Australian Government

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Diplomatic Academy.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

EDUCATION LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT MODULE
Foundation Level
2021

CONTENTS

ACRONYMS

ANDK	A New Day for Kids
ARNEC	Asia-Pacific Regional Network on Early Childhood
ECCE	early childhood care and education
ECD	early childhood development
ECE	early childhood education
ECEC	early childhood education and care
ECED	early childhood education and development
EGRA	Early Grades Reading Assessment
GER	Gross Enrolment Ratio
PEARL	Pacific Early Age Reading and Learning
SNAP	Special Needs Action Pack for Struggling Readers Project (Sri Lanka)
TLSDF	Thailand Life Skills Development Foundation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

1   INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this module is to provide foundation level introductory information about the importance and scope of early childhood development. It provides a foundation to engage with this topic and to apply advice from staff with operational or expert levels of knowledge in education. On successful completion you will gain the ability to apply practical knowledge of early childhood development to make valuable contributions to the field.

2   WHAT DOES EARLY CHILDHOOD MEAN?

Defining early childhood

Early childhood is defined as the period of human development from conception (when pregnancy starts) through the transition to the early years of primary school (typically ends at age 8 or 9). This definition is reflected in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the early childhood literature, and in government policies.

There are sensitive stages of development during early childhood. During the prenatal period, from conception through pregnancy, the health and nutrition of the mother critically determines foetal development. Safe childbirth, infant nutrition, safety and health, cognitive stimulation, nutritious foods and safety for exploring toddlers, and successful transitions from the home (e.g. to a playgroup or pre-school) are all critical aspects of early childhood development and set the stage for primary school entry. Early childhood development, in other words, is a critical period for the development of the capabilities that shape every element of a person's life.

Source: Rebello Britto, 2012, Key to Equality: Early Childhood Development, The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development Task Force for the Post 2015 Development Agenda.

Is it important to invest in early childhood development?

There is a wealth of evidence showing that investment in early childhood is essential not only for the well-being of young children and their families, but also for the greater good of society as a whole. Many of the returns on investment in early childhood are related to the public good in the form of social, economic, and educational benefits. Paying attention to this period of life is especially important among marginalized and disadvantaged population groups, in any country. There is evidence that children from vulnerable backgrounds and children with disabilities benefit proportionally more than their more advantaged or non-disabled peers. Early childhood programs can therefore narrow and sometimes close developmental gaps attributed to income, disability or other forms of social inequality.

Source: Duncan and Sojourner, 2013, Can intensive early childhood intervention programs eliminate income-based cognitive and achievement gaps?

What about political commitment and government interest in early childhood development programs?

Despite the strong evidence of the benefits of investing in early childhood development programs, there is often:

- a lack of political commitment and government interest in early childhood

- a lack of integrated, multi-sectoral investment in human capital formation

- significant capacity challenges

- a lack of resources to expand and improve early childhood services

- competition for funding from other, more visible, vocal, and powerful parts of the education system (e.g., secondary and higher education).

As a result, early childhood remains a low priority for many governments.

This situation – where there is large need but limited government prioritisation – presents a particularly difficult challenge for development partners who are committed to providing the early childhood development that is critical for long-term human capital formation.

An activity for you

Think about your country program or a developing country known to you and answer the following questions.

1. Is there a formal policy or framework on early childhood development?

2. If so, what is the defined age range for early childhood?

3. Is there strong political support for investment in young children?

3 WHAT DO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION, DEVELOPMENT AND CARE MEAN?

Policies and programs around early childhood

Policies and programs around early childhood take on many names. These include:

- Early childhood care and education (ECCE)
- Early childhood education and care (ECEC)
- Early childhood education (ECE)
- Early childhood education and development (ECED)
- Early childhood development (ECD)
- Early intervention, used in reference to specialised support in the early years for children at risk, children with developmental delays and children with disabilities.

Good practice policies and programs focus on providing good quality care and education to ensure girls and boys receive positive, holistic opportunities for development. Good practice approaches support young children to be physically healthy, mentally alert, emotionally secure, socially competent, and motivated to learn.
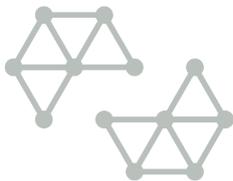
Brain development in early childhood

As explained by UNICEF: "The brain requires multiple inputs: it requires stimulation and care to spark neural connections across multiple regions of the brain to increase its capacity and function. It requires access to good quality early childhood education programs that provide children with early cognitive and language skills, build social competency and support emotional development. It requires good health and nutrition at the right time to feed and nourish the architecture of the body, including the brain, during the sensitive periods of development. It requires safety and protection to buffer against stress and allow absorption of nutrients and growth and development of the nervous system - including the brain. All these aspects of the environment must work together to build a better brain."

Source: UNICEF, 2012, Inequities in Early Childhood Development: What the data say. Evidence from the multiple indicator cluster surveys; UNICEF, 2014, Early Childhood Development: a statistical snapshot – Building better brains and sustainable outcomes for children.

How does DFAT define Early Childhood Development?

ECD (the term adopted by the Australian aid program) is interdisciplinary in its focus and multi-sectoral in its approach. It addresses issues facing young children that include health, nutrition, education, gender relations and opportunities, social development, economics, child protection, and social welfare.

ECD focuses on young children's overall well-being during their early years, which provides the foundation for the development of women and men who are physically and psychologically healthy, socially and environmentally responsible, intellectually competent, and economically productive.

ECD therefore links care (by families, communities and the society as a whole) and education (both formal and non-formal) to the child's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.

ECD is inclusive of children with disabilities in line with DFAT's Development for All 2015-2020: Strategy for strengthening disability-inclusive development in Australia's aid program.

4 WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT STAGES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD?

Three stages of early childhood

Early childhood is often divided into three different but overlapping age ranges, each with its own set of challenges and recommended ECD approaches:

4. Pregnancy to the age of three years.

5. Children aged three to six years.

6. Children aged six to eight years.

Pregnancy to the age of three years

Over 200 million children in low and middle-income countries under the age of five years will not reach their potential due to illness, disability, malnutrition, and a lack of nurturing care, early stimulation, and education. This disadvantage begins before birth, where for example, inadequate nutrition for pregnant women can result in low birth weights and other complications for children. Gaps in health care systems can limit access to quality pre-natal services, particularly for the poor and those living in rural or remote areas. The situation can then be exacerbated by poor infant and toddler care. Very young girls and boys can experience developmental risks such as:

- Poor health, including being born premature or with low birth weight, malnutrition and infection with HIV.

- High levels of family and environmental stress and exposure to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.

- Inadequate care and learning opportunities.

In the prenatal to age three period, the neural architecture of the brain grows faster than at any other time in the life course. At the same time, a broad set of fundamental capabilities are developing – cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional – that are the basis for future learning and development. In order to combat developmental risks and to achieve their full potential, infants and young children from conception to age three need these conditions:

- Adequate prenatal care, nutrition, support, and education for families, especially for the pregnant mother – more likely where there is greater gender equality.

- A stimulating and protective physical and social environment with loving, predictable caregivers and relationships. The use of language to support early learning is imperative at this age and can include using self-talk to narrate activities and adult interactions with the child, such as singing, rhyming, naming, and other games as the child's language develops.

- Good health care (e.g., skilled birth attendants and health checks), balanced nutrition (beginning with exclusive breastfeeding), and immunisation.

- Clean and safe environments, safe play spaces, and equal opportunities for exploration and discovery for both girls and boys.

- Early and routine developmental screenings and, where necessary, more in-depth assessments and referrals to accessible services for children identified with developmental delays.

- Individualised support, social welfare programs, and protective services for disadvantaged families and vulnerable children.

The following case studies detail information about parent-focused early childhood interventions.
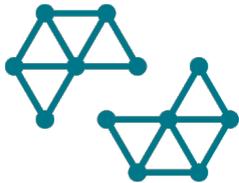
Case study: Parent-focused interventions

A Scoping Review of early childhood interventions in economically developing countries between 1998 and 2017 was undertaken by the DFAT-Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) Centre for Global Education Monitoring. Part of this review examined parent-focused interventions. Parent-focused interventions seek to support positive parenting, with a focus on improving child outcomes. Parent-focused interventions may occur through home visits, group sessions or in connection with visits to health care providers (such as one-on-one counselling).

Parent-focused interventions are typically implemented where:

- Children face a range of developmental issues.
- Support for learning in the home is limited, due to social, cultural or economic reasons.
- Access to centre-based early childhood services is limited or non-existent.
- Parents are already accessing other programs; additional parenting support.
- Financial resources are limited – parent-focused interventions are relatively low cost when compared to other interventions.

The key findings of the twenty-year Scoping Review:

- Almost all parent-focused interventions are targeted at mothers.
- Almost all interventions have an effect on children's learning outcomes.
- Cultural sensitivity of interventions is important for its success.
- Parent-focused interventions have lower implementation costs when compared to other types of interventions, such as income supplementation or child-focused education and care.
- This type of intervention may be most appropriate where logistics, financial and staff resources prevent comprehensive coverage of centre-based early childhood provision.

Source: Jackson, et al., 2019, Parent-focused interventions in economically developing countries.
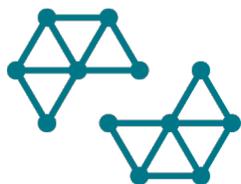
Case study: The Philippines Partnerships for a Healthy Start

Healthy Start is an intensive, community-based, home-visiting program that supports pregnant women and families with new-born babies, providing assistance during the first three years of the child's life.

The program focuses on increasing positive parenting and decreasing environmental risks through:

- Increased parental knowledge of child development.

- Games and activities to support healthy development and learning.

- Strengthened relationships among family members.

- Increased access to social, medical, and employment services.

Formal program evaluations demonstrate that Healthy Start has had positive effects on parent knowledge of child development, parenting practices, and child health and well-being. Due to the success of the program, it was expanded to provide support to children aged 3 to 5.

This positive impact may be explained by five program characteristics:

- Healthy Start addresses health, nutrition, and early stimulation. The program begins with children in the prenatal stage and continues to focus on young children and their families.

- Healthy Start pays attention to the most vulnerable, marginalised, unreached populations: tribal groups, religious minorities, pregnant teenagers, the rurally isolated, and informal settlements.

- Partner families benefit from trusting relationships with Family Support Workers. These workers respect families and their choices and see themselves as guides and support.

- Healthy Start incorporates developmental assessment for the formal monitoring of child development and can tailor programming to each individual partner family.

- The adaptation of the program to the local context increases the quality and effectiveness of programming by ensuring it is aligned with the partner families' daily reality and needs.

Sources: Malkin, 2011, ARNEC Connections: Working Together for Early Childhood.

Children aged three to six years

A child's capacities evolve rapidly between the ages of three and six years. During this period, girls and boys more fully develop their cognitive and social capabilities and, if supported and encouraged, begin to fulfil their rights to participation and non-discrimination in education.

This is the age range when many children begin to participate in group-based (sometimes formal) ECD programs like child care or pre-school education. Participating in quality ECD programs helps prepare children for school and enables later school success. Participation in pre-school activities can assist children to enrol and commence schooling at the expected age, reduces school repetition and dropout rates while increasing primary and secondary completion rates. Quality ECD programs have been shown to enhance student achievement, and broad-based availability can make the education system more equitable, efficient (by reducing drop-out) and effective (through support to pre-literacy and age-appropriate soft skills such as cooperation and problem solving).

Interventions to achieve outcomes

Interventions can be particularly important for girls, ethnic minorities, children with disabilities and children living in rural or remote areas, all of whom can face greater challenges in accessing and remaining in schooling. While there is still much to be done, there has been good progress on pre-primary access and participation. In 2019, the global pre-primary education Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) was 61 per cent, up from 16 per cent in 1970 and 29 per cent in 1990. In developing countries, there has been an increase in gender parity (GER Gender Parity Index of 0.99 in 2015, up from 0.95 in 1999 and 0.90 in 1970). In 2019, 59 per cent of girls in low and middle-income countries participated in pre-primary education, a significant jump from 28 per cent in 1990 and a mere 15 per cent in 1970.

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d., UIS STAT.

Two ongoing challenges remain. Firstly, increasing equitable access to programs for children with and without disabilities in the years before pre-primary programs are offered (i.e. two or more years before children commence formal schooling). Secondly, ensuring children from regional and remote areas access programs in the same proportions as their peers from metropolitan areas.

To support positive development in children between the ages of three and six years, several interventions are essential. These include:

- Stimulating early learning activities which focus on the development of children's sense of self, their interactions with peers and adults, their confidence as learners, their language competence, and their critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

- Links to health care and other referral-services (e.g., speech pathology, early intervention, social work), and the provision of nutritious food, clean water, and latrines. This is especially important for children suffering from stunting, developmental delays and malnutrition.

- Access to at least two years of quality early childhood programs (e.g. play groups, pre-schools, home- or community-based day care/nursery/ programs, private

pre-school provision, kindergartens or other stimulating child care environments) prior to formal school entry. Where possible, places should be publicly provided or, when part of a demand-side driven market, subsidised (or ideally made free) to ensure the inclusion of otherwise marginalised population groups. There can be high transport costs associated with attending ECD programs. It is therefore important that ECD programs are located close to population centres (e.g. in the middle of villages, in residential neighbourhoods and within informal settlements) and accessible for all, including children and caregivers with disabilities.

All ECD programs should be underpinned by specific early learning and development standards. For example, regulations that set minimum standards as well as standards that state the expectation for what children should know and be able to do at different stages of development (e.g., at four, five, six, etc. years old). Programs need to emphasise the value of play as a mechanism of early learning and social skills development. It is also crucial that learning and development standards are monitored by an independent authority.

The Asia-Pacific Regional Network on Early Childhood (ARNEC) has defined five broad domains of school preparedness that are set out in the East Asia-Pacific Early Child Development Scales:

1. Physical health, well-being, and motor development.

2. Social and emotional development.

3. Approaches toward learning.

4. Language, literacy and communication.

5. Cognition and general knowledge.

Sources: ARNEC, 2019, EAP-ECD Scales.

Services and support: some examples

Services and support which can target both young children and their families are especially important for marginalised groups such as:

- Girls.
- Children from ethnic/religious minority communities living in poverty.
- Children with disabilities.
- Children living in isolated rural areas, informal settlements, areas of conflict and natural disaster, and children affected by HIV and AIDS.

Here are two intervention types from the wide range of programs that can be implemented to promote early learning in the family and the pre-school.

Table 1 - ECD Programs and How They Impact Learning

Type of intervention	Example of intervention	What is the learning pathway?	Program effect
Parenting programs (focused on parent and child)	A playgroup program in Tonga supports improved parent-child interactions in the home	Increases language development Improves the quality of parent-child interaction	Improved school readiness in the literacy domains. Cost effective at US$12.62 per child.
Pre-school programs	The Pacific Early Age Readiness and Learning (PEARL) program supports early grade teachers in Tonga to improve reading instruction	Increases cognitive development Increases language development	Increase in early grade reading scores. Cost effective at US$62 per child

Source: Mcdonald et al., 2018, Intervening at Home and Then at School A Randomized Evaluation of Two Approaches to Improve Early Educational Outcomes in Tonga.
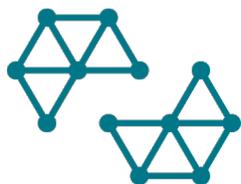
Case study: A New Day for Kids (Cambodia)

A New Day for Kids (ANDK) is a comprehensive program that addresses both the root causes of developmental risks in children's home environments and villages, along with more indirect cultural and institutional influences. Working directly with children, their parents and caregivers, village members, commune chiefs, and district governments, ANDK is grounded in forging strong partnerships that are deeply embedded in the communities in which it operates.

ANDK engages the community in guided discussion around topics including child development and parenting (with a particular emphasis on the period of prenatal through school-entry), health, agriculture, and financial management. Simultaneously, children up to six years of age participate in 'Children's Circles', a facilitated, informal pre-school experience.

ANDK is a grass-roots project that grew out of community needs. Anecdotally, adult behavioural change is said to follow the acquisition of knowledge in these communities, and children's developmental contexts are believed to have improved. Two factors stand out as noteworthy:

- ANDK targets children during a sensitive period in their development (from conception to six years) when their experiences have a marked impact on their later learning, behaviour, and health.

- ANDK recognises the multiple influences on young children's lives and seeks to create change in children, their parents, and the community in order to maximise the impact on children's outcomes.

Source: Malkin, 2011, ARNEC Connections: Working Together for Early Childhood

Children aged six to eight years

When children start primary school, education systems may miss the most marginalised children, who may have had the least access to early childhood programs. Children without ECD exposure can have higher primary drop-out and grade repetition rates, and can fall into patterns of under-achievement.

These 'silently excluded' children often leave school unable to read fluently, calculate, or solve problems. Further, many children with disabilities are not enrolled in school at all. This makes it all the more urgent to ensure that the entry of young children with and without disabilities into primary school is a smooth one and that the early grades of their schooling are of good quality that support individual learning needs.

Learning and development processes

It is essential that the learning and development processes promoted in ECD programs are age-appropriate, and well linked to the primary system. The teaching-learning methods and curricula of pre-schools, for example, should be child centred and play-based, linked closely to and reinforced in the early grades of primary school.

The learning progressions should be continuous across the transition from ECD to school. For example, reading is a skill that emerges at the youngest of ages with children – ideally – first listening to text being read aloud, then deriving meaning from familiar images, and next connecting sounds and images to letters, numbers and words. Therefore, reading should be cultivated in children from the youngest of ages and efforts should be made to ensure a seamless transition of approaches in the home, in child care programs, into pre-primary programs, and onwards to primary school.

A typical challenge is that ECD programs are often administered by different authorities to those responsible for primary education. Policy and operational engagement is necessary to build ECD and primary school linkages, to therefore smooth the transition from early childhood programs to formal schooling.

Reading is fundamental to a student's progress through the formal education process. If children are not able to read and understand age-appropriate text fluently by the end of the third year of primary school, they probably never will. This again affirms the foundational role of ECD: children who are exposed to pre-literacy skills (e.g. listening to stories; handling books) are more prepared to master literacy in the early grades of primary school.

Special attention is also needed for children who need alternative means of accessing information due to disability. These children are at particular risk if there are no adaptations to methods and materials (e.g. sign language, tactile learning, visual cues etc.). Stigma and discrimination can mean that even when explicit laws and policies exist for inclusive education, parents of children with disabilities are not encouraged or supported to enrol their children in ECD or in primary school. A lack of early intervention services for children with disabilities combined with a lack of inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream ECD programs results in significant risks to development and learning outcomes for these children.
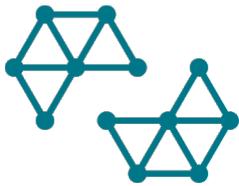
Case study: The Special Needs Action Pack for Struggling Readers Project (Sri Lanka)

The Special Needs Action Pack for Struggling Readers Project (SNAP) implements a range of low-cost teaching and learning materials. Training on the most effective use of the materials is provided to teachers. To assist teachers in supporting children struggling to read, a series of quick reference materials including information on documenting and tracking student progress is provided. The SNAP project is founded on the Save the Children's Literacy Boost program, which has been successfully tested in sites across ten countries. The reading intervention is delivered in the context of a supportive school and community environment.

Source: Friedlander et al., 2013, Literacy Boost Sri Lanka: Baseline Report.

Should the early years of education be given priority?

It is crucial to give priority to the early years of education as a key component of ECD.

Giving priority to early education means implementing the following strategies.

- Activities to sensitise children in pre-primary programs and their parents to the importance, nature, and content of primary school. Early parenting interventions for children with and without disabilities can ensure families value education and are empowered to consider if the content of pre-primary and school education aligns with their cultural context.

- Free, available, and inclusive pre-primary programs and primary schools with more resources devoted to the early years. The Millennium Development Goals aimed to achieve universal primary education. The Sustainable Development Goals include a higher aspiration – to ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality ECD, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education. For all countries, it is essential that pre-primary education and

primary schooling is a priority. (Key questions: What is the net enrolment rate in pre-primary education? What is the net enrolment rate in primary education? How genuinely "free" is primary school?).

- Well-trained and effective teachers in pre-primary programs and the lower primary grades who understand the varying developmental needs and learning styles of young children. (Key questions: What is the average age, educational background, and years of experience of a Grade 1 teacher compared to a teacher of the last grade of primary school? What is the gender balance? Are pre-primary teachers required to have a teaching qualification?).

- Smaller class sizes and a manageable pupil-teacher ratio in the early years of primary school. (Key question: What is the pupil-teacher ratio of Grade 1 compared to that of the last grade of primary school?).

- Active, child-centred learning combined with structured and systematic support for reading and writing, so that all girls and boys become fluently literate. (Key question: Do early grade teachers receive any special training in the teaching of reading and numeracy? Do early grade teachers receive any special training in child-centred, play-based learning? Do early grade teachers receive any special training in inclusive education?).

- Attention to children's health, hygiene, nutrition, and protection through linkages with appropriate services and the incorporation of health education within the primary school curriculum. (Key question: What is the level and kind of collaboration among ministries of health, education, and social welfare/protection?).

An activity for you

Think about your country program or a developing country known to you and answer the following questions.

1. Have the education authorities carried out any surveys of reading ability (e.g. Early Grade Reading Assessments; national/regional learning assessments) in the early grades – with what results?

2. Is there any attempt to link pre-primary programs with those of the early grades of primary school?

3. How might the education of children aged three to eight years be made more continuous and seamless in content and teaching methods?

4. Is the right to education of children recognised by education authorities and do inclusive education policies exist to realize this right?

5 WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT?

Investing in early childhood across the range of relevant sectors:

- Reduces child mortality.
- Significantly improves children's health status and lowers their later health care costs.
- Reduces inequality.
- Counters discrimination (including gender and disability discrimination).

Healthy cognitive and emotional development in the early years translates into tangible economic returns. Early interventions as preventive measures are far more effective in increasing education attainment than remedial services later in life. Policies that seek to remedy deficits incurred in the early years are also much more costly than initial investments in the early years.

Nobel Laureate economist, James Heckman, argues that investments in human capital formation have the largest returns in the early years of life. Reskilling adults, on the other hand, has a low (usually negative) rate of return.

Source: Heckman et al., 2010, The rate of return to the HighScope Perry Preschool Program.

What are the returns on investment?

Early education can help ensure that girls and boys enrol, remain, and succeed in school. There are clear economic, social and educational benefits from appropriately targeted ECD interventions. Beneficiaries are more likely to lead economically productive lives, earn adequate incomes, and contribute fully to their families, communities, and society. For example, studies have shown that the benefit-to-cost ratio of immunisation can be as high as 20:1, while increasing preschool enrolment to 50 per cent of all children in low-middle income countries could have a benefit-to-cost ratio as large as 17:1. Results from the 2020 Programme for International Student Assessment showed that children's participation in ECD had a positive effect on learning outcomes at age 15, and that those who start at age three have higher proficiencies than those starting at age 5 or 6.

Expanding and improving ECD also contributes significantly to addressing entrenched cycles of poverty and social marginalisation (including gender and disability discrimination). This process is also a powerful means of mobilising the larger community, as well as individual families, to improve the wellbeing of girls and boys with and without disabilities. Early investments in ECD have been shown to have both short-term benefits (including health, social and educational outcomes) and long-term pay-offs (such as reduced crime rates, lower levels of social welfare dependence and lower health costs).

While the returns on investments in early years' education have significant benefits for individual children and their families, the majority of the benefit is returned to the public. Public investments in ECD are pragmatic and rational acts that greatly increase the public good. It cannot be left to families alone to invest in ECD, as it would further exacerbate

inequitable access to education. Those who stand to benefit most from public ECD investment are highly disadvantaged families who are less likely to be able to afford private ECD programs and families experiencing disability who are more likely to be excluded from ECD programs.

The Perry Preschool program, for example, shows that for each dollar invested in four year olds, between 60 and 300 dollars is returned by age 65. Some studies have suggested the benefits to society in the form of reduced anti-social and criminal behaviour are even higher.

Sources: Heckman et al., 2010, The rate of return to the HighScope Perry Preschool Program; Schweinhart, et al., 2005, The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40; Laxminarayan et al, 2006, Intervention Cost-Effectiveness: Overview of Main Messages; Engle et al, 2011, Strategies for reducing inequalities and improving developmental outcomes for young children in low-income and middle-income countries; OECD, 2020, Attendance in Early Childhood Education and Care Programmes and Academic Proficiencies at Age 15.

6 ECD AND THE EARLY YEARS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL

It is essential to get the foundations of good health and cognitive development 'right' in the first years of a child's life. It is clear that the period before formal schooling, the transition to formal schooling, and the early grades of formal instruction, are critically important in determining the future well-being of the child.

ECD program options

There is a range of formal and non-formal ECD programs with important education components such as day care, and pre-primary programs for a range of ages in different school and pre-school systems. Nonetheless, it is essential to provide linkages between ECD programs and the early grades of primary school, presenting to the young child (and their caregivers) a coherent, seamless, inclusive, continuous approach to learning. ECD programs can play a range of important functions.

- ECD programs provide a place for the early assessment of developmental delay and disability and referral to appropriate services. Early intervention is key, and it is at this point that effective interventions and remediation is most effective.

- ECD programs have a wider socio-economic function by providing regulated and monitored care for young children, which would otherwise need to be provided by parents (who could be working) or older siblings, usually girls (who should be in school).

- ECD programs can help develop a child's sense of self, interactions with peers and adults, self-confidence, language competence, critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

- ECD programs can promote essential pre- or emergent literacy skills, preferably in their mother tongue.

- ECD programs can help children develop in a play-based, child-centred, child-friendly, inclusive and interactive environment.

Primary school transition

'Attending a high quality pre-school lays the foundations for learning and helps children make a smooth transition to primary school. Extending access to the poorest and most vulnerable children can boost their education and livelihood experiences in life. The more time children spend in pre-school, the better their performance in primary school.'

Source: UNESCO, 2012, Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Policy Paper 03.

Early childhood development programs can help ease the often challenging transition from the known environments of home, family and community groups to the unknown structure and culture of formal schooling. Where operationally possible, the pre-school

setting can particularly support the transition to primary school.

Similarly, according to a seminal Lancet study on ECD, in most cases, pre-school enrollees demonstrated higher scores on literacy, vocabulary, mathematics and quantitative reasoning than non-attenders.

Thus, the role of pre-school in terms of a child's school preparedness becomes an important rationale for advocating with ministries of education (and ministries of finance) for greater investment in ECD.

Source: Walker et al., 2007, Child Development: Risk factors for adverse outcomes in developing countries.

To ensure a seamless curriculum and pedagogy from ECD programs or pre-school, primary schools should do the following in regard to their early grades:

- Allocate their best teachers, with an early learning specialisation, to these grades.

- Reduce the pupil-teacher ratio.

- Build on any pre-/emergent literacy skills gained in pre-school, systematically develop mastery in literacy in the child's mother tongue where possible.

- Involve parents, including parents of children with disabilities and the local community in the school, stressing the importance of promoting family conversation and storytelling (by parents and children), motivating their children to learn, and bringing many of the oral traditions and other cultural manifestations which can inspire young children to learn, into the primary school setting.

- Ensure school facilities are accessible following DFAT's Accessibility Design Guide: Universal design principles for Australia's aid program.

An activity for you

Think about your country program or a developing country known to you and answer the following questions.

1. Are parents, including parents of children with disabilities and from other marginalised groups and the local community generally encouraged to take an active part in the management of primary schools?

2. If not, why not? Are parents reluctant to get involved in schooling and/or do schools consciously try to keep them out of school affairs?

3. Are mothers and fathers equally involved? If not, why not?

4. To what extent (and how) could more local, school- and community-based management of education be promoted?

7 WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES IN RELATION TO EXPANDING AND IMPROVING ECD?

Expanding and improving ECD

In order to further expand access to – and improve the quality of – ECD, including pre-primary education and the early years of primary school, a number of key issues need to be addressed.

These issues include:

- Increasing the availability and quality of pre-primary education.
- Promoting the concept of inclusive education.
- Gender inequality.
- Ensuring ECD programs are available on days and at times that suit children and their families.
- Ensuring that pre-primary and early grade teachers receive both appropriate pre-service education (e.g., a B.Ed. in early learning) and in-service training that includes strategies for disability inclusion).
- Using children's mother tongue as the language of instruction and having a stated policy on the relationship of mother-tongue instruction to the formal language of instruction.
- Ensuring pre-primary and primary school curriculum and pedagogy is age-appropriate and accessible to learners with disabilities. Ensuring pre-primary and primary school facilities are accessible.

Increasing the availability and quality of pre-primary education

Making ECD programs available requires expanding inclusive pre-primary education nationally. This needs to be measured by the total number of facilities, classrooms, teachers, as well as the number of girls and boys with and without disabilities participating in the pre-primary system. To raise the resources of and participation in ECD requires clear ECD and pre-primary policies, and attention to implementing and financing these policies, often through a mix of public and private resources.

A special focus is needed to ensure there are quality ECD programs available in every local community. Many families experience high transport costs and are excluded because of the lack of early childhood services in low-income communities.

Promoting the concept of inclusive education

Early childhood development, as an important foundation of a child's later learning and future well-being, must be inclusive. This is best achieved by working against educational

marginalisation and removing all physical, communication, system, cost and attitudinal barriers to learning including discrimination against girls, disability, poverty, remoteness, minority linguistic and ethnic status.

Gender equality in early childhood development

It is important to recognise that gender inequality is a barrier to the effectiveness of ECD programs. For example, gender inequality impacts women's nutrition during pregnancy, their pre and post-natal care, nutrition of infants, women and children's access to services, and women's literacy, which all impact on children's ECD. Gender equality can be better mainstreamed through the different stages of ECD.

An edition of the Education for All Global Monitoring Report—Strong foundations: Early childhood care and Education – focused on the benefits of ECD. The Report found that girls gain more than boys from participating in ECD. Parents whose daughters have attended early childhood programs are more inclined to enrol them in primary school. Girls who attend ECD programs are more ready for primary school, more likely to begin school at the appropriate age, cope better with their schooling, and remain in school longer. Additionally, when their younger sisters and brothers attend ECD programs, older girls are relieved of care responsibilities, which is a common barrier to girls' enrolment in primary and secondary school.

ECD programs provide an opportunity to reduce stereotypes about traditional gender roles. They foster gender equality at an age when young children are developing understandings of identity, empathy, tolerance and morality. Well-designed early childhood programs can challenge gender stereotypes if the curriculum is gender-neutral.

Source: UNICEF, 2007, EFA global monitoring report: Strong Foundations – early childhood care and education.
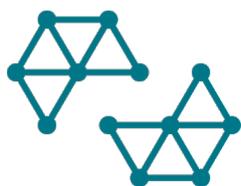
Case study: The Thailand Life Skills Development Foundation (TLSDF)

Despite Thailand's commitment to improving early childhood care and development, the implementation of these policies can be problematic. An example of policy implementation difficulties exists within the northern mountainous region and its rural communities. These areas are largely populated by ethnic minority groups (the so-called 'hill tribes') which government initiatives rarely reach, and who rarely receive much needed help integrating into the central Thai education system.

TLSDF has responded to this difficulty of remoteness with the provision of early childhood development programs designed to meet the needs of those living in rural and remote communities.

The work of TLSDF is focused on improving the lives of children living in marginalised communities along the Myanmar border. Since its inception, TLSDF has engaged in projects to enhance early childhood care and development, children's rights, and the protection and care of children affected by HIV. Practical applications of the work of this foundation include:

- establishing early childhood centres and household level initiatives including home visits

- training parenting volunteers from the local community

- facilitating local forums on the importance of play and cultural events.

Evident in TLSDF's work is a commitment to engaging with the community to build strong foundations to achieve their strategic objective to establish a child friendly community model.

Source: The Life Skills Development Foundation (TLSDF), n.d., About Us.

Note: For more information view the modules on *Marginalisation* and *Disability-Inclusive Education*

An activity for you

Think about your country program or a developing country known to you and answer the following questions.

1. Are there any special efforts to identify and provide quality ECD services to children of especially marginalised groups?

1. If so, which groups are considered of highest priority?

2. What other marginalised groups need greater attention in regard to the provision of ECD services?

Exploring alternative approaches to full-time pre-schools

If formal pre-schools are simply not possible for financial or other reasons, other alternatives exist. Summer programs for children before they enter the first year of primary school can help increase school preparedness. The early months of the first year of primary school can use a modified curriculum and more child-centred (kindergarten-like) teaching methods to focus on skills that children need to succeed in school.

Alternative approaches are especially essential in emergency (e.g. post-conflict and post-disaster) contexts where full-time, formal pre-schools and other ECD services are difficult to establish.

The UNICEF Early Childhood Development Kit

UNICEF has developed an Early Childhood Development (ECD) Kit in response to the needs of children experiencing emergencies including conflict and war, as well as natural and human-made disasters. Emergencies pose several challenges for young children, particularly those already experiencing a vulnerable situation, including separation from caregivers, physical harm, and emotional and psychological problems.

The ECD Kit comprises activity guides for caregivers with instructions for how it should be used. It also provides suggestions on how to use individual items, combined with a range of resources for children under five. The kits can also be pre-positioned as part of disaster risk preparedness.

Source: UNICEF, 2009, Early Childhood Development Kit: A Treasure Box of Activities.

Using mother tongue as the language of instruction

Special attention is needed for children who speak a language or dialect that is not the dominant language of instruction at school. These children are at particular risk if there are no opportunities for programs conducted in local languages. Such children also suffer if there are no explicit policies for how and when schools will facilitate the transition to the formal language of instruction (e.g. bilingual programs). There is significant research that indicates engaging with mother-tongue in ECD settings improves children long-term outcomes, in any language. However, there needs to be a clear and evidence-based approach to transitioning from mother-tongue based learning to the official language of instruction to realise these long-term gains.

The language policy in ECD should promote the use of mother tongue for initial literacy and early learning. Therefore, the special demands this puts on teacher training, curriculum and materials must be taken into account when formulating ECD language policy.
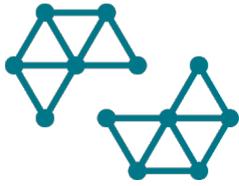
Case study: Vanuatu Education Support Program – A dual language model

With 113 vernacular languages, one national language (Bislama) and two official languages (English and French), Vanuatu has one of the highest concentration of different languages per head of population in the world. As part of Vanuatu's primary education reform program, the Australian and New Zealand governments are jointly supporting a multilingual approach in education through the Vanuatu Education Support Program (VESP).

The new curriculum includes a 'dual language model' for years 1-3, where English or French is introduced from Year 1 along with mother tongue instruction. Time spent on English or French increases each year over a three year period. The intervention includes support for teachers and teacher training, the development of mother tongue readers and the trialing of new assessment tools.

A mid-term review conducted in 2016 found that school attendance has increased and classroom-based assessment has shown an improvement in learning outcomes. Teachers reported that they are mastering the curriculum and parents have become more engaged in their children's learning. This is consistent with international experience which shows that mother tongue instruction facilitates teaching practice in the classroom and encourages learners and their caregivers to be more involved with the subject matter.

Sources: VESP View, 2017, Issue 1: Yusum fulap lanwis blong lan; DFAT Blog, 2017, Valuing language: Improving education in Vanuatu.

An activity for you

Think about your country program or a developing country known to you and answer the following questions.

1. What is the Ministry of Education's policy – and practice – in regard to using mother tongue language in ECD programs and the primary classroom?

2. What is the medium of instruction for early literacy?

3. Does the country recognise sign language as an official language?

Ensuring ECD does not become overly formalised or 'schoolified'

There is often a tendency to overly focus on literacy and numeracy outcomes in ECD settings. Parents are often familiar with these concepts and value them. Governments may also value them because they are often the indicators reported in the press or in international assessments. It remains important to find a balance between content-specific curriculum and child-centred, play-based pedagogy (e.g., developing early capabilities through play that form a part of the learning progression for reading and numeracy) and blended or holistic approaches (e.g., those that focus on the whole development of the child). Focusing too narrowly on one or the other is insufficient for the cognitive and task-based development necessary to thrive in primary school. While there are some benefits to content-oriented approaches, the strongest social, emotional, and meta-cognitive outcomes are seen in blended or holistic approaches.

Source: OECD, 2012, Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Education and Care.
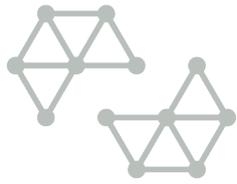
8 TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Assessment questions

Answer the following questions by ticking 'True' or 'False'. Once you have selected your answers to all the questions, turn the page to 'The correct answers are...' to check the accuracy of your answers.

Question 1

Early childhood is defined as the period of zero to six years of age since this period is the most important in individual development.

Is this statement true or false?   ☐ True   ☐ False

Question 2

Early childhood development programs are usually under-funded by governments.

Is this statement true or false?   ☐ True   ☐ False

Question 3

Early childhood development programs are best organised through separate programs by individual ministries (health, education, social welfare).

Is this statement true or false?   ☐ True   ☐ False

Question 4

In the prenatal to age three period, the neural architecture of the brain grows faster than at any other time in the life course.

Is this statement true or false?   ☐ True   ☐ False

Question 5

The transition between the home or pre-school to primary school is often a challenging period in a young child's life.

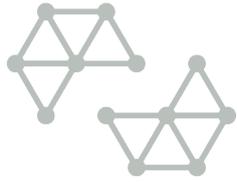Is this statement true or false?   □ True   □ False

Question 6

Early education – in pre-school and the early grades of primary schools – should always be provided in the country's national language to ensure that children master it early in their life.

Is this statement true or false?   □ True   □ False

The correct answers are...

Question 1

Early childhood is defined as the period of zero to six years of age since this period is the most important in individual development.

This statement is false. The definition of ECD is from the prenatal period – from conception through pregnancy (when the health and nutrition of the mother are important determinants of foetal development) to the successful transition from the home (and often an early childhood development program) into the early grades of primary school. Early childhood, therefore, encompasses the period of human development from the age of minus nine months (conception) to the age of eight or nine (corresponding with the early years of primary school).

Question 2

Early childhood development programs are often under-funded by governments.

This statement is true. Despite evidence showing their importance, early childhood development programs are typically under-funded by governments.

Question 3

Early childhood development programs are best organised through separate programs by individual ministries (health, education, social welfare).

This statement is false. Early childhood development programs are better organised by health, education and social welfare agencies working together. There should be a cross-sectoral approach adopted to support early childhood development programs.

Question 4

In the prenatal to age three period, the neural architecture of the brain grows faster than at any other time in the life course.

The statement is true. In the prenatal to age three period, the neural architecture of the brain grows faster than at any other time in the life course. At the same time, a broad set of fundamental capabilities are developing – cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional – that are the basis for future learning and development.

Question 5

The transition between the home or pre-school to primary school is often a challenging period in a young child's life.

The statement is true. The transition from home or pre-school to primary school can be challenging, with a move from the culture of the home to a more structured environment.

Question 6

Early education – in pre-school and the early grades of primary schools – should always be provided in the country's national language to ensure that children master it early in their life.

The statement is false. Early education does not need to be in the country's national language. The language policy in ECD should promote the use of mother-tongue for initial literacy and early learning.

REFERENCES AND LINKS

Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC) n.d., EAP-ECD Scales, https://arnec.net/static/uploads/1544519683421-EAPR%20ECD%20Scales%20One%20Pager%20April%202016%20image_ModifiedV1.0Final-2.pdf

Carneiro, P. & Heckman, J., 2003, Human capital policy. National bureau of economic research, Cambridge, http://www.nber.org/papers/w9495.pdf

DFAT, 2015, Development for All 2015-2020: Strategy for strengthening disability-inclusive development in Australia's aid program, https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/development-for-all-2015-2020.pdf

DFAT Blog, 2017, Valuing language: improving education in Vanuatu. https://blog.dfat.gov.au/2017/03/01/valuing-language-improving-education-in-vanuatu/

Duncan, G. J. & Sojourner, A. J. 2013, Can intensive early childhood intervention programs eliminate income-based cognitive and achievement gaps? Journal of Human Resources, 48(4), 945-968, http://jhr.uwpress.org/content/48/4/945.abstract

Engle, P. L., Fernald, L. C. H., Alderman, H., the Global Child Development Steer Group, & et al., 2011, Strategies for reducing inequalities and improving developmental outcomes for young children in low-income and middle-income countries. The Lancet, 378(9799) p. 1339-53, https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(11)60889-1/fulltext

Friedlander, E., Alesbury, C., Fernando, N., Vitharana, H., & Yoshida, K., 2013, Literacy Boost Sri Lanka: Baseline Report, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/literacy_boost_sri_lanka_baseline_report-_march_2013.pdf

Heckman, J. J., Moon, S.H., Pinto, R., Savelyev, P.A., & Yavitz, A., 2010, The rate of return to the HighScope Perry Preschool Program. Journal of Public Economics, 94, 114-128, http://jenni.uchicago.edu/papers/Heckman_Moon_etal_2010_JPubEc_v94_n1.pdf

Jackson J., Ahmed, S. K., Carslake, T., Lietz, P., 2019, Parent-focused interventions in economically developing countries. (Insights from a scoping review; Policy note 3), Australian Council for Educational Research, https://research.acer.edu.au/monitoring_learning/43/

Laxminarayan, R., Chow, J. and Shahid-Salles, S. A., 2006, Intervention Cost-Effectiveness: Overview of Main Messages. In D. T. Jamison, J. G. Breman, A. R. Measham, et al. Disease Control Priorities in Developing Countries. 2nd edition. The World Bank: Washington, DC, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK11784/

Malkin, J., 2011, ARNEC Connections: Working Together for Early Childhood. Asia- Pacific Regional Network in Early Childhood (ARNEC): Singapore, no.4, http://handstohearts.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/ARNEC-Research_Innovative-Early-Childhood-Programs-2011-SpecialEdition_bw_small.pdf

Mcdonald, K., Brinkman, S., Jarvie, W., Machuca-Sierra, M., McDonall, K., Messaoud-Galusi, S., Tapueluelu and Vu, T.B., 2018, Intervening at Home and Then at School A Randomized Evaluation of Two Approaches to Improve Early Educational Outcomes in

Tonga. http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/749601545227173514/pdf/Intervening-at-Home-and-Then-at-School-A-Randomized-Evaluation-of-Two-Approaches-to-Improve-Early-Educational-Outcomes-in-Tonga.pdf

OECD, 2012, Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Education and Care, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264123564-en.pdf?expires=1538977693&id=id&accname=ocid54010355&checksum=B48CE627546B35EA9571202CA57FB558

2020, Attendance in Early Childhood Education and Care Programmes and Academic Proficiencies at Age 15, OECD Education Working Paper No. 214, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP%282020%292&docLanguage=En

Rebello Britto, P., 2012, Key to Equality: Early Childhood Development. The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development Task Force for the Post 2015 Development Agenda, http://aserpakistan.org/document/learning_resources/2014/Early_Childhood_Education/Consultative%20Group%20on%20ECCD%20Findings.pdf

Schweinhart, L. J., Montie, J., Xiang, Z., Barnett, W. S., Belfield, C. R., & Nores, M., 2005, Lifetime effects: the High/Scope Perry preschool study through age 40. Ypsilanti, Michigan: High/Scope Press, http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/specialsummary_rev2011_02_2.pdf

The Life Skills Development Foundation (TLSDF), n.d., About Us, https://www.idealist.org/en/nonprofit/e58c41693d0c4d2c8c3b7075b790f678-the-life-skills-development-foundation-tlsdf-chiang-mai

UNESCO, 2012, Expanding equitable early childhood care and education is an urgent need. Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Policy Paper 03. Paris, pp. 1-9, http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002160/216038e.pdf

UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d., UIS stat. http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx

UNICEF, 2007, EFA global monitoring report: Strong Foundations – early childhood care and education. UNESCO, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000147794

2009, Early Childhood Development Kit: A Treasure Box of Activities. UNICEF ECD Unit: New York, https://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/files/Activity_Guide.pdf

2012, Inequities in Early Childhood Development: What the data say. Evidence from the multiple indicator cluster surveys, https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/press-releases/media-Inequities_in_Early_Childhood_Development_LoRes_PDF_EN_02082012%281%29.pdf

2014, Early Childhood Development: a statistical snapshot – Building better brains and sustainable outcomes for children, https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ECD_Brochure_2014_197.pdf

VESP Views Vanuatu Education Support Program, 2017, Issue 1: *Yusum fulap lanwis blong lan*. https://www.espvanuatu.org/Documents/VESPViews/VESP%20Factsheet%201%20v12.pdf

Walker, S.P., et al., 2007, Child Development: Risk factors for adverse outcomes in developing countries, The Lancet, vol. 369, pp.145–157: http://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/documents/pdfs/lancet_child_dev_series_paper2.pdf?ua=1

Learn more about…

- *UNICEF Early Childhood Development, found at:* https://www.unicef.org/early-childhood-development

- *The Convention on the Rights of the Child, found at:* https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx

- *Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC), found at:* http://www.arnec.net/

- *The East Asia-Pacific Early Child Development Scales, and its implementation in six countries, found at:* https://arnec.net/ecd-scales

- *The benefits of early childhood development, found at:* https://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/index_40748.html

- *The 2007 Lancet study on ECD, found at:* https://www.thelancet.com/series/early-child-development-in-developing-countries-2007

- *Strategies to enhance student inclusion, found at:* http://www.create-rpc.org/pdf_documents/Making-Rights-Realities-Keith-Lewin-September-2011.pdf

- *From Enrollment to Learning: The Way Forward, found at:* http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2013/01/enrollment-learning-van-der-gaag