

Policy Brief for Parliamentarians

Early Childhood Development: Resolving Concerns Today for India's Tomorrow

Introduction

The period of birth to six years in a human's life is considered to be the foundational years. It has been established by neuroscience research that 90% of the child's brain growth occurs by the time a child is 5 years of age.¹ These children are citizens of today and adults of tomorrow they will carry the India we give them on their shoulders. India can only progress and prosper if sound investments are made in our human resources during the period of childhood. This is not a matter of charity, it is sound economic sense. However, the data shows that the country has for long neglected its children under six.

[*"If all child rights measures were to become a critical measure for HDI, India would fare even worse..."*²]

Children Fact File: India

- ❖ Children under 6 years of age in India - **15.87 crore**; which is **13.12%** of the total population³
- ❖ Out of which **48%** children are covered under ICDS i.e. **7.57 crore**
- ❖ In 2010, **43%** of India's children under five were underweight and **48%** were stunted and **69%** were anemic⁴
- ❖ In 2013, India's child mortality rate was **53 per 1000** live births, accounting for **21%** of the deaths of children under five worldwide⁵
- ❖ India and Nigeria together account for more than a third of all under-five deaths⁵
- ❖ 51.3% of children are under the poverty threshold⁶

Children's development has been a subject of discussion since 1970s and it was during that time that the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme was launched. However, in 2002, the Parliament decided to exclude the under sixes from the Right to Education, and it was but only in 2013, that the government of India took formal cognizance of the importance and needs of children under six years of age and formulated a Policy on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE).

Existing provisions for young children

The history of policy and law making in the country for young children depicts a series of achievements as well as long plateaus of inaction. The ICDS schemes, several labour laws provided for statutory child care; the National Policy on Education, 1992, the National Charter for Children (2003), National Policy for Children, 2013, the National Food Security Act, 2013 and the National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy, 2013 have recognized young children as a distinct subset of children with their own set of specific needs and rights.

India has also ratified international conventions like the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), UN Convention for Elimination of Discrimination against Women (1979), the UN Convention on Rights of the Child (1989), and UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) that have provided for various rights and entitlements of young children. Despite these peaks of achievements, we have long plateaus of governmental indifference towards the young child. The data on children demonstrates how we have fared badly in translating these goals into action and have not even achieved minimalistic targets of the schemes.⁷

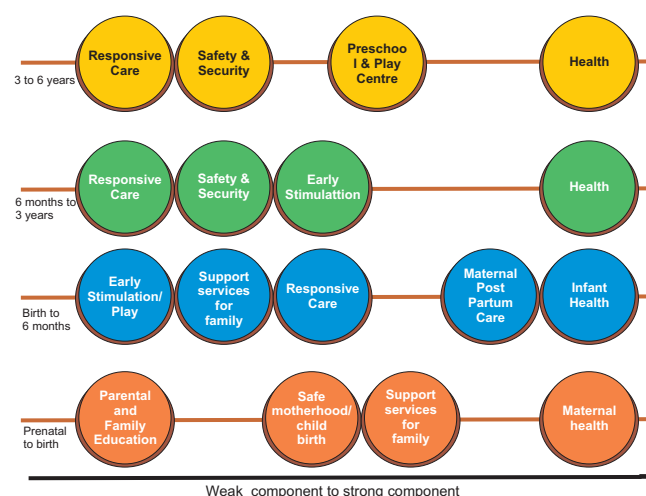
But despite of the existing provisions for ECD, why is the situation so bad?	
Inadequate Provisions	Inadequate in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coverage, Infrastructure and Quality
Fragmented Approach	State has followed fragmented approach in terms of schemes and programmes to address the various needs of the children
Lack of inter-sectoral Coordination	Early childhood Development requires multi sectoral inputs – health, nutrition, learning, care and protection – delivered in an integrated manner. Lack of coordination among various ministries such as health, women and child development, human resource development affects the effective implementation of schemes and policies
Importance of Care not recognized	While health, nutrition, education and protection are concepts are understood, ‘care’ appears amorphous and have been overlooked in the various schemes and programmes for young children. Care, the presence of an informed caregiver is an essential need during early childhood and in the absence or unavailability to a caregiver, widespread neglect takes place.
Time poverty of women	Childcare is seen as the responsibility of women, and with the increased financial burden on the families, they need to struggle between work and childcare responsibilities, which generally leaves a care deficit at home. This adversely affects the overall development of young children
Low Budgets	The care work of women for household is not valued and recognized by the state and society at large, and the needs of children have been viewed from the welfare lens by the State, leading to insufficient investments in the schemes and the programmes which address the needs of young children.
Not an entitlement	The state has been addressing the needs of the children through schemes and programmes but not as entitlements.

Early Childhood Development has proven to be a key intervention to provide opportunities for a healthy, productive and satisfying life by enabling the child to develop to her optimal potential. The holistic development of children in their formative years will not only ensure child’s development but will have a positive impact on the economic as well as social development of the nation.

What is Early Childhood Development?

Early childhood years spans the period from birth to six years. It is the period when the foundation of cognitive, physical, socio-emotional development, language and personality are laid. As development is very rapid in this age group the period is further

Age specific needs (from birth to 6 years)



sub divided in sub stages based on the developmental characteristics of the each stage⁸:-

- Conception to birth
- Birth to six months
- Six months to 3 years
- 3 years to 6 years

The birth of a healthy child is premised on the fulfilment of the rights of pregnant women and lactating mothers. In the first stage, i.e. of conception to birth, delivery, and early childcare, the needs and rights of the women overlap with the needs and right of the child. Further, the rights of women can only be met only when the survival, economic and socio-cultural needs of the family

are met. Therefore, the overlapping rights of mother, family and child need to be clearly recognized and addressed by Early Childhood Development programmes.

Early Childhood Development, therefore, refers to the holistic development of the child which is dependent on the development within different and inter-related domains such as physical, motor, cognitive, social, emotional and language. The development of the child's potential in the early years through provision of ECCE has a lasting impact across the child's lifespan.

Components of ECD					
Period	Care and Protection	Play and Learning	Health	Nutrition	Remarks
Prenatal to birth	No prenatal sex determination; Mother friendly workplaces	Information to mothers	Ante natal and post natal care; Immunization; preventive health care; Safe childbirth	Maternity Entitlements; Information and counseling	Maternity entitlements in the form of nutritious diet, adequate rest and stress free environment, leave, etc. directly impact the development of the child
Birth to 3 years	Day care for working mothers; Family and community support	Teaching social, personal and health habits; Parental awareness about learning; Stimulation and interaction with adults; Play spaces and materials to explore	Clean environment, Safe shelter; Clean Water and toilet; Basic healthcare; Immunization	Exclusive breast feeding for six months; Continued breast feeding and supplementary feeding till 2 years	Three dimensions of care i.e. Presence of the care giver, Relationship with the care giver and Caregiving activities are important and impact the brain development
3 years to 6 years	All the above plus Safe and accessible play space and Adult guidance	Early learning centre with age appropriate developmental curriculum and trained teacher; Preparation for primary school	All the above plus regular health checks	Adequate and appropriate nutrition	Responsive care and nurturance, protection from toxic stress and preschool education would ensure strong foundation for life and school readiness

Why we must engage with the Early Childhood Development, what is its significance?



It is proven by neuroscience research that 90% of the child's brain growth occurs by the time a child is 5 years of age, and the process of brain growth is influenced by early environmental experiences.⁸ If the child does not get a stimulating, psychosocial environment in these years, the chances of the brain developing to its full potential are considerably, and often irreversibly, reduced. Since development is interdependent and synergistic in nature, inputs pertaining to different components need to be provided simultaneously to the child and across the sub-stages of early childhood.

- **Child Survival and Development:** By providing pre-natal services, ensuring safe delivery, promotion of breastfeeding, provision of health, immunization and nutrition services, ECD programme reduces infant mortality and enable child survival. Survival, growth and development are simultaneous and not sequential processes and as ECD is an integrated approach, it goes beyond survival and aim at overall development of the child.
- **Economic Returns:** Returns on investment in early childhood programmes doesn't only accrue to the child enrolled but to the national economy. James Heckman (2006) cost-benefit

analysis of ECCE provision demonstrated nearly 10% annual rate of return to the state on money invested in early childhood programme.¹⁰

- **Improves women economic participation:** The work that the women perform in household which is unrecognized and unpaid work is generally considered the responsibility of women, particularly childcare. This heavy and unequal responsibility limits their economic participation. The childcare support from the state in terms of ECD programme will help in reducing the time poverty of women and engaging more and more women in economic activities without creating care deficit for young children.
- **Promoting Social Justice:** Studies have revealed that the most disadvantaged children - whether because of poverty, ethnicity, gender, rural isolation, or disability - experience the most dramatic development gains from ECD. By not providing ECD government works towards strengthening inequalities.¹¹

“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men” ...Frederick Douglass

Recommendations to improve the status of young children

In the light of these the fact that how we have failed to take care of our young children and the critical importance of investing in early childhood, the following recommendations emerge:

State's Responsibility vis-à-vis the Child: While parents [or the children's legal guardians], are primarily responsible to care for their children, the Government must step in and support them to do so, or, if necessary, take over the duty in the event that they cannot or are unavailable to do so.

- **Access:** every child should have access to free, universal, equitable, quality and contextualized opportunities for early childhood development services which can be delivered through multiple modes such as Anganwadi centres (AWCs), day care centres and crèches for the under threes and AWCs, NGO run balwadis, government and private schools for 4+ to 6 years for preschool. There should be equitable quality services access sectors.
- **Convergence:** ECCE requires an integrated approach and thus effective implementation requires coordination and convergence with various departments at various levels. Financial, regulatory and operational convergence between related policies, schemes and programmes should be developed.
- **Adequate Financial Allocation:** It has been observed that low budget allocated by the state obstruct the effective implementation of policies and programmes. With the recent slashed union budget 2015-16 for children, it is imperative that the government should allocate sufficient budget to ensure holistic development of the future generation.
- **Minimum wages and good working conditions for caregivers:** The quality of an ECCE center can only be as good as the quality of the teacher who is there for the children. There is no official cadre of ECCE teachers and Anganwadi worker who serves as the ECCE teacher is an honorary part time worker. Thus to improve the outreach and quality of programme it is necessary that all frontline functionaries are paid minimum wages as per the skills requirement, professional status is given to ECCE workers.
- **Provision of Maternity Entitlements:** Universal maternity entitlement is a necessary precondition to enable women to adequately care for themselves, their children, and to enable exclusive breastfeeding for six months. They need cash support, withdraw from work which is both paid and unpaid, and thereafter to be supported by Creches and childcare arrangements.

Questions to be raised in Parliament:

- What is the status of implementation of the Restructured ICDS mission:
 - o How many districts have been covered?
 - o How many Anganwadi cum Creches have been operationalized?
 - o How many Sneh Shivirs and ECD days have been conducted?
- Under the National ECCE Policy 2013, how many ECCE Council meetings have been held?
- What is the status National Food Security Act?
 - o By when the rules for National Food Security Act on ICDS and Maternity Benefits Schemes will framed?
 - o How many districts and people are planned to be covered by the Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana scheme?
- How much budget is allocated for various schemes and programmes related to young children?

- **Implementation of existing provisions:** Some progressive steps have been taken up by the government in terms of laws and policies viz. ECCE policy, NFSA and Restructured ICDS to address the issue of children under six but all these provisions need to be implemented to bring about a change on the ground.
- **Legislation for Right to ECD:** The importance of good policies, backed by a legislative framework is well recognized. Till now the

needs of the children have been seen through the welfare lens. A justiciable right will give the policies teeth and ensure fulfillment of comprehensive entitlements. The rights approach to ECD need to be two-fold:

- i. Meeting the rights of pregnant woman right from conception as well as of the lactating mother, and the rights of the child from birth to six years. The rights of the pregnant women and lactating mother include the right to health, nutrition and maternity entitlements.
- ii. The rights of the child consist of the right to health, nutrition, age-appropriate learning, responsive care, safety and protection.

What can Parliamentarians do?

- Take leadership role and encourage fellow parliamentarians to advocate for the importance of investing in the Early Childhood programmes.
- Raise questions in Parliament to review and monitor implementation of Restructured ICDS, ECCE Policy and National Food Security Act (entitlements of children under six and pregnant & lactating women).
- Ensure adequate budget is allocated to children under six and laws, policies and programme are implemented without exclusion and delay.
- Use MPLAD/MLA funds for establishing day care centres; quality Anganwadi centres; Anganwadi cum crèches; improved public services; water, sanitation, health and nutrition.
- Ensure that adequate and cost effective funding is provided to state governments to meet the objectives of the various schemes and programmes.

- Advocate and persuade the Govt. to enact a comprehensive legislation for Right to ECD.
- Build networking and alliance with the CSOs to improve the ECD programmes.

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