ANNUAL REPORT
2020
FOR OUR CHILDREN FOUNDATION
MISSION

The For Our Children Foundation provides professional social services to the most vulnerable young children by encouraging constant, secure and developing family relations.

VISION

Development and happy childhood for young children.
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IVANKA
SHALAPATOVA,
PHD

Chief Executive Officer

It is said that people “will be known by their deeds”. We know that what matters is not how well we use words but what trace we leave behind with our actions!

If you are reading this, perhaps you already know that the For Our Children Foundation is a unique organization bringing together committed professionals and enthusiastic supporters. Together, we never waver in our determination to make sure that every single child in Bulgaria has an equal and a strong start in life and is supported develop to their full potential.

To achieve these goals, you need the ability to dream, the courage to confront the unknown, and the persistence to withstand mistrust, insults, and many other obstacles. I often say that the most difficult thing in Bulgaria is to do good!

Therefore, I would like to congratulate the Foundation team who turned 2020 into a historic year and the most memorable since we began in 1992. I also thank all our supporters, the investors and the parents who have put their trust in us. We achieved the objectives we set for ourselves more than five years ago and we did it against the backdrop of the uncertainties thrust on us during the COVID-19 pandemic. What we share with you in this report demonstrates the valuable contribution of the civil society sector in bringing about democratic change in Bulgaria, encouraging respect for children's rights, as well as the role of the For Our Children Foundation as a genuine agent of change.

Reading the story of our achievements during the last year, you will notice that the word “development” appears at least once on every page and 72 times in total because this is what we work for: despite the high levels of child poverty, isolation, violence, abandonment, despair, rejection and the fact that they are sometimes “invisible” in our society, the CHILDREN are here, they are part of society and they have the right to and need for a harmonious and positive environment for development, to dream and to have a happy childhood. To make sure that Bulgaria will survive, we need adults committed to making sure the children of our country thrive.

And now I leave you with the story, the facts and evidence of the changes we’ve made and the happiness we feel in making children's lives meaningful, our satisfaction in extending a helping hand to inspire confidence in a desperate parent, to be a transparent partner of a responsible company, to propose wise policies to public institutions, to rejoice at the success of other civil society organizations, and to be a successful change-maker!
Hello, dear colleagues and friends,

I cannot but start with the hard and unusual year when the pandemic changed our way of life dramatically. We stayed home, isolated ourselves, put masks on, and our communication became “unreal”. Children stopped going to school, to kindergarten, or to the sandbox to play. Parks, streets and shops looked deserted. The virus took over our lives and added more risks to those we already knew - abandonment of children continued, violence and isolation changed their childhood, more children needed additional care, schoolchildren forgot the schoolroom habits of sitting at a desk and raising a hand to answer the teacher’s question or playing non-virtual games.

But this was a year in which we also saw some good news because the Foundation strengthened its leading role in setting early childhood development policy in Bulgaria. We can be proud of our successful initiative Bulgaria Grows with Its Children and we will make further efforts to turn it into a government policy. Hardships pressed us to seek new opportunities so that we could reach out to more children at risk and their parents. We developed new programs including emergency family help, online consulting, and new services to provide specialized assistance to children with developmental difficulties and disabilities and their parents. The Early Childhood Development Complex, which we had been dreaming of, opened its doors to its young clients in Sofia. As we helped more children find their permanent families, the Children’s House welcomed its first older children. We are also on the threshold of making another big dream come true, the Early Childhood Development Complex in Plovdiv.

Being a new member of the Board of Trustees of the For Our Children Foundation, I am happy that I am joining an ambitious, motivated, hardworking, and efficient professional community. Let enthusiasm and commitment to the cause never waver, let us take hardships as a challenge to overcome together, and to have more success stories like those of Emma, Victor, and Iveta.
WHY IS OUR WORK IMPORTANT?

- Bulgaria lacks a comprehensive child welfare policy in general and an early childhood development policy in particular.
- There are no early childhood development standards, despite the government commitment pursuant to the Pre-School and School Education Act.
- Poverty and the lack of support from close relatives as well as from a well-functioning system of social services are among the most frequent reasons for child abandonment.
- The large number of children accommodated at HMSCCs and the subsequent negative impact on their development is a cause for concern.
- Services to support families with young children, especially those aged 0-3, are underdeveloped.

- 33.3% of Bulgarian children aged 0-17 are at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat).
- 408 children accommodated at Homes for Medical and Social Care for Children – HMSCCs (31 December 2020, ASA).
- 290 children living at HMSCCs, 150 of whom are under three years of age (31 December 2020, ASA).
- 2,768 children/young people accommodated in Family Type Placement Centres.
- 1,371 children waiting for their family on the list of the adoption register, 741 of who have disabilities or developmental difficulties (as of 31 December 2020, ASA).
- 3,781 new cases of prevention of abandonment supported by social services (31 December 2020, ASA).
- 564 children successfully reintegrated in their own families after a period of separation (31 December 2020, ASA).
- 3.78% child mortality rate compared to 3.4% in the European Union.
IN 2020, WE PROVIDED DIRECT HELP TO 2,307 CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND SPECIALISTS, OUT OF WHOM:

- 1,617 children, families, and specialists participated in trainings at the Social Services Centres in Sofia and Plovdiv:
  - 22 newborn babies were rescued from abandonment;
  - 22 children in Social Care whose socialization skills we supported;
  - 277 families were supported to prevent the risk of separation;
  - 33 children received love and care in foster families;
  - 154 children and parents were involved in the Early Childhood Development Programme;
  - 12 children found a temporary home at the Children’s House;
  - 131 families were supported during pandemic-related crisis;
  - 20 children with developmental difficulties received day care at the “Development” Centre;
  - 270 people participated in parental skills training and training groups;
  - 58 children and parents received highly specialized therapeutic support at the Community Support Centre “Happy Childhood”;
  - 47 children and families were involved in the Reintegration Programme;
  - 690 children and parents were supported through consultations thanks to the financial assistance from the Human Safety Net Foundation.

- We develop alternative care in a family environment for children separated from their parents, stimulating their development and providing them with attention and safety.
- We promote the self-confidence of children and develop their adaptation and communication skills through complex support.
- Families are helped to achieve a secure family environment.
- A wide range of prevention services and programmes are offered to provide timely support to children and families.
- We work towards a change of the overall approach to social work in Bulgaria and actively assist the development of high-quality and efficient policies focused on the family and the child.
2020 was a challenging year for the Foundation. The pandemic affected our direct work with the families we support, and our overall activity.

However, 2020 was also a year of hard work and dreams coming true. We were dreaming to see the St. Sofia Home for Children Deprived of Parental Care without a single child accommodated there, and we achieved it. We were dreaming to transform the old, grim facility into a wonderful place where children and parents could receive comprehensive support – to have more psychologists, family consultants, a speech therapist, a special pedagogue, a physical therapist, and other specialists, and to give the children with developmental difficulties the whole range of services they need at a single place. This is also what parents wanted – to improve and extend the facility, to bring together various specialists, and to continue to actively support children and families.

We made it!

Despite the restrictions due to the pandemic, we worked hard to complete the refurbishment. We set up new centres, involved new specialists and finished the year of 2020 deeply gratified that the dreamed of Early Childhood Development Complex (ECDC) was in full operation in Sofia, was fully operational and supporting the development of young children. Here, at this wonderful place which is so valued by children and families, children get all the complex and specialized support that they need.

How did we achieve it? By opening two new and very needed services in Sofia. These provide specialized assistance to children with developmental difficulties and disabilities and their families. Alongside the St. Sofia Community Support Centre, the Foster Care Centre and the Children’s House, now we have the Development Day Centre and the Happy Childhood Community Support Centre.

In combination, the new specialist equipment, (including the high-tech glance tracking system and the programmes at the ECDC strengthened the capacity of the Foundation to implement new and more successful activities in support of early childhood development.

WE TRANSFORMED AND ENRICHED OUR PROGRAMMES TO ENSURE THE BEST CARE OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.

Guided by the dream of giving all the necessary care to each child visiting the ECDC, we restructured our programmes and created new inclusive activities which are provided by highly qualified specialists. We set up teams for:

- Psycho-social work
- Expert support
- Early childhood intervention

With the support of our donors, we dedicated and equipped special rooms for direct work with children and families – the Magic Room, the Fairy Tale Room, the Family Room, I Know and I Can, where children can express their emotions and develop their fine and gross motor skills under the able care of specialists.

Children and parents can rely on a team of social workers, psychologists, specialists and early childhood development experts, family consultants,
family therapists, as well as early childhood intervention specialists, a physical therapist, a special pedagogue, and a speech therapist, etc.

We thought of the parents too. We supported them in providing a secure family environment for their children, helped them cope with their challenges and worked together with them to improve the dynamic pattern of their families. We set up a support group for candidate-adoptive parents and adoptive families.

“I find the training of candidate-adoptive parents to be useful. It met my expectations. My opinion and attitude were fully in line with the information I heard at the training. Learning is a life-long process and I think that there is always something new to learn. I appreciate the experience shared, the examples given by the competent moderators, and the opinions of the participants. I, too, shared my opinion and experience on various issues. Thank you all!

Adoption is my hope, my ray of sunshine, a wish of my heart and mind, and a decision taken consciously. Now I feel calmer and more confident, I have the answers to what was unclear to me.”

Z.S., a participant in a training course for candidate-adoptive parents.
Last but not least, we offered our external experts a package of trainings that they had identified they needed in order to support their work.

“Our child started visiting the early childhood development centre two years ago. The progress is remarkable thanks to the work with Raya and the music therapy with Rosi. I thank them from the bottom of my heart; thanks to them our child develops and grows up together with the other children.”

G. and R.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CHILDREN

The new Development Day Centre opened its doors at the beginning of September to welcome children aged from 0 to 7 years with developmental difficulties and disorders of the central nervous system.

We are proud that, despite the difficulties of the pandemic and the isolation for all, we managed to equip the premises and employ a team of specialists: social assistants, a special pedagogue, a physical therapist, a speech therapist, and a nurse. Thus, we provided the complex support which both children and parents need to overcome social isolation and to lead a positive and happy life.

Here children get care and support for their overall development. Developmental and socializing activities, such as physical therapy, speech therapy and psychological support in the form of art therapy, games, fairy tales, dancing, music and other memorable and exciting activities, help them overcome the dynamic challenges they face and take an effective part in the educational process. We provide all-day, half-day or hourly care, depending on the specific needs of each child. Half-day and all-day care programmes include meals and opportunities for rest and sleep.

Joint activities with children and parents are organized to foster relationships of trust and affection and to gain better knowledge of children’s needs. We work with parents individually and support them with the professional advice of specialists so that they can develop the knowledge and skills for providing appropriate support to their children.

EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION BRINGS ABOUT GOOD CHANGES

Five-year-old Emma is one of the 30 children with whom the For Our Children Foundation works through the Early Childhood Intervention Programme. Due to her developmental delay, she has been involved in specialized activities to improve her communication skills, fine motor skills and problem-solving skills since June 2018.

When we first met, Emma could hardly play in a structured way, she could not stay still or focus her attention. She could only pronounce several words in English. The child showed the need for support to overcome some patterns in her behaviour and in her concentration and attention capacity. Therefore, we used various incentives and game activities and with her in the sensory room. Emma likes and prefers activities with the developmental
Over recent years, the number of families supported by the Foundation has grown substantially and the needs of our customers have become more diverse. We faced the need to transform our direct work with clients from preventive social activities to a more complex service which educational, social and health components provided in a welcoming and stimulating space. We identified the need for a broader scope of group and individual developmental activities and practices carried out together with our customers. As a result, we opened the Happy Childhood Community Support Centre in July 2020 to expand the opportunities for support to the youngest children and their parents. This centre also supports the professionals from toys from the Toy Library and, for this reason, we always start our sessions with them. She gradually started to engage long enough in doing puzzles with animals, shapes and numbers, “cutting” vegetables made of wood, and playing the xylophone.

As a result of the work of a specialist in early intervention at the St. Sofia CSC, we started observing her more structured play with a clear beginning and end, her still work on an assignment, her engaged and sustained attention on an activity, and the absence of hyperactive behaviour. Emma can now take part in various activities and stimulating games, depending on her interests, and she is cooperative within her capabilities. She can do a puzzle with animals and pronounce the sounds they make: woof, meow, jump-jump, cluck-cluck, croak, moo, baa. She can recognize and name animals and numbers from 1 to 10. She likes “cutting” wooden foods and she can name some of them: banana, apple, fish, carrot. She can listen to instructions and fulfill assignments.

Her mother shares that Emma can now answer the question “What’s your name?”. She responds with body language and words to express “hello”, “bye”, “good for you” and “kiss”. She uses words and short sentences to express her needs. She can retain her attention and listen to the end of the reading of a short story from a picture book.
the healthcare, education and social systems who work with children and families on a daily basis. We set up a team of professionals in the field of early childhood development to provide comprehensive, expert support in accordance with our clients’ needs and with the highest professional standards.

**ONLINE WORK WITH OUR CUSTOMERS**

The onset of the pandemic in March 2020 posed new challenges for us. Many public spaces became inaccessible. Kindergartens and schools closed down. The centres working to support the most vulnerable members of our society had to temporarily stop welcoming visitors. Many families had to combine remote work with childcare at home and to cope with anxiety. Families with children turned out to be much more vulnerable to the psycho-emotional aspects of the pandemic. While the initial main objective of the response was to provide information on how to limit the spread of COVID-19 and to prevent infection, we became aware that social isolation contributed to an overlaying mental health crisis.

We, the team of the For Our Children Foundation, knew that our clients needed us by their side. Therefore, we organized urgent training of our experts on how to provide remote support to children and their parents. We rapidly changed our working methods in order to continue the work to the benefit of our clients. We managed to provide the necessary personal technical equipment to the team and modern facilities in the rooms for training and development. It was not just the training courses for candidate-adoptive parents that were carried out online. All training courses on socially sensitive issues for schoolchildren also took place online. We started remote work with parents and children. That was how we, both professionals and clients, found out new ways to stay together. Children once again proved to be highly adaptive under these new conditions. When they have a remote session with their specialist, they often show their home and personal belongings on the screen. Thus, the physical distance did not separate us from the children and their families and they, on their part, let us closer than ever to ensure our continued support in those difficult times.
THE NEW EMERGENCY FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAMME

The challenge we faced last year was enormous. Many families that we had supported and had felt confident that they could cope with everyday challenges were suddenly unemployed and left without a secure income. We had to make urgent decisions on how we could flexibly respond to this changing situation. We came to the common understanding that there was no way to abandon those families and therefore we established the Emergency Family Support Programme. It was targeted at families in difficult social and financial conditions due to the pandemic. We made a number of visits to communities at risk in order to identify the families in need of support. Following which we were able to provide 87 children and their parents most in need with basic food packages, and with the important psychosocial support they needed to maintain the family’s integrity during these difficult times.

“My 22-year-old daughter is a single mother of three children and she is expecting a baby girl. She relies only on my husband and myself for raising her children and meeting their needs. But my husband lost his job during the pandemic and the two of us were the only working members of the whole family. Thank you for your support.”

B.I., July, 2020

YET ANOTHER CHILD IS GROWING UP HEALTHY, SMILING AND LOVED BY MOM AND DAD WITH OUR SUPPORT

With our support, Naiden and Violeta, who grew up in institutional care, have broken the cycle and becoming loving parents to beautiful baby Iveta. Abandoned by their parents, they grew up without the affection and understanding of a loving family. However, despite the lack of parental modelling they have defied the statistics and with the support of the Foundation are making sure that their daughter is growing up safely and securely in their loving family.

Growing up, Naiden and Violeta, took care of each other, supported each other, loved each other passionately and decided to have a child. They had a clear plan and it seemed that nothing could go wrong. But fate decided otherwise.

When baby Iveta was born, she was healthy - 3.450 kg and 48 cm - and all seemed fine. But when Iveta was only one-month old she was hospitalized at the Pediatric Clinic because of vomiting and loss of weight – clear signs of an undernourished infant. The hospital staff alerted the Child Protection Department in Plovdiv and they, in turn, contacted the For Children and Parents Community Support Centre to seek support for the family. The case was taken by our social worker Margarita, who started her difficult fight to keep the family together and give Iveta the chance to stay at home and develop surrounded by the love and care of her Mom and Dad. Margarita worked with Violeta very intensively, whilst baby Iveta was still in the hospital. Together they mapped out a feeding schedule. Margarita taught Violeta how to recognize the needs of the baby and how to hug her lovingly.

Following numerous telephone conversations with the Child Protection Department, meetings with the management of the home in Bratsigovo where Violeta grew up and the visits to the hospital a decision was taken in the best interests of the child that Iveta could continue to live with her parents with the committed support of the Foundation. Our social worker, Margarita focused her efforts on supporting and building the capacity of both parents to ensure Naiden and Violeta learned to take proper parental care of Iveta. She also arranged for the supply of diapers and baby food for the child. Today, Iveta is growing up healthy, smiling and loved by her Mom and Dad who, with our support, proved that growing up at an institution was not a stigma but a challenge to believe and to prove that it is possible to break the status quo, to love and to be loved.
ENHANCEMENT OF PARENTAL SKILLS

Our dedicated teams immediately reorganised our work and quickly moved to providing family-support consultations online.

Although this way of working was new to all of us, we continued to provide psychological consultations, emotional support, and group trainings for candidate-adoptive parents.

A total of 53 candidate-adoptive families attended the group trainings, where we discussed topics regarding the adoption procedure, the adaptation of the adopted child, and ways of talking about adoption with the child.

Our doors remained open to families who needed material and financial support to satisfy the basic needs of their children. While observing all hygiene measures and regulations, we also managed to help them feel that they were not isolated and forsaken.

WORK WITH HOSPITALS AND SCHOOLS

Despite the critical year, we continued to work with schools and hospitals. We did not stop our crisis interventions at maternity wards, and, notwithstanding all the challenges, we managed to stand by every mother who expressed doubts that she would not be able to take care of her baby. We supported 17 mothers in taking the most appropriate decision for them and their baby, and continued supporting them long after they left the maternity ward. Thus, they managed to cope with the difficulties and take over the care of their children. Parents received emotional support, guidance and exhaustive information on how to meet the challenges they face because of the lack of experience in raising children and of sufficient support by family and relatives, and also because of material or financial hardships. Last but not least, we provided a welcome package for each newborn baby with all the items needed during the first month.

Last year we learned how interactive training could be delivered in an online environment. We adjusted our work very quickly and continued to provide high-quality training to the pupils at 135 Jan Amos Comenius School. As well as the traditional trainings in family planning and raising a newborn baby, we added new courses, at the request of the pupils themselves, on topics which they found pertinent. We had thorough and frank discussions on the topics of discrimination, prejudices, self-knowledge and the acceptance of people different from us.

"Every topic was well presented and visualized to highlight the main points. I gained valuable knowledge that I will hardly forget."

R.S., October, 2020
WE WORKED ACTIVELY AND ACHIEVED A LOT FOR THE CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES IN PLOVDIV

In spite of all difficulties last year, we never faltered or stopped fighting, dreaming, identifying new opportunities, and overcoming our fears. We are on the threshold of another big dream come true: the Early Childhood Development Complex in Plovdiv.

We never stopped being available at our partner maternity wards and responded to every alert that a newborn baby was at risk of abandonment. We also delivered food packages and support to 35 families in desperate need, because they had lost their income.

“The psychologist Polina Tonova is a very special person and I am grateful to her that she was by my side in some of the hardest times in my life! She is an incredible specialist. One consultation was enough to make me feel as if she was my best friend. She helped me overcome many concerns that I had and be a better parent. She helped me see my problem from a different angle and reunite my family!”

V.V., September, 2020

The funding provided from the OP HRD within the framework of the project Initiative for Social Inclusion – For Our Children enabled us to expand the team of specialists and work actively in eight municipalities in the region of Plovdiv (Rodopi, Stamboliyski, Maritsa, Asenovgrad, Sadovo, Kuklen, Plovdiv and Perushtitsa).

Three new programmes were implemented: Individual Needs Assessment and Referral to Social and Integrated Services, Support for Development and Socialization of Children from Vulnerable Groups, and Consulting and Therapeutic Support. We provided additional opportunities for children and families to use mobile supportive services, to obtain specialized support by an early childhood intervention specialist, a speech therapist, a physical
therapist and a kinesiotherapist, depending on their individual needs. The team also included medical specialists who extended a helping hand at difficult moments and at places where access to healthcare was almost impossible. The opportunity to get in touch with the magic of theatre, to take part in musical and sports events and art workshops was provided to 195 children.

With the assistance and encouragement of experts and supporters we developed a programme for interaction between the healthcare, education, and social sectors in the Plovdiv region. This integrated approach contributes towards better coordination and more effective provision of comprehensive services for children and families.

Last year, our work highlighted the huge need for support to children in smaller municipalities and, at the same time, filled us with confidence that we were on the right track. It confirmed the need for early childhood development programmes in Plovdiv and the burning need for an Early Childhood Development Complex there. The results achieved in 2020, the expansion of our activities, as well as the long-standing fruitful partnership with the Plovdiv Municipality, brought us closer to the opening of the Early Childhood Development Complex in Plovdiv. Repair works are underway and we believe that we will welcome children and families in the refurbished building of the former Home for Children Deprived of Parental Care Rada Kirkovich in the middle of 2021.

Today we are even more confident because we know that the Early Childhood Development Complex in Plovdiv will soon offer high-quality professional social and integrated services to a greater number of young children and their families.
Regardless of the challenges which the year 2020 posed, our foster families and the supporting team from the For Our Children Foundation did not let the global chaos affect those who needed them – the foster children. Our specialists stood by the side of the children who needed a temporary home and supported them calmly.

The team of the Foster Care Centre was remarkably flexible and adaptive to the changes and managed to provide foster families with the continued opportunity to benefit from the services of For Our Children Foundation from the safest and most convenient place – their own homes. That was achieved through online platforms, remote support groups and virtual upskilling. Any direct contact between foster children and families and social workers took place in strict observance of hygiene protection measures and regulations.

Although the year was very challenging families who were eager to become foster parents did not give up their willingness to help children at risk, and by the end of 2020, we had identified three more prospective foster families. This success was highly motivating and gratifying for the team in its mission to stand shoulder to shoulder with foster families because of their crucial, albeit temporary, role in the lives of children in need of love, care, and attention.
FINDING MOM AND DAD IN TIMES OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

Katya was born prematurely and abandoned by her mother in the summer of 2018. She had neonatal candidiasis and signs of hypotrophy and she weighed a mere 2.4 kg. But the little girl was a strong survivor. Although her first days were spent in the loneliness and isolation of the medical establishment without the warmth and affection of a mother, soon after her birth Katya found the love, care and attention that any child needs in the home of the foster mother Vera.

Katya enjoyed the loving, safe and cozy family environment of the foster family for 18 months. The games with Vera’s older child promoted her development. Katya often suffered from acute respiratory infections but her foster mother’s love and care helped the underweight infant turn into a happy and playful little girl. She went to a nursery where she adapted very quickly and all her teachers loved her.

Little Katerina’s familiar world changed forever in March 2020. The emergency situation had just started and it was with the assistance of the Foster Care Centre social worker Yoana that she met her future Mom and Dad for the first time. Just one meeting in person was enough to trigger “love at first sight”. Little Katya seemed to understand the role that those strangers would play in her life. She gave them a playful glance, smiled and even winked to invite them into the game she was playing.

The meeting was followed by three months of Viber calls. Every day the child waited eagerly for her future family to call and at the end of each call, she covered the telephone set with kisses in her childish way of demonstrating her love for the people she saw on the screen.

Before the candidate-adoptive parents appeared in little Katya’s life, she had been calling her foster parent “Mom”. But the daily Viber calls made her spontaneously and naturally start calling her adoptive parent “Mom”.

The emergency situation was lifted and they could finally meet in person. It was as if they had never parted. The girl felt secure and happy with them. Katya moved to the home of her new parents in the middle of June. Thanks to the care of her foster mother, she parted with Vera in the best painless way and gave a loving hug to her new parents. This is the story of a child who was unwanted and abandoned by her biological mother about two years ago but she met the care and love of Vera and her family, and finally found a forever home, parents and enormous love.
In 2020, our Children’s House grew up when it celebrated its seventh birthday. That age is a time of momentous and responsible changes for every child and so it was a time of substantial transformation for us in just the same way.

All six children and the team stayed healthy until July when we gave everything that the children needed to move happy and confident to their permanent families. We celebrated every little victory with them. We rejoiced at their first steps, first words, first meetings with Mom and Dad. We were growing together in an environment full of love and affectionate care. Now we are thrilled to receive every photograph which the happy parents send us, to hear every story they tell us, to share every achievement or concern with them.

When all young children left the Children’s House to move to their loving forever homes we started refurbishing the facilities so as to be able also to take care of older children from 3 to 7 years. That was the imperative requirement of the new Social Services Act and we were not only ready but also eager to comply. We were incredibly enthusiastic to welcome the older children. We transformed the house, put fresh paint everywhere, redecorated the rooms and designated one room for active indoor games and another one for creative work and learning. Bedrooms were designed to have space for the favourite toys, drawings and books. Most importantly, the team prepared intensively to meet the needs of older.

The carers attended a series of training courses and consultations with specialists as part of an ongoing capacity development process. That preparation helped them welcome the first new
children in the house in October. These children are accommodated in an emergency, and it took the team only a few weeks to calm them down, to take care of their health, to fill in gaps in their knowledge, and to show them what cosiness, care, joy, celebration and love meant. This might seem natural and easy to every parent but, again, every parent knows how much commitment is needed even for the simplest things in the daily routine of a child before he or she turns seven: washing in the morning, physical exercise, observance of the daily schedule, playing outdoors, learning colours, letters, numbers, seasons, animals, fruit and vegetables, drawing, gluing, music, cooking, tidying up the toys, the room, the wardrobe and so on.

We are smiling proudly because we have good reasons to believe that these first seven years laid the solid foundations of our future growth as confident, knowledgeable and capable carers of children in need.

Victor arrived here as an infant. I remember it as if it was yesterday. Somebody rang the bell, I went to answer it and when I opened the door, I cried. I saw a policeman in a uniform and a baby in his arms. I was devastated. I thought: “Yet another harsh fate...” Of course, I took the baby and I predicted a happy life for him.

Fate had been cruel to him. I opened the diapers and what I saw was outrageous – a skinny baby, undernourished and dirty, one finger smashed, scars on the head, and an enormous hernia. Enough of the bad things, because the sun rose for Vicky ever since he was brought to the Children’s House!

Those big and beautiful eyes! The eyes of a survivor. It all happened then and there. I gave him all my love. That was the beginning of his new path. He overcame all health problems, made his first steps, and pronounced his first words. Victor was growing up with beautiful eyes and a mass of hair, amicable and kind to the other children in the house.

One beautiful day the good news came. Victor already had his Mom and Dad. And there was more to it! He also had a brother and a sister. Tell me, is there anything better than having a family of one’s own, knowing that you mean a lot to somebody, being loved and attended to with affection?

The Sun Rose for Me. This is the title of Victor’s story. A story with a happy ending. I am crying again while I am writing these lines but this time these are tears of joy. Because our little Victor found his happiness.

I love you, Vicky, you will always be in my heart!

Cornelia
Carer at the Children’s House
OUR PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES HELP PROTECT CHILDREN’S RIGHTS IN BULGARIA

The Foundation operates within the framework of various programmes and projects aimed at developing services for children and families in Bulgaria, as well as raising public awareness and sensitivity about these issues.

The Bulgaria Grows with Its Children initiative is a milestone of our overall advocacy activities aimed at improving early childhood development policies in Bulgaria. Within the framework of the initiative, we conducted research among specialists working with young children in order to focus the attention of the general public on the need for systematic efforts of the government, local authorities and all stakeholders to support the people who take care of the health, development and education of children at an early age which is a crucial stage of their development. At the end of the year, there was a series of advocacy meetings with the concerned ministries and local authorities, academia, professional associations and trade union organizations, which corroborated the importance of the data collected in the research and outlined the policy guidelines for the development of competent and motivated workforce dealing with early childhood development in Bulgaria. The outcomes of the research project will potentially contribute to the development of appropriate workforce policies in the field of early childhood development.

Let us Give Way to the Services for Early Childhood Development in Bulgaria is a comprehensive programme in support of early childhood development in a safe family environment, which is financed by the Human Safety Net Foundation (THSN) of Generali International Insurance Company. It provides direct support to children and parents through a wide range of social services and promotes corporate social responsibility in Bulgaria to the benefit of children and families. We are proud that thanks to the team of Generali Bulgaria, our organization
is involved in this global network of people and supporters who focus on families in their work.

At the end of the first year of implementation of the project, the investment of The Human Safety Net and Generali Insurance enabled us to provide competent care, training and support in the field of early childhood development to 1,552 parents and 902 children in Sofia and Plovdiv. The equipment we purchased with the financial assistance of THSN to cope with the consequences of COVID-19 helped us strengthen the capacity of the organization to provide digital services.

The THSN assistance enabled us to better meet the needs of parents and children with the introduction of new training programmes for parents, such as Nutrition at the Early Childhood Age and Positive Parenthood. New components were added to the existing programmes to develop parental skills in support of early childhood development and the scope of those programmes was expanded to cover new target groups.

Furthermore, we provided training and consultations with specialists from the education, healthcare and social sectors to assist foster parents in upgrading their skills to work with children aged from 0 to 7 years, multiplying the effect of our work.

ADVOCACY FOR CHILDREN’S RIGHTS IN BULGARIA

Last year was difficult in all aspects of our lives and it changed our traditional methods of work and communication. Although in a new context, we continued our advocacy for children’s rights, for the development of an appropriate and timely child and family policies and for the adoption of modern legislation concerning the provision of social services. As a result of our joint efforts in the civil society sector, the Social Services Act entered into force. We also supported the drafting of the related secondary legislation. We take special pride in the fact that thanks to our advocacy together with our colleagues from UNICEF and non-governmental organizations providing services to children, the Implementing Rules of the Social Services Act define early childhood development and early intervention for children with disabilities.

THE LICHIEVI FAMILY – A CHANCE FOR NEW LIFE

This is the story of the Lichevi family, 50-year-old, bereaved parents who could hardly cope with the loss of their son. They did not measure the flow of time in days but in memories, photographs and messages. Only two years prior to their loss, the spouses lived with the hope of seeing the family of their son, dreaming of a grandchild.

The last wish of their son left an indelible imprint on their minds, “You are great parents, do not stay without a child. If something
as separate services which are freely and broadly accessible. Thus, all children and their parents or carers will be able, if necessary, to easily consult specialists, to overcome challenges in parenthood and support their children in reaching their potential.

We repeatedly discussed and put on the agenda the process of deinstitutionalization and closing down of all institutional facilities for children in this country. We advocated for careful preparation of the children to be deinstitutionalized, especially because many of them had disabilities and special needs and any change would be an additional trauma for that matter. Regrettably, a hasty and unprepared deinstitutionalization took place at the end of the year at several big homes for medical and social care of children (HMSCC) without proper preliminary measures, in spite of the repeated alerts that we and other organizations sent.

A sign of recognition of our Foundation by our peers working in the field of early childhood was our re-election as the coordinator of the Early Childhood Development Alliance (ECDA). It was evidence of the trust in and expectations from us as a knowledge bearer and a policy driver in this sphere. We played a leading role within the ECDA framework in the drafting of many opinions and proposals relating to the public discussion of national strategic documents.

An integral part of our work is our participation in various working groups and advisory councils, such as the National Child Protection Council, the National Council on Social Inclusion, associations and networks, such as the National Network for Children, Childhood 2025 Coalition, Violence-free Childhood, and international formats, such as Eurochild and the International Step by Step Association (ISSA).

At the end of the year, we launched, together with the two major international networks, the First Years, First Priority campaign for early childhood development. We are implementing it together in eight more European countries. The objective is to advocate for prioritization of early childhood development and the need for presence and focus of this issue in the public policies of European countries, as well as for more investment in early childhood.

happens to me, please adopt a child.” Thus, the family embarked on the challenging path of their dream to adopt a child. But they were confronted with dismay, negativist attitudes, inappropriate questions, distrust, formal attitude, and skepticism.

And then the team of our St. Sofia Community Support Centre intervened in the story. We helped the family feel that we understood them, that we felt and respected their pain. We heard their wish to continue their life by helping a parentless child in the right way. Our family consultant Petya explained to the Lichevi family very patiently and prudently that bereavement could lead to failure in the adoption procedure in spite of their strong wishes. She persuaded them that they needed not only thorough preparation as candidate-adoptive parents but also some time to work on themselves and their loss.

The permission for them to become adoptive parents came a bit late but the trustful relationship with Petya and her support inspired hope and courage in the future parents. They talked as often and as much as the family needed. While waiting, the parents reassessed their preferences for the age of the child and visited various administrative institutions where they could already see not just skepticism but also signs of good will and trust in their cherished desire to adopt a child.

The Lichevi waited for a “one-pregnancy” period. When they saw the eight-year-old boy for the first time, he was shy and scared, an “invisible” child with a grim fate. They recognized him as their son and he recognized them as his parents. Every meeting they had was transformative. Trust was gradually building and warmth found its way back to their souls. Today they are together, parents with a new meaningful life and a child enjoying the warmth and love of a genuine family.
LITTLE MAYA IS GROWING UP HAPPY AND LOVED BY MOM AND DAD WITH OUR COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT

It takes a lot of help to be born, to grow up and to become a healthy, happy, and productive person. Sometimes this help comes from Mom and Dad alone, sometimes it comes from many people. That was the case of Maya who was born prematurely and with a facial anomaly. The specialists from the For Children and Parents Community Support Centre met her because her parents Angel and Violeta had not received any support from their relatives and declared their intention to abandon her.

Our specialists had a meeting with Angel and Violeta to introduce them to Community Support Centre staff members who had managed to change the attitudes of many other people and to build trust. They helped the parents raise their Maya happy in a family environment! The condition of the child called for specialized medical care and she was initially accommodated at a medical and social facility. Meanwhile, our specialists assisted the family in settling in a home of their own and provided everything that the baby needed from the special bottle to the bed. Then the pandemic broke out. It confused and scared Mom and Dad and separated them from the child. Nevertheless, both of them continued to believe and fight for the return of their daughter.

And they made it! Together with us!

A patient nurse trained mom Vili on how to feed little Maya, a dedicated social worker was always on the side of the family and helped them achieve financial security and receive the support they were entitled to. She accompanied them during their visits to various offices and specialized institutions and helped them contact organizations supporting children with facial anomalies. A specialist in early childhood development monitored the progress of the child and shared valuable advice with the family on how to take care of the child and support her development. The medical specialists who carried out the surgical interventions also gave emotional support to little Maya and her mom and dad. The nurse never left Angel and Vili until the last scar of the plastic surgery disappeared.

Maya, Angel and Vili are one of the families that received the full range of services they needed to stay together in spite of all difficulties.

Their story is an example of many different specialists coming together to work towards a common goal – an equal chance for the child to develop and enjoy a happy childhood in the family because home is the best place!
DONATIONS IN THE YEAR OF COVID-19

THE ROLE OF CORPORATE DONORS IN SUPPORT OF OUR MISSION

Trust, development, and sustainability in the time of a crisis – these are the words that best describe our year of 2020. In spite of all the difficulties and challenges, donations remained the focal point of our work with companies and supporters. To donate is a value that is nurtured, a tradition that develops, and a precondition of sustainability for our organization and society as a whole.

In 2020, the consistency of our traditional corporate donors and the commitment of our new partners inspired us and provided us with the resources we needed to continue the support of thousands of children and families in Sofia and Plovdiv. We managed to respond instantaneously to the consequences of the pandemic, which had a devastating effect on the most vulnerable children and families. It was as early as the first weeks of the emergency situation that we established the Emergency Family Support Programme, entirely thanks to the help of corporate donors, and provided food and social support to 120 families who had lost their jobs or found themselves in a difficult situation.
We continued our Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives with our long-term partners and established new friendships. We are proud of the results we achieved together with our donors and we are grateful to them that they trusted our joint efforts to make a long-term positive change in the lives of children and families in Bulgaria.

Partnerships that make us sustainable:

- **Generali Bulgaria**, through *The Human Safety Net* initiative, increased their support and turned into a strategic partner investing in the sustainability, innovations and development of the Foundation.

- **Dundee Precious Metals** was the first company that believed in our dream of establishing an Early Childhood Development Complex in Plovdiv and continued to be the traditional general sponsor of our annual Evening of Virtues.

- **Compass** has been supporting our Family Support and Foster Care causes for ten years now.

- **Citibank** continued their five-year-long support for the development of foster care.

- **Doppelherz** joined the family of our donors and implemented a campaign in support of the prevention of separation of babies and infants from their parents.

- **Lavena** and the Bochko brand developed special wet wipes to support the children and families that we help.

- **Herbalife** supported our efforts to provide appropriate and healthy food to the children at the Children’s House and the Development Day Centre.

- **Proficredit** supported our work with families at risk and families affected by the pandemic.

- **LR Global Kids Fund** continued its long-term support for the Children’s House and doubled its contribution.

- **Devin** catered for the daily needs for drinking water of the whole team of the Foundation and all children and families visiting our centres.

- **Telus International Europe** provided food packages to 50 families with young children in Sofia and in Plovdiv.

- **The Smarts** continued to make our causes, campaigns and events more inspiring with their creative style absolutely free of charge.

We thank all companies which have consciously chosen to invest in early childhood development. They understand very well that the investment in the first five years of human life is a powerful economic tool which we can use to improve the quality of life of the child and his or her family, to reduce the social costs of deteriorated health, school dropout, poverty and high crime rates, to improve the economy with better educational achievement which ensures the development of well educated, self-confident and ambitious young specialists.

**THE DREAM FOR PLOVDIV – THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT COMPLEX**

“*You are only as big as your dreams*”. We could not agree more with these words of Antoine de Saint-Exupery, especially in 2020 when we dared to live one of our biggest dreams – the establishment of an Early Childhood Development Complex in Plovdiv in part of the building of the former Rada Kirkovich Home for Children, the first orphanage in Bulgaria. Dozens of companies and their employees and hundreds of people believed in our dream and donated funds and materials to create the place where the children of Plovdiv and their families could get the support they needed.

The Early Childhood Development Complex will provide and develop various integrated services for early childhood development and support for a safe family environment. Thus we will be able to continue our work for overcoming the risks to children’s life and health. The Complex will host the Academy for Social Learning and Development and the first permanent museum exhibition in the country to tell the story of the Home and of institutional care in Bulgaria.

In 2020, in spite of all difficulties, the generosity and support of our donors helped us raise BGN 150,000 out of the BGN 330,000 needed for the establishment of the Early Childhood Development Complex and to start the repair works. Our mission will continue in 2021, too, because we believe that our joint efforts will inspire more supporters to join our cause and make our dream for Plovdiv come true. We thank those who were the first to believe in it even when it seemed impossible.
THE FIRST ONLINE EVENING OF VIRTUES

In 2020, the traditional Evening of Virtues, our biggest charity event held annually since 2009, underwent its first digital transformation. Thanks to technological innovations, we succeeded in overcoming all challenges relating to the ban on holding in-person events and in organizing our first Evening of Virtues fully online.

On 29 November 2020, the Evening of Virtues was broadcast live from a special stage in Sofia Event Center on the MP-STUDIO.EVENTS virtual events platform. It enabled 120 guests to experience the cause for full-fledged early childhood development and donate over BGN 85,000.

Hosts of the event were the popular Bulgarian actors Elena Petrova and Kalin Vrachanski. The inspiring programme created by our long-term friends Ivan Angelov and Dimitar Kotsev – Shosho starred the dancer Remy Toin, the teacher Teodosiy Teodosiev, and the actors Ilona Ivanova and Denko Prodanov. The Evening of Virtues would have never been the same without its traditional charity auction held once again by the incredible Igor Markovski entirely online. Some of the most intriguing auction items were a cultural experience at the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China to Bulgaria, a seven-day cruise with a sailing boat around the Sporades islands, a guitar autographed by the members of The Foundation group, and a chair signed by all members of the team which organized the event.

Our heartfelt thanks go to our general sponsor Dundee Precious Metals, and to our general partners Special Events Group, Sofia Event Center, MP-STUDIO and MP-STUDIO.EVENTS, and also to the other sponsors EOS Matrix, Interlogistics Holding Limited Sofia, Synevo Laboratories, and Compass Invest. The event was also supported by The Smarts, J Point, Arlet Stars and Metro Cash & Carry. Their support covered all organizational costs and made it possible for 100% of the funds raised before and during the event to be allocated to the cause in support of early childhood development.

The first online Evening of Virtues proved that human kindness knows no boundaries. We thank everybody who donated a part of their heart to give more children the chance they deserve!
INDIVIDUAL DONORS AND VOLUNTEERS

In 2020, we continued our Re:giver programme of monthly donations and increased the community of people believing in our cause and enabling us with their small but regular donations to change the lives of thousands of children and families.

“To donate means to express kindness in a unique way and to give a little so as to change a lot. I would like to thank For Our Children Foundation for the opportunity they gave me to contribute to their cause in these times that are so hard for many families”. These are the words of Irina, one of our Re:giver.

We managed to hold several volunteer campaigns at our centres in Sofia and in Plovdiv. Team members of our partners Generali and Citibank helped us assemble the furniture at the new Early Childhood Development Complex in Sofia, while volunteers of Telus International Europe distributed food packages to families affected by the pandemic.

At the end of 2020, we held our campaign This Christmas You Make the Miracles for the eighth time. Team members of 24 companies participated and raised a total of BGN 30,000 in support of our cause. Thanks to the new ideas for online fundraising initiatives, the remote working teams managed to make Christmas miracles happen and to come together to help the children and families we work with.

We are happy that our donor community grows from one year to another and we thank all who give their small or big contribution to the implementation of our mission!
Work in the non-governmental sector has always been challenging and related to the maintenance of relationships with various organizations, with the central and local public administrations, donors, business organizations, and partners, and also to the active participation in and advocacy for early childhood development and child and family policies. Last year we worked even harder to raise the awareness of the important and necessary work of professionals providing social services and their status in society, the context in which we develop and build our expertise and capacity.

However, there was a challenge we could never predict and assess the risk of what was ahead of us. COVID-19 changed our working priorities radically and reshuffled our personal and professional priorities. Our human resources management systems were put to the test in that unpredictable situation. We needed a new plan and a new strategy to manage the team. Therefore, we developed a new HR management strategy. We called it MACS, the acronym (in the Bulgarian language) of the words “motivated, dedicated, competent, stable (team)“.

The strategy envisaged a range of interrelated activities which were geared to the objectives of our organisation.

This is what we did:

The whole administrative team was transferred to home office work. The teams which provide services were assigned to hybrid work: presence at the office and home office work in accordance with the new schedule;
We retained the entire team of the organization during the pandemic and even recruited 17 new employees; Working hours were not reduced; We increased salaries by 17% on the average; Two new social services were opened: Development Day Centre for Children and Happy Childhood CSC. We changed the age group of the children accommodated at the Children’s House.

In the recruitment of new specialists, organizations like ours have to compete with the healthcare and education sectors where the demand for human resources is very high. In spite of all difficulties and dynamics of the labour market, we selected young and highly motivated professionals. The advantages we offer are our working environment, the open communication culture based on such values as loyalty to clients and users, the continuous professional development, our result orientation, the tolerance to differences, our constructive dialogue, teamwork, transparency, openness, and honesty.

Our social services were digitalized with the new equipment for online consultations and meetings. Trainings were transformed into a digital format in Teams, Google Meet, and Zoom. We recorded sessions to support our clients and help them cope with tension and stress during the pandemic.

All staff members of the organization were tested for the new virus. We bought protective equipment and organized internal communication channels and groups for psychological support and supervision. We provided COVID insurance and individual psychological consultation to all staff members. The Care of the People Programme was extended with a COVID Fund to cover the costs of PCR tests and to reimburse the costs for medications to our employees.

We continued to invest in the training and development of our team members. Our programme for the development of the managerial potential was continued and we never gave up the efforts to ensure continuity in our teams, preparing the next young leaders of the organisation.

2020 was a year of change and uncertainty. Therefore, our team was so excited to meet Maria Atanasova, a highly motivated and dreaming young person.

She met Ivanka Shalapatova, our Executive Director thanks to the initiative of To The Top Agency Have Lunch with the Boss of...

The meeting took place at our Early Childhood Development Complex in Sofia, where Maria and Vanya discussed the burning issues in our society and shared their dreams of the future.

"From my conversation with Ms. Ivanka Shalapatova I learned a lot and understood that negative experience could often turn into strong motivation and energy to change the environment that surrounds us and make it better. Courage, persistence and hard work can help you achieve a lot not only for yourself but obviously for the people around you, as well.

I was interested to see what gave meaningfulness and motivation to those people dealing with the harsh fate of children and families and how they achieved sustainability. I learned that meaningfulness came precisely from the work with those children and families and from the support they provided. These are people who simply love their work and find others who share the same ideas."

Maria Atanasova
Ms Iliana Yotova, Vice President of the Republic of Bulgaria visited the For Our Children Foundation last July. She expressed her appreciation of our efforts and visited the Early Childhood Development Complex which was still in construction. The discussion focused on the policies for the prevention of abandonment and the legislation concerning the protection and rights of the child and the provision of social services.

H.E. Ms. Sri Astari Rasjid, Ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia to the Republic of Bulgaria was our guest and was interested to see the ongoing refurbishment of the Complex in Sofia and the expansion of the activities of the Foundation. H.E. Ms. Sri Astari Rasjid has been supporting the Foundation for many years.

She and many other friends of ours supported us in the mission to provide a safe family environment to each child.
In 2020, we achieved financial stability by allocating sources in four main pillars:

- State delegated activities – SDA
- Project financing
- Corporate and individual donors – CSR
- Business operations

The financial resources raised amounted to BGN 2,489,677 in 2020, which was an increase of 28% in comparison to 2019.
The resources invested in various activities of the organization amounted to BGN 2,298,363 in 2020, which was an increase of 20.4% in comparison to 2019.

Repair works started at our new location in the former Rada Kirkovich Home in Plovdiv in 2020. This year the funds raised will be invested in the overhaul of the facilities, furniture and equipment, and improvement of the exterior, including an access ramp for wheelchairs and people with limited mobility.

In 2020, the financing of the main organizational activities was allocated in four basic financing pillars:

- State delegated activities (SDA)
- Project financing
- Corporate and individual donors (CSR)
- Non-financial donations

Each organizational activity had its own financial structure which is shown in the chart above.
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In accordance with the personal data protection policy and the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation, the names of individual donors who supported our cause in 2020, will not be published in this report.
FOR OUR CHILDREN FOUNDATION

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