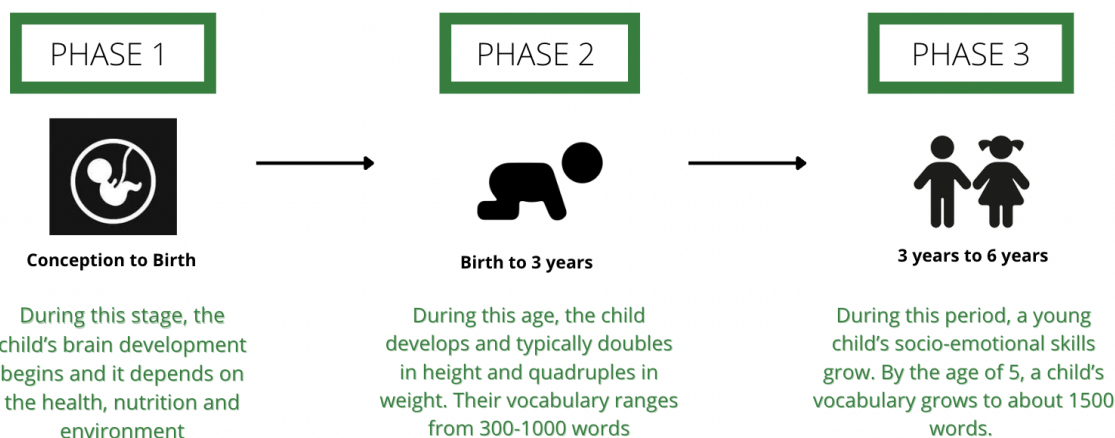


## Early Years Matter: Getting India's future right through integrated Early Childhood Development

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is a concept that envelops both a child and the child's environment. It is a period of pivotal development of the cognitive, linguistic, socio-emotional and physical faculties of children from conception to six years of age. It is the foundation on which the framework of a child's life-long learning, behavior and health heavily rests. Investing in holistic ECD is one of the wisest decisions a country can make while embarking on a journey of growth and sustainable development. With India having one of the largest young populations in the world, nurturing ECD will unlock the infinite potential of the nation's children.

As a nation, it would be interesting to explore the parameters surrounding successful ECD in order to ensure that we achieve them. Healthy ECD is an outcome defined by a young child being adequately nourished, physically healthy, mentally alert, emotionally sound, socially competent and ready to learn. 80% of a child's brain growth occurs by the age of three<sup>1</sup> and in the early years of life (birth - six years) which are distinct "windows of opportunities".



Sources: © <https://www.dreamstime.com/illustration/child-development.html>, <https://thenounproject.com/browse/icons/term/toddler/>, <https://uxwing.com/children-kids-icon/>

Missing these windows of opportunities often has irreversible consequences which affect later life outcomes such as academic success, employability and emotional well-being. ECD additionally requires cross-sectoral interventions across nutrition, health, education, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), parenting, and an intersectional approach which includes gender, caste, disability and climate change.

## The Components of ECD

Developed by the WHO, UNICEF and the World Bank, the nurturing care framework<sup>2</sup> takes a holistic approach towards the development of young children and aims at ensuring that young children survive and thrive to transform their health and human potential.

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, & World Bank Group. (2018). *Nurturing care for early childhood development: a framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential.*

<sup>2</sup> Developed by WHO, UNICEF, and the World Bank

The key components of the nurturing care framework are:

- i) good health
- ii) adequate nutrition
- iii) responsive caregiving
- iv) safety and security and
- v) opportunities for early learning.

In line with the nurturing framework, the following critical components of ECD have been identified for this study:



Source: The Nurturing Care Framework developed by WHO, UNICEF and World Bank has 5 important components to ensure a holistic approach to the development of young children

**Education:** Early education lays the foundation for learning throughout life, and good quality early childhood education is known to reduce school dropouts and class repetitions.<sup>3</sup> An age-appropriate early years curriculum is imperative for a smooth transition from preschool to early grades; however, the curriculum in both government and private pre-primary institutions is often not age-appropriate.

**Nutrition:** Nutrition is critical in the early years as up to 75% of a meal goes to the baby's brain<sup>4</sup>, and optimal nutrition affects later life outcomes. Optimal breastfeeding and complementary food are essential to avoid stunting in infancy and early years; however, only 56.6 % of infants are breastfed within one hour of their life in India.<sup>5</sup>

**Health:** Young children face health-related risk factors such as malaria, exposure to heavy metals, low birth weight, worm infections, diarrhoeal diseases and pesticides, which negatively impact their development.<sup>6</sup> Despite the progress made by India in this sector, challenges persist due to factors such as low immunization and limited access to health services.

**Responsive Caregiving:** WHO defines responsive caregiving as "the ability of the caregiver to notice, understand, and respond to the child's signals in a timely and appropriate manner". Lack of adequate care during the early years can result in developmental delays.<sup>7</sup>

**Child Safety:** Young children are often unaware of the consequences of their actions, due to which they can land in dangerous situations.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, their young age leaves them vulnerable to neglect, violence, abuse and exploitation.<sup>9</sup> Young children, especially toddlers, are harshly punished, resulting in uncontrollable fear, stress, and emotional, mental and social maladjustments.<sup>10</sup> The potential detrimental impact of compromising child safety is so massive that child safety is a crucial component of ECD.

<sup>3</sup> *Early childhood education*. (2020). UNICEF India.

<sup>4</sup> *Baby food and nutrition*. (n.d.). UNICEF Parenting.

<sup>5</sup> *Early childhood nutrition*. (n.d.). UNICEF India.

<sup>6</sup> New Philanthropy Capital, Copal Partners, Blake, S., Chand, T., Gupta, G., & Miller, I. (2009). *Starting strong*.

<sup>7</sup> Day, Monimalika, Kochar, Reema, Bawa, Swati, Mahalwal, Preeti, Makkar, Riddhi. (n.d.). *Unpacking Care: Protecting Early Childhood*

<sup>8</sup> *Health and Safety, Ages 2 to 5 Years*. HealthLink BC.

<sup>9</sup> Krishna, C., Ramaswamy, S., & Seshadri, S. (2021, February). *Integrating Child Protection and Mental Health Concerns in the Early Childhood Care and Development Program in India*. Indian Pediatrics.

<sup>10</sup> World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, & World Bank Group. (2018). *Nurturing care for early childhood development: a framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential*.

## Sectoral intersectionalities with ECD

Along with the ECD components discussed in the section above, intersectionalities with other sectors play a crucial role in healthy ECD outcomes;

**Disability:** Early detection of disability and learning delays are critically important for making timely interventions and ensuring healthy and productive adult lives. There are 2.04 million young children with disabilities in India.<sup>11</sup> However, Early Childhood Care Education (ECCE) teachers and AWWs are not trained on early detection of developmental delays.

**Gender:** Gender considerations and ECD outcomes are closely interlinked. The primary caregivers of young children are most often mothers. Due to a severe shortage of full day care centres in India, mothers, especially those working in the informal sector, either bring their young children to work or stop working. Hence, either young children stand the risk of physical injury as the conditions at informal worksites are dismal.

**Migration:** Young migrant children in urban areas in India often lack access to amenities and entitlements for their nutrition, health and learning due to the seasonal pattern of rural-urban migration. This is due to implementation gaps in the "one nation one ration" card scheme.<sup>12</sup>

**Urban Design:** The design of urban spaces is closely connected to the physical development of young children. Currently, 18.7% of young children in urban India live in slums<sup>13</sup> where they face issues such as open defecation, inaccessible parks and footpaths, safe and affordable mobility which severely affect their well-being.

**Climate Change:** ECD is impacted by extreme weather events triggered by climate change. Climate change also affects young children's mortality and morbidity, and cognitive and physical development due to increased prevalence of diseases and air pollution<sup>14</sup>. Exposure to extreme heat and precipitation in prenatal and ECD in tropical areas could make it harder for young children to attain secondary school education.<sup>15</sup>

## Key Challenges for the ECD Ecosystem in India

There is considerable research and data to substantiate the importance of quality ECD, globally, yet millions of children are being deprived of it. According to UNICEF, over 43 per cent of children under the age of five in India are at risk of not fulfilling their full developmental potential.<sup>16</sup> According to the Census of India (2011), there are 16.45 crore young children in India in the birth to six years age category. Despite their large number and the importance of early years, the central government issued only 22% of the total budget allocated for all children in 2019-20 (itself just 2.7% of the total budget) to young children. In addition to limited investments, communities, parents, and society are not sensitized and aware of the value and importance of healthy ECD. However, there is immense value in investing in ECD, such that provision of optimal nutrition during the early years can raise later-life adult wages by 5-50%.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, it is found that investing in high-quality and comprehensive early education can yield 13% returns.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup> NIUA. (2016). *Status of Children in Urban India. Baseline Study*.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> NIUA. (2020). *Children and Adolescents in Urban India: Scale and Nature of Deprivation*.

<sup>14</sup> Dora, C. (2010). *Climate change and early childhood development: finding the synergies – Early Childhood Matters*. Early Childhood Matters.

<sup>15</sup> National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center. (2019). *Climate change could undermine children's education and development in the tropics*. ScienceDaily.

<sup>16</sup> UNICEF India. *Early Childhood Development*.

<sup>17</sup> India: *Investing in a Child's Early Years for a Stronger Economy*. (2016). World Bank.

<sup>18</sup> Solomon, C. (2019, May 10). *13% ROI Research Toolkit*. The Heckman Equation.

Despite the obvious importance of the early years, there are significant challenges that hinder advancements in ECD:

#### **I. Lack of integrated approach to ECD and focus on holistic child development**

Government ministries and organizations working on ECD often operate in silos. At an ecosystem level, since ECD is not tackled holistically, some ECD aspects such as nutrition get more focus and energy. In contrast, critical intersectional elements such as gender, responsive caregiving, disability, urban design, migration are often neglected.

#### **II. Inadequate ECD system capacity**

The quality of ECD in India is affected by systemic deficits such as inadequate training and a lack of a standardized curriculum for training of ECD personnel. Furthermore, there is little financial value attached to being part of the ECD workforce, which leads to a huge gap in the demand and supply.

#### **III. Inadequate and inaccessible ECD resources**

Overall, there is inadequate knowledge generation, documentation and sharing in the ECD sector. ECD stakeholders cannot benefit from the successful interventions of others, and data on crucial ECD themes such as young migrant children, children with disabilities, and parenting, is limited and inaccurate.

#### **IV. Weak and uncoordinated collective influence for ECD**

There is a strong need for all ECD stakeholders in India to join hands and collectively influence programs and policies for improving the quality of ECD interventions, thus eliminating uncoordinated efforts.

These crippling barriers to effective ECD need to be addressed to ensure the educational accomplishment, financial productivity and lifelong health of the coming generation. For this it is crucial that parents, policymakers and responsible caregivers comprehend the importance of ECD, by having a deep understanding of the individual components which constitute overall childhood development.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident that a child's early development does not take place in a vacuum. The surrounding ecosystem and environment is an indispensable contributor towards fostering an emotionally-socially-psychologically and financially well adjusted child. Understanding how significant early experiences and enduring connections are to lifelong development is a critical step in supporting children and families. It is also imperative to be cognizant of the fact that each child is unique and learns differently. Thus an interdisciplinary approach to ECD is necessary for effective and impactful change. Current ECD resources on-the-ground will continue to play a leading role in shaping the future of ECD in India, and thus their knowledge and training need to undergo regular upskilling. To bring about a meaningful ECD in India, there will need to be a shift from the current mindset of laying emphasis on only a few facets of a child's growth. A finely balanced focus on each aspect of a child's development is necessary for successful ECD.

Implementing the knowledge that we have, and ensuring that it permeates into current practices and policies can expand the potential, aptitude and capabilities of the children in the country. Breakthrough improvements for children are pivotal for a thriving and progressive society and nation. Leveraging what we are constantly learning from science and extensive research to catalyze and test new ideas is an integral, untapped opportunity to propel these remarkable improvements.