

- **Name of the study:** Findings Report from a Survey on the Need for Additional Emotional Support Services for Toddlers with Disabilities in Rehabilitative Daycare Centers
- **Year:** 2024
- **Type of research:** Survey
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- **Research Authority:** Shalem Foundation.

Abstract

This study was carried out by 'Michlol'- the Assessment and Measurement Unit of the Shalem Fund

In Israel, approximately 1.7 million people live with disabilities, representing around 20% of the general population. About 20% of them (approximately 338,300) are children under the age of 18, accounting for 11% of all children in Israel (Elyasaf, 2023).

Rehabilitative daycare centers provide essential services for toddlers with disabilities, aimed at promoting their development and supporting their families. Existing regulations define two service packages for toddlers with disabilities: a basic package and an Enhanced Health Care Basket (EHB).

The basic basket includes three weekly hours of therapies (physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy), plus one additional hour for team meetings and professional guidance. This basket is provided to all toddlers in rehabilitative daycare centers.

The EHB, granted only to toddlers with autism in designated communication daycare centers, includes emotional therapies.

The difference between these two service baskets highlights the need for emotional support services for toddlers who are not on the autism spectrum.

Evaluation Objectives

The primary goal of the survey was to examine the need for and the potential impact of adding one weekly hour of psychological treatment for toddlers in rehabilitative daycare centers.

Special emphasis was placed on assessing how this addition could improve toddlers' emotional coping, support families, and enhance the support available to professional staff in the centers. Specifically, the survey aimed to:

- a. Assess the necessity of adding the hour,
- b. Evaluate the expected benefits of the additional hour,
- c. Examine whether the lack of psycho-social treatment affects the quality of other therapies (occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech therapy), and if so, how,

- d. Investigate differences in need between general rehabilitative daycare centers and multi-disability centers (which do not receive EHB services),
- e. Identify the main emotional needs of toddlers and families, according to staff perceptions, that are not sufficiently addressed.

The research method

A questionnaire was developed by the Mikhlol Unit with the assistance of various partners and distributed online via Google Forms to para-medical therapists working in rehabilitative daycare centers nationwide (with the help of representatives from the Ministry of Welfare and the Ministry of Health).

The survey was completed by 158 therapists from 49 local authorities (74% from cities, 16% from regional councils, 10% from local councils). The response rate from authorities with rehabilitative daycare centers (82 in total) stood at 60%.

Beyond the relatively high response rate, there was representation from all geographic regions (North, South, Jerusalem, Center).

Respondents' roles included speech therapists, managers, nurses, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, social workers, kindergarten teachers, emotional therapists, and others.

Of the respondents, 66% worked in multi-disability classes, 24% in autism spectrum classes, and 10% in sensory classes.

main findings

The need for an additional hour of psychological services was evident across all three populations: toddlers, families, and staff. The greatest reported need was among families, with 94% (148 respondents) rating the additional hour as highly or very highly necessary for families, followed by 87% who reported the same level of need for toddlers, and 83% for the professional staff. The survey highlighted emotional challenges experienced by toddlers (such as avoidance and medical complexities), by families (including difficulty accepting a diagnosis, the need for parental support groups, heavy emotional burdens, and coping with stigma), and by staff who lack sufficient tools to address emotional difficulties. In characterizing the toddler populations most in need of the additional hour (multiple selections allowed), 96% of respondents indicated toddlers with physical disabilities, 79% indicated toddlers with sensory disabilities, and 61% indicated toddlers on the autism spectrum. Regarding the type of daycare center, 62% stated that the additional hour was needed for all rehabilitative daycare centers, while 35% indicated it was needed specifically for multi-disability centers, and 3% selected "other." In terms of the expected benefits of adding emotional support (multiple selections allowed), 80% believed it would provide more comprehensive psycho-social support for toddlers, 75% believed it would strengthen the parent-child relationship, 72% believed it would enhance toddlers' emotional

resilience and coping skills, and 67% believed it would improve the quality and effectiveness of other para-medical services provided at the centers. Additional findings showed that 76% of respondents believed that the absence of psycho-social support negatively impacts the effectiveness of regular therapies, citing examples such as difficulties in addressing parents' emotional needs, toddlers' emotional unavailability for therapy sessions, limited staff capacity to assist toddlers facing emotional challenges, and a resulting lack of a holistic approach to meeting the child's needs. About half of the respondents reported that they knew of families who seek emotional therapy for their toddlers outside the daycare centers, which, while potentially beneficial for the children and parents, might also hinder collaboration with daycare staff and limit the center's ability to provide comprehensive care.

Summary, Insights, and Recommendations

The survey findings highlighted the critical importance of adding emotional support services for toddlers in rehabilitative daycare centers – for the benefit of the toddlers themselves, their families, and the therapeutic and educational staff.

The findings confirmed widespread professional concerns in the field and emphasized the need for daycare centers to serve not just as therapy providers but as holistic therapeutic environments.

There is a need to systematically accompany families from the earliest stages of referral to child development services, sometimes even before a formal diagnosis is made.

This component was identified as a missing element that must be strengthened and embedded into daycare center services.

Furthermore, the findings emphasized the importance of defining service policies based on toddlers' functional and individual needs rather than on medical diagnoses or labels like "autism" or "CP."

Following the findings, a suggestion arose to conduct a similar survey within the EHB framework for toddlers on the autism spectrum.

The survey and its findings were recognized as valuable both for shaping current action plans and for promoting future legislative initiatives to establish a structured, continuous, and sustainable model for emotional support services.

Advancing this goal requires a clear prioritization from the leadership of relevant ministries, especially the Ministry of Health, without which further progress would not be possible.

Additionally, it was recommended to integrate the survey results into ongoing policymaking processes with legal departments, budget divisions, and senior management teams, to ensure a data-driven, needs-sensitive, and implementable national policy framework.

Keywords

Disability | Rehabilitative Daycare Center | Psychological Treatment | Families | Emotional Coping | Service Policy | Child Development | Systematic Support | Emotional Therapy.

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