National Strategy for Child and Adolescent Health and Pediatric Care 2030”) explicitly envisages the development of integrated health-social services for children — including for families of children with disabilities and chronic diseases. This includes support for early diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation and training for parents.

For children 0–7 years old, the main role of the NELC is to guarantee access to social, health and educational services, including: Social benefits and supplements (parental assistance for raising a child with a disability) Medical and rehabilitation services Specialized services in kindergartens and schools for children with SEN

Growing Access to Complex Care Centres

Children served





**Ministry of Education
and Science**

General and additional support



Inclusive Education in Bulgaria

- Based on Law on Preschool and School Education and Inclusion Ordinance
- 28 Regional Support Centres across the country
- Functional assessment and individual support plans
- 3.53% of children and students receive additional support (2025)



Kindergartens, preschool
groups under the
supervision of the Ministry of
Education.

Nursery schools, under
the supervision of the
Ministry of Health;

Complementary services are
clinics and medical practices,
hospitals, maternity homes
and intensive neonatal care
units, patronage care,
supported by UNICEF, etc.





Impact on Families

- High financial burden for private therapies
- Psychological stress and lack of guidance
- Often one parent leaves the labour market
- Support depends heavily on place of residence

BUT:

- The specialists who work in the individual systems work with family care and give individual suggestions.
- The specialists who work in the various therapeutic centers also apply an individual approach.

Key Recommendations

- Create a national early intervention system
- Guarantee access to therapies and multidisciplinary support
- Strengthen family support services
- Invest in inclusive education and teacher training

Data and Governance

- Establish a national monitoring and data system
- Improve coordination between institutions
- Use data for planning, funding and policy evaluation

Conclusion

- Bulgaria has made progress in developing services
- However, coverage and coordination remain insufficient
- Early intervention and family support must become national priorities

