

## **Our children are the invisible ones**

As a result of the mental health cases that are appearing in the social and mass media, we would like to outline the work that we have been doing and the situation of our members, as well as to thank the public that has extensively supported us.

First of all, we believe that we shouldn't have to appear in the social and mass media to discuss our particular cases in order to get the resources we need. Some people don't have access to the media and others don't want to trumpet their dramatic situation, not the least because of the social stigma that prevails still today in our society. But regardless of the media interest, everyone is entitled to social and health care.

Our children are defenseless. Children, adolescents and young people with a number of diagnoses —ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder with or without Hyperactivity), FASD (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder), ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), EBD (Eating Behavioral Disorder), BPD (Borderline Personality Disorder), Early Adversity, BIF (Borderline Intellectual Functioning)... and many others without a diagnosis but with very severe disorders. Self-injurious behaviors that have led to suicide, aggressiveness within the family with child-to-parent violence in many cases, impossible family life, thefts within and outside the family, restraining orders for young people who end up living in the streets, children in prison when in fact they have a mental health problem, families who mortgage themselves to pay for a place in a private or subsidized residential treatment center.

Mental Health Care Centers for Children and Adolescents, and for Adults, that don't always have the necessary resources, and in some cases even lack the necessary training on the above mentioned neurodevelopmental disorders, which are increasingly common amongst the young. A ratio of professionals up to three times lower than in the rest of Europe. Children expelled from the educational system due to a lack of skilled professionals and resources to look after them. Thus, they can't find a job and develop a life project; they can't access an apartment because they often don't have a broken family and so are not considered at risk of social exclusion. Unfortunately, in many cases there is also substance use, including cannabis or alcohol, and self-medication.

In addition, our children are the invisible ones. Despite the interest of the media, the cases of disruptive behavior, child-to-parent violence, thefts, etc., are not being reported in the media. These cases are left out and not mentioned even when mental health is discussed. No one thinks about them because they are still associated to a lack of education and crime, thus blaming the families themselves.

AFATRAC (Association of Families Affected by Behavioral Disorders) <https://afatrac.org/> was founded in 2016 with the help of Mrs. Magda Casamitjana, who at that time was a

member of the Catalan Parliament. We are now 260 member families, and we provide help to 350 additional families that at some point have contacted us.

On July 5, 2017, we appeared before the Social Affairs and Families Committee of the Catalan Parliament to inform about our association, the problems suffered by the families, and the necessary answers. As a result, the Government appointed Mrs. Casamitjana as Director of PAIcSaMAEC (Plan for the Comprehensive Management of High Complexity Mental Health and Addiction Cases), which through an innovative and very inclusive (almost 400 professionals) methodology is trying to bring clarity and resources to this social ailment, from a multidisciplinary, community and recovery-based perspective. AFATRAC is very proud to participate in this project, and we are bringing a lot of energy and hope to it. We would like to thank Mrs. Magda Casamitjana for her commitment and the great work she has done.

In October 2018, with a more organized association, we wrote a wish list including all the requests from our families, and we took it to all the Departments of the Regional Government of Catalonia. The document, entitled *“AFATRAC a les Conselleries de la Generalitat de Catalunya”*, can be downloaded.

On February 6, 2020, we organized the first *“Let’s rethink the Mental Health-justice”* day, which had 401 registrations, up to 250 streaming visits and 1,969 visits to date in YouTube. This reflects the great interest in the topic and the scale of the problem.

We have met with the Ombudsman, heads of different departments of the Regional Government of Catalonia and professionals from all the services involved: healthcare, social services, education, labor, justice, related associations, etc. We have signed an agreement with the Vidal and Barraquer Foundation, which is devoted to Mental Health and integrates care, teaching and research in mental health.

We have been told too often that resources are indeed available, but our daily life is cruel and proves that this is not the case —life at home is hell and we suffer institutional neglect at all levels.

Since the very beginning of our foundation as an Association, we have been fighting for a decent life and resources for our relatives and their families, and we won’t stop. This is something that has to be done by associations.

We won’t give up!

Montserrat Boix

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