

# 4 CORNERSTONES of Early Childhood Care and Development



THE CONSULTATIVE GROUP  
ON EARLY CHILDHOOD  
CARE AND DEVELOPMENT

ecdgroup.com

## Introduction

*Definition of “cornerstone”  
– a basic element, foundation.*

*Synonyms – basis, keystone,  
root, underpinning*

*(Merriam-Webster Dictionary)*

Just as every significant building, literally speaking, requires the laying of solid cornerstones as the first of the foundation stones needed to ensure its strength and durability, so, too, does every important paradigm, framework, and approach, figuratively speaking, require solid conceptual “cornerstones” upon which to base its policies, programmes, and practices. The last few decades of accelerated exploration of both the importance of early childhood care and development (ECCD) to young children, their families, and their societies and the basic elements of good ECCD programming and implementation have led to a general consensus on the essential cornerstones of ECCD.

The release of the 2007 *Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Strong Foundations*, focusing on ECCD, inspired the Consultative Group to convene a special session at its Annual Consultation, and the participants from all regions of the world came up with the idea of the 4 Cornerstones of early childhood care and development. But consensus on the Cornerstones was not easy to achieve. Should they be cross-cutting issues such as the equity of ECCD provision, the quality of ECCD programming, and the need for child-centred, interactive processes? Or should they be based on age ranges within the more and more commonly accepted definition of the young child as aged 0-8 in order to ensure roughly equal attention to each age range by each of the major actors in ECCD – an equality often not achieved?

In the final analysis, the latter approach was chosen, with one exception (Cornerstone 4), leading to four cornerstones as outlined in the attached briefs.

Just as the integrity of any building is threatened to the extent that any of its cornerstones is weak and/or missing, so, too, with the four Cornerstones of ECCD. Ignoring the cognitive and psycho-emotional needs of children aged 0-3 in favour of interventions limited to health and nutrition,



UNICEF Myanmar

providing quality pre-school services only to children of the urban elite, assuming that all children will make a similarly easy transition from the home or pre-school to a primary school not ready to receive them, and/or developing ECCD policies which are not comprehensive, multi-sectoral, or adequately funded will ultimately weaken any national (and therefore, ultimately, any local) ECCD effort.

Each of the following Cornerstone briefs is meant to be adaptable to a variety of audiences – from the converted to the sceptics, from policy-makers to practitioners – and will be continually enriched on the website of the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development (CG) with references to relevant research, programme descriptions, and examples of good practice. ■

## CORNERSTONE 1: **Start at the beginning**

- Integrate, coordinate and improve services that are responsive to needs and desires of – and accessible to – all young children and families
- Promote more positive caregiver/child interaction, stimulating environments, good health and nutrition, and better child care.
- Provide universal access to family support programmes that address holistic child development, with special attention to the most vulnerable young children and their families.

Children have rights from birth, and families, communities, and governments must work together to ensure the realisation of these rights.

### **From pregnancy through to the age of three:**

- Every child has a right to responsive parenting, a stimulating physical and social environment in which to grow and develop, good primary health care, a nutritious diet, and a safe, clean environment.
- Support from families and communities is essential to encourage optimal development of young children beginning even before birth. **WHY** invest more in the beginning of life?

Over 200 million children under the age of five will not reach their potential due to illness, malnutrition, and a lack of nurturing care, early stimulation and education. This failure to develop begins even before birth and is exacerbated by poor early childhood care before the age of three. Many young children experience many of the following developmental risks:

- prematurity or low birth weight
- prenatal substance exposure
- malnutrition, ill health, and developmental delays
- family or community violence
- poverty
- significant family stress
- lack of a consistent responsive caregiver
- environmental disasters and exposure to environmental toxins



Save the Children/Warner

- environments affected by conflict or crime

Integrated and coordinated services and a good physical and social environment during the period of rapid brain growth can prevent delays and bring rapid improvements, but research shows that delays are increasingly difficult to reverse with time.

### **WHAT needs to be done for children aged 0 to 3?**

At least 80 percent of the brain's capacity develops before the age of three. To combat risks and achieve their full potential, infants and young children during these years need:

- adequate prenatal care and education for families
- support for the transition to parenthood for men and women
- a stimulating and protective physical and social environment

- loving, predictable caregivers and relationships
- good health care, balanced nutrition, and support for breastfeeding
- clean and safe environments, safe play spaces, and opportunities to explore nature
- opportunities to initiate and sustain activities and interactions with others
- inclusive environments that respect cultural and linguistic diversity and differing abilities and provide equal opportunities for both girls and boys

In order to ensure that these needs are adequately met, a range of services must be targeted at the young child and his/her family. These include:

- regular prenatal education for fathers and mothers , care, and support (including nutritional supplementation) from the first trimester forward
- births attended by skilled professionals and early birth registration
- regular primary health services including immunization and, where needed, nutritional supplementation, and advice on breastfeeding and responsive feeding
- information and guidance to families regarding children’s development and care
- early and routine developmental screenings and, where necessary, assessments and locally accessible interventions
- promotion of play in safe, quality care environments
- individualized support, social welfare and protective services for disadvantaged families and vulnerable children where needed

### **WHO has responsibility for taking action?**

- all mothers, fathers, and primary caregivers
- government departments and ministries of all relevant sectors – education, health, nutrition, sanitation, social welfare or protection, and justice
- communities (leaders and members)
- neighbourhoods (adults and peers)

### **HOW can care be improved for children aged 0 to 3?**

Developing effective and cost-efficient systems for young children requires a comprehensive approach including the following actions:

- Conduct a national analysis of the situation of pregnant mothers (health and nutrition status, family support), parental knowledge of good child-rearing patterns, and children aged 0 to 3.
- Strengthen and maximise the use of existing education, health, nutrition and social welfare services for children aged 0 to 3 and their families.
- Plan, design, and implement integrated programmes to achieve a greater synergy of services, fill service gaps, go to scale, and meet national social and economic objectives in regard to the well-being of children aged 0 to 3.
- Support government policies that integrate the needs of young children.
- Establish a monitoring and evaluation system to ensure service quality and accountability and to develop standards, national indicators, measures, and targets related to children aged 0 to 3. ■



## CORNERSTONE 2: Provide new opportunities for discovery and learning

- Ensure access to at least two years of quality early childhood services (whether informal, nonformal, or formal settings, community- or home-based) prior to formal school entry.
- 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 – rather than on more formal school-oriented learning activities.
- Provide information and support to parents and caregivers, including fathers, through wide-ranging family support activities that equip parents to help their children realise their full potential.
- Prioritise the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

Children have the right to be safe, cared for, and stimulated at home, in school, and in the community. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that parents are a child's first and best educators and caregivers. The CRC recognises also that a child's capacities evolve rapidly between the ages of 3 and 6 years. During this period, children more fully develop their intellectual and social potential in safe, caring, play-based, and stimulating environments; such environments also help to fulfil their rights to participation and nondiscrimination.

### WHY invest more in parenting programmes and quality early learning, nurturing, and care in homes or centres for children aged 3 to 6?

It is clear that investing in early childhood reduces child mortality, significantly improves health status, lowers



children's later health care costs, reduces inequality, and counters discrimination.

Greater attention to the needs of children aged 3 to 6 also helps to ensure later school success in terms of:

- enrolling at the expected age
- lower school dropout rates
- reduced repetition
- higher achievement and completion rates – and ultimately, lower education costs

### WHAT results need to be achieved for children 3 to 6?

- Parenting support initiatives that are family focused, meet the needs of preschool-age children, and are culturally relevant.
- Inclusive, community-based early childhood programmes as well as other more formal public or private centres/ classrooms that provide safe, stimulating early learning activities. These activities should use a range of learning materials that allow young children to engage with their peers and adults, develop their understanding and use of language (especially mother tongue), explore the properties of different objects, build and create with simple materials (blocks, sticks, boxes), delve into imaginary play, and use their creativity in multiple ways. In addition, these activities should link to health care services and provide nutritious meals or snacks, clean water, and latrines.
- Activities to promote a positive sense of self, participation, respect for others, gender equality, and social justice (e.g., ensuring different opportunities to interact with others through games and other activities as well as through collaborative projects with peers).
- The expansion of appropriate education, health, nutrition, and social welfare/protection services to provide quality early childhood support, especially for traditionally marginalised or excluded groups

such as girls; children from ethnic/religious minority communities; children with disabilities; and children living in isolated rural areas, urban slums, and areas of conflict, emergencies, and/or high prevalence of HIV/AIDS.

### WHO is responsible for this age group?

Parents remain children's first and most important teachers at this age. However, children 3 to 6 years old gain tremendous benefits through engaging in appropriate, organised early learning and development activities in their communities.

In all regions of the world, early childhood services for children 3 to 6 years of age tend to be delegated to ministries of education. The education sector may offer formal, centre-based early childhood services for children from around the age of 3 or 4 years to school entry, such as those attached to or near primary schools. Some countries delegate early childhood to ministries of social welfare and, in several cases, early childhood programs are operated by more than one ministry. In addition to providing primary health care, ministries of health sometimes establish early childhood care and development services for this age group, as well as parenting programmes. Numerous local communities and civil-society organisations also offer formal or nonformal early childhood preschool-type services and, in fact, are the main provider of services in some contexts.

The education ministry (or another designated ministry) has the following responsibilities for the well-being of children aged 3 to 6:

- Establish, with other key stakeholders, a national philosophy of early childhood care and development under which the tone, structure, and parameters for child growth, support, and development are enumerated.
- Set programme quality standards for public, private, and civil-society early childhood services.
- Conduct pre- and in-service training and set procedures and policies that allow non-state training institutions to offer recognised training and professional development for those working in early childhood settings.
- Work to ensure smooth transitions from nonformal/informal to formal types of provision and to improve linkages between all types of early childhood settings for 3- to 6-year-olds, services for younger children, and the primary school system.
- Provide information using a wide range of media for parents, caregivers, providers, and professionals about all aspects of quality early childhood services.

Government designated ministries also guide and monitor parenting programmes and community-based

early childhood programmes. Strong intersectoral and interagency/stakeholder coordination is critical among the ministries of education, health, and social welfare and their civil-society partners.

### HOW should effective early childhood systems for 3- to 6-year-olds be developed?

Developing relevant and cost-efficient early childhood systems requires a comprehensive approach and the regular involvement of the diverse stakeholders concerned with young children (government, civil society, and especially families). It includes the following steps:

1. Understand what is happening across the country for children. If needed, conduct a national situation analysis concerning the status and condition of children aged 3 to 6.
  - Pay particular attention to those children, areas, or communities who historically have not had access to formal education at the primary level (and probably other necessary basic health and social services).
  - Include all types of informal, nonformal, and formal organised early childhood settings as well as related support services for children and families (e.g., parenting programmes, mobile libraries, child-to-child efforts, etc.) operated by civil society, communities, government, and the private sector.
  - Examine policies across sectors for this age group in terms of their attention to children's holistic development rather than solely focusing on the "3 Rs" of more formal primary education. This should include the use of mother tongue and alignment with the local cultures and contexts within these early childhood settings.
2. Promote partnerships, networks, and regular dialogue and sharing across levels and types of stakeholders to achieve increasing synergy of services and identify promising services that can go to scale and/or be adapted for other contexts.
3. Strengthen, maximise, and increase resources (financial but also human and other material resources) for a range of relevant services and supports suitable for the diverse needs of communities, children, and parents across the country.
4. Establish participatory monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure service quality and accountability (with emphasis on accountability to children and their families) and to support the development of appropriate standards, national indicators, measures, and targets.
5. Increase alignment, collaboration, and transitions for children (and their families) reaching downwards to the under-threes and upwards to early primary. ■

## CORNERSTONE 3: Make schools ready for children

- Ensure a welcoming, appreciative, and inclusive environment which facilitates the child's transition from the family or preschool environment and where every child feels safe and secure.
- Train and appoint capable teachers to lower primary grades who understand the development needs and learning styles of young children.
- Ensure smaller class sizes and a manageable teacher-child ratio in the early years of primary school.



Schools must be ready for all children – those who have participated in early childhood programmes and are “ready” for school, and those who have not.

### For children aged 6 to 8:

- Address the crisis in early primary education now.
- Give more attention and resources to early primary education.
- Pay special attention to the first year, when most children repeat or drop out.

WHY focus more on the early years of primary education?

- In 2008 64% of young children in developing countries had no access to early childhood programmes – 86% in sub-Saharan Africa.
- The most marginalised, disadvantaged children are the least likely to have access to early childhood programmes. When these children start school, the education system fails them most.
- The vast majority of children who do not complete primary school drop out in the first year or two; many more repeat. In some countries, half of the pupils repeat or drop out of the first year. Many more continue in school but end up in persistent patterns of underachievement and leave school unable to read fluently, calculate, or solve problems.
- This makes it all the more urgent to ensure that the entry of young children into primary school is an easy one and that the overall quality of the first years of their education is improved – drawing upon the substantial

knowledge and experience of how best to support young children's learning and development.

The real crisis in education is in early primary – yet it receives almost no attention. By the time more money and resources are put into the later years of school, it is too late for the many who have already dropped out of school altogether!

Though the international definition of early years covers 0–8, the early childhood field largely ignores 6- to 8-year-olds, leaving responsibility for them to the formal education system. Completion of primary education is the core milestone of Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), but the focus on completion to the end of the cycle has distracted attention from the heart of the problem – the fact that it is during the first year or two of school that the vast majority of children drop out. Systemic failures are most acute within early primary. But most resources and attention – including teachers (who are usually more qualified in the upper grades than in the lower), better textbooks and other materials, longer school hours, and extra instruction for examination subjects – are focused on the last years of primary school.

The best example is early literacy. Reading is fundamental to a student's progress through the formal education process, and if children are not reading fluently by the end of the third year of primary, they probably never will. Yet little attention has been given to ensuring that all children become successful readers, including those who join school

with no reading skills or have a mother tongue different from the language of instruction.

Good quality early primary education improves the efficiency of the schooling system and saves money by improving achievement and reducing repetition and drop-out. It dramatically improves the chances of meeting the targets of EFA and the MDGs. The return on investment is magnified when quality early primary schooling is combined with early childhood services prior to children entering school. Children who drop out of school are less likely to lead economically productive lives, earn adequate incomes, or contribute fully to their families, communities, and society. Improving early primary education contributes significantly to addressing entrenched cycles of poverty and exclusion.

### **WHAT results need to be achieved to improve the early years of primary school?**

It is crucial to give greater priority to early primary education as a key component of education reform and the ongoing improvement of schools. This means, first, that primary schools must be available and free of cost. But it also implies a radical change of perspective in education sector planning. For example, large-scale school improvement programmes need to be reoriented to ensure a more supportive environment and more systematic and appropriate learning opportunities for children in the early grades. This reorientation requires shifts in perspectives at all levels, from teachers' professional development, to school management of human and financial resources, through to the priorities of ministry officials and international donors. Such a change of thinking must be embedded in poverty reduction strategies, EFA plans and sectoral strategies, MDG programmes, Fast Track Initiative proposals, and so on.

The most powerful determinant of education success is what actually goes on within classrooms: the way teachers ensure that children learn. Thus, critical components of quality early primary schooling include:

- Activities to sensitise preschool children and their parents to the nature and content of the primary school.
- Active, child-centred learning combined with structured and systematic support for reading and writing, so that ALL children become fluently literate.
- Use of the child's home language for teaching basic concepts and initial literacy, with mother-tongue-based bilingual classes when home and school languages are different.
- Culturally relevant texts in the children's mother tongue and low- or no-cost learning materials to aid in the establishment of basic concepts.
- Attention to children's health, hygiene, and nutrition through linkages with appropriate services and incorporation of health education within the curriculum.

### **WHO is responsible for improvement in primary school?**

Ministries of education have the primary responsibility, setting policy and establishing and monitoring standards. To ensure a smooth transition into early primary education, close collaboration is required between ministries of education and organisations focused on early childhood development.

International donors and NGOs also have a responsibility to give proper attention to grade-disaggregated data (e.g., highlighting high drop-out and repetition rates in the early years) and draw the only possible conclusion: priority must be given to early primary education if the EFA goals and MDGs are to be achieved and children's rights translated into reality. Such organisations have a responsibility to take the initiative to forge links with ministries of education and the school system to ensure a smooth transition to primary school.

### **HOW to improve the early years of primary school?**

Improving the first years of primary education, to the benefit of children aged 6 to 8, requires a major rebalancing of current priorities and programmes. A comprehensive set of reforms and strategies must be put in place, including the following actions:

- Reform the professional development of teachers of the early grades, including early identification of teacher candidates interested in the early years, coursework focused on young child development and learning, and the retooling of teacher educators toward a focus on the early years.
- Assign experienced and capable specialist teachers to the early years and provide them higher status, improving their morale and removing any disparities in pay with teachers of upper primary and in the allocation of class resources.
- Provide appropriate curricula and health services for young children and encourage parental involvement in their education.
- Ensure that teachers of the early years have the requisite knowledge and practical skills (if necessary, in the learners' mother tongue) to enable all children to establish strong literacy skills.
- Provide support for teachers, where needed, from specialists trained in remediation. ■



## CORNERSTONE 4: Ensure the development of policies on early childhood

- Develop, implement, and evaluate EC policies and action plans in the context of a national vision and strategies for young children, expanded investment in their development, and stronger intersectoral coordination.
- Guarantee adequate resources and multisectoral coordination by ensuring that early childhood is integral to national development policies and macroeconomic planning and budgeting.
- Address early childhood, across sectors, in all national and subnational policies and plans.
- Invest now in EC policies and programmes – and therefore in the development of young children – which will bring large future returns to individuals, families, communities, and nations.

Comprehensive, integrated early childhood development policies promote the development of young children, their families, their communities, and their nations.

Over half the world's nations have developed – or are developing – national early childhood policies or policy frameworks.

The most effective policies are evidence-based, multisectoral, comprehensive, integrated, and developed through the widest possible consultation of stakeholders.

### WHY should nations develop early childhood policies?

From a rights-based perspective, nations should ensure that their policies uphold the rights of their youngest children. From an economic perspective, the development of early childhood policies and the provision of early childhood services significantly lower later costs for education, health, nutrition, welfare, and justice systems. From a social development perspective, integrated and comprehensive early childhood services create a convergent, common vision and language across sectors and achieve a multiplier effect for enhancing child development, attaining education for all, reducing poverty, and increasing national productivity. From a social policy perspective, well-prepared EC policies create organisational frameworks and strategies appropriate for complex situations and make planning for early childhood development programmes easier, as they promote coordination among key stakeholders and establish systems of standards and quality assurance.

### WHAT results need to be achieved in EC policies or policy frameworks?

- A situation analysis to assess: (1) EC needs; (2) existing institutional, human, financial, and training resources; and (3) current policies and the policy context. Baseline data from such a situation analysis can help to form the basis of an EC management information system.
- A national EC vision, goals, and objectives, with policies and strategies for each main objective.

- Under each strategy, priority programmes or services for the following subgroups: prenatal to age 3; 3 to 6; and 6 to 8; with special attention to vulnerable children.
- Policy monitoring, evaluation, and research systems with indicators, measures, and targets.
- An adequate EC governance structure for implementing, coordinating, and evaluating the results of the EC policy.
- The provision of programme standards, EC curricula and materials, supportive media and methods, and pre- and in-service training systems for professionals, paraprofessionals, and volunteers.
- A policy advocacy, social communications, and social mobilisation plan.
- An investment and financial plan that includes cost projections and simulations to maximise the use of current resources and identify new ones.
- National leadership to promote partnerships and ongoing dialogue, coordination, and commitment among representatives of government, civil society, the private sector, and international development partners to support EC policies.

### **WHO is responsible for early childhood policy planning?**

Most nations that develop EC policies or policy frameworks involve the following core sectors: education, health, nutrition, sanitation, social welfare or protection, and justice. Frequently they also include ministries of planning, finance, gender, national solidarity, and urban and rural development. Some nations have taken an intersectoral and integrated approach to EC policy planning. Active participants should include representatives of civil-society and private-sector institutions such as universities; nongovernmental, faith-based, and cultural organisations; professional associations; ethnic and linguistic groups; and parent and community groups.

Responsibility for EC policy planning varies from country to country due to differing institutional traditions and political realities, ministerial mandates, fiscal considerations, and sectoral arrangements regarding EC leadership and accountability. National ministries usually lead EC policy planning. In the best of cases, the government establishes a high-level, multisectoral National Early Childhood Committee that ensures wide-ranging participation in EC policy planning. Often this committee becomes a national EC council that guides annual planning activities, policy implementation, coordination, monitoring, evaluation, and follow-up. EC policies should also designate a lead EC institution or agency to coordinate implementation of the national policy.

### **HOW can nations develop early childhood policies?**

To be effective, EC policies, policy frameworks, and action plans should be developed in a fully participatory manner to enable citizens and decision makers at all levels to take ownership of policies and strategies. During community, provincial, district, and national consultations, people become aware of the compelling needs of vulnerable children and parents and of the importance of an integrated and comprehensive approach to early childhood. They become motivated, develop consensus, build their commitment to policy implementation, and establish partnerships. They begin to work in concert to promote the goals and strategies of the EC policy. Participatory policy-planning processes usually require a long period of intensive work and include the establishment of a national early childhood council; a situation analysis of EC; multilevel consultations; the drafting of an EC policy, EC strategic plan, and annual action plans; and their final adoption and implementation.

Valid evidence to support policy content is essential. The evidence for formulating EC policies may include academic research, program monitoring and evaluation results, situation analyses, statistical data, and systematically documented information from development agencies. The evidence on ECD is expanding rapidly, providing critical information to improve the lives and well-being of young children and inform the goals, objectives, strategies, directives, tools, and indicators of EC policies.

Nations whose policies for education, health, nutrition, sanitation, and protection lack adequate coverage of EC – or that have major gaps in services for parents and for children from conception to age 8 – should place priority on preparing comprehensive early childhood policies. Countries that already have a complete set of multisectoral and sectoral policies for education, health, nutrition, sanitation, and protection – but lack a strong national EC system that ensures that all young children, and especially vulnerable children, will develop well – should develop EC policy frameworks that reinforce existing policies, harmonise conflicting policies, fill policy gaps, and provide a system of EC governance and accountability for essential EC services.

### **All nations should:**

- Develop national EC strategic plans, and, as possible, annual or biennial action plans.
- Prepare EC legislation, codes, standards, guidelines, and regulations.
- Establish national targets and indicators for EC.
- Include EC in all relevant sectoral and multisectoral policies and plans. ■