

INEE Thematic Issue Brief: Early Childhood Development

Definition

Early Childhood Development refers to the processes through which a young child under eight years develops his/her optimal physical health, mental alertness, emotional confidence, social competence and readiness to learn. Experience has shown that critical preconditions must co-exist to ensure that young children get the best start in life for them to develop to their full potential. Such pre-conditions include: effective and responsive caring of the young child by the family and community; access to and the use of quality basic social services for young children, and pregnant and lactating women, and finally a supportive policy environment. Holistic early childhood development programming integrates health, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene, education and child protection sectors. This enables the young child to claim his/her rights to survival, growth, development, protection and participation and ensures that the duty bearers, namely, parents, caregivers, communities, sub-national and national authorities respect, protect, promote and fulfil those rights.

Early Childhood Development as a Thematic Issue

The period of time from prenatal to eight years is one of the most sensitive developmental phases in an individual's life. This time is characterized by rapid brain development and the acquisition of foundational skills and competencies which form the basis for future development. Emergency settings pose a set of visible and invisible risks for young children and their families. Children who experience extreme and adverse stress in their early years are at greater risk for developing cognitive, behavioural and emotional difficulties, which also reduces and delays their overall developmental processes. Their parents and caregivers are more likely to be stressed and depressed, and thus less able to provide young children with positive and emotionally nurturing environments. Such children are more likely to start school late, experience academic failure and develop socially aggressive behaviours. Research shows that an accumulation of stressful events becomes increasingly detrimental to children's development, especially when no compensatory forces are at work to mitigate the effects.¹ To mitigate the adverse impacts of emergencies, infants and young children need early positive care interactions with their primary caregivers, access to protective, nurturing and clean environments, good health care, balanced nutrition, and early learning opportunities.

For young children, learning occurs all the time and should be maximised through creative learning spaces for movement and play, both at home and within the community. At home, positive care interactions which engage the child and the caregiver arouse a child's curiosity are the foundational stones for early learning. Within the community, child development centres which provide early learning activities through play, can integrate essential services such as health care, nutritious meals, availability of clean water, latrines, and adopt child-safety initiatives. Along with providing young children with the opportunity to learn and socialize with peers and caregivers, secure learning spaces also provide children with a sense of routine and protection from physical harm.

Applying an early childhood lens to emergency programming ensures that early childhood development dimensions are incorporated within interventions undertaken by sectors in an integrated way, and are put into place right from the start of a child's life and right from the start of an emergency.

Addressing Early Childhood Development in the INEE Minimum Standards

Owing to the cross-cutting nature of Early Childhood Development, the references to ECD in the INEE Minimum Standards Handbook form in no way a complete ECD in emergency framework. This must be complemented with the additional guidance given in this brief, along with ECD perspectives mainstreamed in the SPHERE handbook. Examples of how ECD has been mainstreamed throughout the INEE Minimum Standards Handbook include the following:

- **Foundational Standards** work to ensure that a life cycle approach is adopted for young children, wherein education programmes effectively address the rights and age-specific needs of young children in developmentally appropriate ways.
- **Access and Learning Environment** highlights the need to extend essential health, nutrition, water and sanitation, education and psycho-social services not only to young learners but also to parents, caregivers and teachers. The category also outlines the importance of including play and recreation within education activities to create a sustainable learning environment at home and in the community which supports the holistic development of the young child.

- **Teaching and Learning** outlines the importance of the early years for the foundational development of literacy, numeracy and life-skills. It focuses on developing capacities of parents, caregivers and teachers to create and use age and development appropriate learning and instructional materials. The section also recognizes the need for caregivers and teachers to be trained on the basics of child-development and to effectively use recreation and play material as aids to facilitate holistic child development. For additional guidance on Teaching and Learning from an ECD perspective, refer to the INEE Teaching and Learning Resource Pack.
- **Teachers and Other Education Personnel** stresses on the need for including early childhood care providers as part of other education personnel. The category emphasises on providing young children with access to trained and/or experienced early childhood care providers who possess the necessary behavioural skills, competencies and experiences to understand the developmental needs of young children. It also outlays the importance of creating a defined code of conduct for recruiting and training early childhood care personnel.
- **Education Policy** recognizes the need to plan and implement early childhood development related services and activities for young children by national and sub-national authorities. It re-iterates the importance of strong coordination mechanisms among different actors to ensure sustainable sectoral linkages are established to address the diverse rights and needs of young children. Furthermore, the category calls upon the need to involve ECD service providers in the project cycle.

Additional Guidance

While integrating ECD dimensions within education in emergency programmes, the following should be considered –

- **Draw Inter-sectoral linkages:** An integrated approach for early childhood development interventions in emergencies is based on the premise that the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional aspects of a child's development are all interrelated and independent; intervention in a single sector will only provide limited results. To ensure overall development, critical services (e.g. clean drinking water, hygienic sanitation facilities, access to health and nutrition services, psycho-social support etc.) should be available within learning spaces (formal and informal) to aid the survival and development of the young child
- **Support parents and primary caregivers (with whom the young child spends most time):** Parents and caregivers must be counselled and provided with key messages on ways and means of caring and positively interacting with their young children. Psycho-social support and access to essential services should be extended to them to ensure their abilities to care for the child are uncompromised
- **Assist service providers (teachers, volunteers etc.):** Teachers, volunteers and other care providers must be recruited as per previously established criterion to aid their effective selection. Their performances should be monitored and they should be coached continuously to ensure appropriate behavioural skills to address the varying developmental needs of young children. They should also be provided with necessary support to access essential health, nutrition, sanitation and protection services which allow them to fulfil their duties and responsibilities towards to the young child unhindered.
- **Emphasize the right to play:** For children, opportunities to play on their own as well as with their peers in and caregivers in unstructured or structured ways is crucial for their positive physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. During emergencies, play activities are a means to alleviate stress for both children and caregivers. Caregivers and community members should be involved in the production of local and age-appropriate early learning play material and in organizing play activities which ensures their social and emotional development and learning continuity even within the home when formal learning spaces outside of the home may not be yet established. Play is one of the most underestimated rights even in regular settings and hence needs to be given even more importance during emergencies
- **Prioritize Early Childhood Development Centres:** Along with schools, ECD centres and community based child care centres should also be established and protected. Such centres provide opportunities for young children to develop through play and early learning activities which create a sense of routine and thereby enhance psycho-social well-being, despite tumultuous times. These centres can also serve as a place for the delivery of health, nutrition and other services which the community can access for young children at all times
- **Establish Child Friendly Spaces (CFS):** CFS hold immense potential in addressing the diverse developmental needs of young children. CFS should provide integrated quality services and can also be used as a secure space for pregnant and new mothers as well as by caregivers and their children as a secure space to positively interact with each other. For more guidance on designing CFS which cater to young children and their caregivers, refer to Child Fund's Manual on Starting Up Child Centered Spaces in Emergencies at www.ecdgroup.com/docs/lib_005823920.pdf

ⁱ Boothby, N. (2008). Political violence and development: an ecological approach to children in war zones. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 17, 497-514.

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