

# The National Therapeutic and Rehabilitation Center for Children - A New Model for Children Mental Health Care in Albania

Dr. Florida Dobi<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Sonila Tomori<sup>2</sup>, Besmira Zenelaj<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, Director at the National Therapeutic and Rehabilitation Center for Children

<sup>2</sup>Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist at University Hospital Center "Mother Teresa", Tirana

<sup>3</sup>Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist at National Therapeutic and Rehabilitation Center for Children, Tirana

**Abstract:** Globally, nearly 15% of young people ages 10 - 19 experience a mental health disorder, accounting for 13% of the global burden of disease in this age group. Yet 70% of children and adolescents who experience mental health problems have not had appropriate interventions at a sufficiently early age. The emotional and financial concerns that these conditions cause, not only to the families but also to the community, innately develop a need for adding advanced mental health facilities that facilitate access of service for this category. This article aims to briefly depict mental health services available for children and adolescents in Albania and to describe the experience of the National Therapeutic and Rehabilitation Center for Children as a multidisciplinary service implemented to satisfy the need for greater outreach of mental health services for all, and as a possible model for all other regions.

**Keywords:** mental health, children, adolescence, Albania, multidisciplinary care

## 1. Introduction

Mental disorders among children are described as serious changes in the way children typically learn, behave, or handle their emotions, causing distress and problems getting through the day (Perou R et al., 2013). Globally, nearly 15% of young people ages 10 - 19 experience a mental health disorder, accounting for 13% of the global burden of disease in this age group (World Health Organization. Adolescent Mental Health, 2022). In 2016, almost 20% of children in the United States ages 2 - 8 years (17.4%) had a diagnosed mental, behavioural, or developmental disorder (US National Institute of Mental Health; 1999).

Yet 70% of children and adolescents who experience mental health problems have not had appropriate interventions at a sufficiently early age. Untreated mental health disorders in children and adolescents are related to adverse health, academic and social outcomes, higher levels of drug abuse, self - harm and suicidal behaviour and often persist into adulthood (Radez J et al., 2020).

6 in 10 individuals who met criteria in for a common childhood psychiatric disorder in early childhood reported an adult adverse outcome such as educational failure, criminality, addiction, suicidality, teenage parenthood, mental and physical health problems, untimely death, and social isolation. Subthreshold cases that did not meet criteria for mental health disorders but experienced moderately impairing emotional and behavioural problems had 3 times higher odds of having an adult outcome and 5 times higher odds of 2 or more such outcomes compared with those with no psychiatric history (Copeland WE et al., 2015).

Mental health disorders can impair cognitive function, concentration, and memory, affecting academic performance and educational attainment. This can have long - term

consequences on future employment opportunities and socioeconomic status.

Most studies on academic achievement and mental health find that youth with mental health problems perform less well in school and attain lower levels of education than other youth. The association holds throughout the early life course—in elementary school, in middle and high school and into the postsecondary years (McLeod JD et al., 2012).

Poor health especially mental health problems in adolescence have the potential to disrupt education and consequently employment pathways.

A study conducted in Sweden showed that adults diagnosed with any type of psychiatric condition in late adolescence spent approximately 10 more days unemployed per year than the other population. Those diagnosed with psychiatric conditions had lower cognitive ability scores and a 1 - SD increase in cognitive ability predicted 4.7 fewer days unemployment per year. Cognitive ability appeared to explain approximately 23% of the link between suffering from any psychiatric condition and unemployment (Victoria Moustery et al., 2019).

Unemployment comes with consequences for individual and family socioeconomic status due to direct costs related to healthcare services and medications with adult family incomes reduced by 20% or \$10, 400 per year with \$18, 000 less family household assets (Smith JP et al., 2010). When referring in terms of the society unemployment also generates pervasive societal costs, including reduced productivity labour market experiences (Richard Layard et al., 2013). Economic burden of psychiatric disorders was estimated to be 3.5% of GDP in European Union in 2010, with benefit expenditure and productivity losses accounting for 50% of the total cost (OECD, 2015).

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The economic burden seems to worsen when the mental health problems are left untreated as a recent study conducted in Indiana, USA suggest that untreated mental illness was associated with \$4.2 billion in annual societal costs, consisting of \$3.3 billion in indirect costs, \$708.5 million in direct health care costs, and \$185.4 million in non - health care costs (Taylor HL et al., 2023).

Children and adolescents with mental health disorders may struggle to build and maintain healthy relationships with peers and family members. Social isolation and difficulties in interpersonal communication can exacerbate the symptoms of their disorders. There is evidence that loneliness is associated with worse mental health outcomes over time, including worse depression and anxiety symptoms and poorer remission of depression (Wang, J et al., 2018).

These disorders increase the risk of self - harm and suicide among children and adolescents. Suicide is one of the leading causes of death in this age group, highlighting the urgent need for early intervention and access to mental health services. Suicide amid young people (15–29 years) accounts for one - third of all suicides globally and is the second leading cause of death in this age group (World Health Organization: LIVE LIFE, 2018). In 2019, in Albania INSTAT declared that 25 youth between 15 - 24 years old committed suicide (Albanian Institute of Statistics, 2019).

In Albania, in 2017, the burden of mental illness in adults was estimated to be 3888 per 100, 000 people (Doukani A et al., 2021).

Despite the impact that mental health problems have on emotional and behavioural aspects a strong correlation between mental and physical health. Mental health disorders among children and adolescents can increase the risk of developing physical health problems such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, and substance abuse.

Both obesity and psychiatric disorders are complex states which interweave genetic, biological, psychological, and environmental factors (Kansra A. R et al., 2021). The association between the two conditions is most significant in affective disorders, since both depression and bipolar disorders affect and distort energy, motivation, attitude towards eating, and need for sleep of minors (Moitra P., 2020).

In line with increased risk for obesity, a study suggests that associations between child mental health and elevated cardiometabolic risk previously documented among adults may be observed as early as the first decade of life (Qureshi F et al., 2021).

In summary mental health disorders have a huge impact in the quality of life and overall wellbeing of these individuals. A study conducted in England showed that self - reported mental health problems were found to be strongly related in reverse to self - reported quality of life in this large community sample of young people aged between 8 and 13 years (Ahmad F., 2014).

All the arguments above mentioned highlight the urgent need for early intervention and access to mental health services. Early diagnosis and appropriate services for children and their families can make a difference in the lives of children with mental disorders.

The emotional and financial concerns that these conditions cause, not only to the families but also to the community, innately develop a need for adding advanced mental health facilities that facilitate access of service for this category (Alegria M et al., 2018).

Despite the raised awareness towards mental health, people with mental health disorders are facing a lot of challenges. In the 2018 report of annual programme of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC) pointed out many issues suggesting that mental health care services are organised in a way that is often complex and often counterproductive in relation to early identification and service in times when the demand for mental health care is raising (ENOC, 2018).

The last but not the least point to be considered when dealing with children and adolescents with mental health disorders is the impact of stigma surrounding mental illness that can lead to discrimination and social exclusion, preventing individuals from seeking help and accessing appropriate treatment. This perpetuates a cycle of suffering and can further exacerbate mental health symptoms. Children and adolescents appear to be a particularly vulnerable group and stigma has negative effects, finding that children and adolescents often feel rejected, have feelings of shame or guilt and try to keep their problems hidden by not seeking professional help (Jamie Ferrie et al., 2020).

Children and adolescent psychiatry and mental health services in Albania

Mental health services in Albania underwent great changes and developments over the last decade. Before 2012, the treatment of serious mental illnesses was only provided in psychiatric institutions. Following the adoption of Law 44/2012 and the Action Plan for the Development of Mental Health Services, measures were taken to 'de - institutionalise' and expand mental health treatment. These changes have led not only to the change of the categorisation of services but also to the expansion of the range of professionals involved in mental health services. Expanding the staff with new professionals, turning it into a multidisciplinary team composed not only of doctors and nurses but also of psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, etc. In comparison, before the year 2009 infant psychiatry residency wasn't available in Albania and therefore paediatricians and adult psychiatrists would treat children and adolescents' mental illnesses.

The mental health workforce has increased to 1.7 psychiatrists and 14.7 mental health workers per 100, 000 population, even though it is still below the average of the countries around Albania (World Health Organisation's Mental Health Atlas 2021).

But when we talk about child and adolescent mental health there is not sufficient data. There currently isn't an official number of child and adolescent psychiatrists, child psychologists, speech therapists, or other professionals who deal with children and adolescent mental health in Albania.

Children and adolescents' mental health services in Albania are organised into 3 main levels. Primary mental health care is provided by paediatricians and in some rural areas even by family doctors and nursing staff who exercise their activity in primary health care clinics or facilities. Doctors have a legal obligation of disclosure, referral, and follow-up of patients with mental health disorders.

The second level is the community mental health services that have in their structure a team composed of a child and adolescent psychiatrist, psychologist, and social worker. Staff members make office appointments and home visits, often following up with patients who had recently been discharged from hospital or were known to need extra support due to an especially difficult home situation. What needs to be noticed is that there are only a few community mental health services, (located in three regions of Albania) 3 in Tirana, 1 in Shkodra, and 1 in Elbasan, making it severely difficult to cover all of the other regions, thus leaving a lot of patients without access to mental health services.

The third level is represented by the only in-patient facility, the child and adolescent psychiatry ward, part of the University Hospital Center "Mother Teresa" in Tirana. This facility provides emergency care for children and adolescents with severe mental health disorders that require hospitalisation.

The increasing number of children and adolescents experiencing mental health problems and the gaps found in the mental health system urged the need to make some changes. Therefore, the Albanian government in 2021 made some additions to the mental health law, affirming that children and adolescents' mental health care should be provided at a national level by the National Therapeutic and Rehabilitation Center for Children in Tirana.

National Therapeutic and Rehabilitation Center for Children  
Historical entry

The National Therapeutic and Rehabilitation Center for Children (NTRCC) has acted as a transformative institution over the years, by introducing necessary changes depending on the actual and immediate needs of the population.

For the first time, the facility was opened in 1970 and served as a hospital where newborns with malnutrition, after being discharged by the maternity service, which was located in the same building, were treated. The staff took care of newborns' physical wellbeing and supportive medical therapy was administered. After the malnutrition was handled the babies were discharged and the main focus was directed towards physical health rather than mental health. In many instances, many of the children who were hospitalised were adopted by other families, after being abandoned by their biological mothers.

After 1990 Albania went through a lot of political changes that affected the healthcare system and with the improvement of the technologies, the additional qualified staff and the improvement of maternal well-being, the number of neonates with malnutrition decreased. Due to the decline in the number of neonates hospitalised, in the year 2000, the Center went through a transformation in its mission, to the National Center for the Welfare, Development and Rehabilitation of Children we have available today.

The newly reformed National Center for the Welfare, Development, and Rehabilitation of Children served as a specialised public institution that provided treatment for children with mental and physical disabilities from 0 - 6 years old, including but not confined to neurodevelopmental disorders, Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, and other physical disabilities.

The multidisciplinary team was composed of neuropsychiatrists, who had a leading role, psychiatrists, paediatricians, psychologists, social workers, therapists, physical therapists, speech therapists, developmental therapists, and nurses. It offered outpatient and inpatient services. On an outpatient basis, children from Tirana and the surrounding areas received therapeutic sessions several times a week, whilst children from all over Albania could be hospitalised for 2 weeks to receive therapeutic and rehabilitation sessions, accompanied by their mothers.

Whilst the number of children with physical disabilities was decreasing and the number of children with neurodevelopmental disorders and adolescents with mental health problems increasingly emerged, the need for a facility that would offer mental health services for a wide range of ages and that the focus would be mainly directed to mental health wellbeing and treatment became moreover important. Therefore, the Center entered its third area of transformation, from The National Center for the Welfare, Development, and Rehabilitation of Children to The National Therapeutic and Rehabilitation Center for Children (NTRCC).

The actual National Therapeutic and Rehabilitation Center for Children

In 2020 the center was newly reconstructed and its facilities were adopted to create an environment best suited for children and adolescents' needs and their families.

The National Therapeutic and Rehabilitation Center for Children (NTRCC) is a specialised central public institution and plays a specific role of mental health services. The center provides diagnostic services, treatment, education, and assistance in tackling child upbringing problems, development, and rehabilitation of children aged 0 - 18 years.

NTRCC's mission is to improve the quality of life of children with special needs, as well as to provide support to their parents by offering the best care for every child through integrated clinical practice, psycho education, and research.

The objectives of the National Therapeutic and Rehabilitation Center for Children in Tirana include:

- Assessment, diagnosis, and treatment according to scientific criteria of mental and physical health problems related to children and adolescents established from the latest evidence - based practice
- Coordination of activities to raise public awareness about mental health problems faced by children and adolescents
- Cooperation, integration, and coordination of the activities of various governmental institutions, local government, various non - governmental sectors, local and foreign donors, and organisations, which focus on similar problems and strategies for the well - being, development, and care of children with problems of mental health.

The now expanded multidisciplinary team is composed of professionals in different fields such as 2 child and adolescent psychiatrists, 1 neuropediatrician, 1 developmental paediatrician, 11 nurses, 4 psychologists, 3 social workers, 4 occupational therapists, 3 speech therapists, 6 developmental therapists, 5 physiotherapists and other specialists with pedagogical and rehabilitation skills. The staff offers a specialised service by evaluating, diagnosing and designing individual treatment plans for a variety of mental health disorders ranging from learning disorders, anxiety, adjustment disorders, etc. to Autism Spectrum Disorder, Psychotic Disorders, Mental Retardation, Disorders of insufficient attention with hyperactivity, mood disorders, etc. The rehabilitation programs include different educational and rehabilitation therapies such as developmental therapy, speech therapy, physiotherapy, psychomotor learning, special education, occupational therapy, group therapy, psychological support, as well as pharmacological therapy (drug prescription).

The multifaceted treatment of mental and physical health disorders of children and adolescents was upgraded in the recent years in our country, partly due to the use of psychomotor and occupational therapy, which is offered primarily by the National Therapeutic and Rehabilitation Center for Children.

As the number of children and adolescents in need of mental health support is gradually growing, the National Therapeutic and Rehabilitation Center for Children is determined to improve its service. In the years to come, the focus will be on providing standardised evaluation instruments for different diagnoses and on designing new rehabilitation protocols according to approved standards for patient's care, family, and community, while maintaining the integrity of the human rights and dignity sanctioned by the international Conventions, to provide a better practice for all.

To improve mental health services the "Action Plan for Mental Health in Albania 2023 - 2026" views new strategies in providing universally unified health care for everyone, with a special focus on children and adolescents, where the National Therapeutic and Rehabilitation Center for Children plays a crucial role (Albanian Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2023). It is considered a model to be implemented in other regions of Albania, where the other similar Centers will be under its supervision and mentorship.

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