

A response to the Global Movement for Children's
Rallying Call and Outcome Document 'A World Fit for Children'

Early childhood counts:

The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development (CG)*

In preparation for the UN Special Session on Children, a statement was created by UN Agencies, NGOs, donor organisations and youth to reaffirm commitments made in the CRC. This is presented in 'A World Fit for Children'. The document can be found at www.gmfc.org. As the statement was being developed, many in the ECD community did not feel that the official text adequately reflected the issues and concerns of those working with young children and their families. Thus, under the leadership of the CG, a set of additional proposals was produced. These are introduced in this article, and presented as additions to the relevant points in 'A World Fit for Children'.

Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) is all that the name implies and more: it comprises all the essential supports a young child needs to survive and thrive in life, as well as the supports a family and community need to promote children's healthy development. This includes integrating health, nutrition, and intellectual stimulation, providing the opportunities for exploration and active learning, as well as providing the social and emotional care and nurturing children need in order to realise their human potential and to play an active

role in their families and later in their communities. This holistic view of children's well-being, while by no means new, has been validated and encouraged by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It has only recently been understood that the basic need for food, healthcare and protection are not just needs but rights (implying duties and obligations) and that, in addition, the rights to affection, interaction, security, stimulation and opportunities for learning have been accepted as being just as fundamental. Children's rights are about the obligations of all adults to

protect the best interests of children, and to create the conditions under which they can develop and thrive.

Research suggests that significant and critical brain development and development of intelligence occur before the age of seven. Moreover, during the first two years of life, most of the growth of brain cells occurs, accompanied by the structuring of neural connections in the brain. This process is influenced by a child's nutritional and health status and also by the kind of interaction a child develops

with people and objects in the environment. It is highly dependent upon adequate nutrition, stimulation, and care. During these first years, the key brain pathways for lifelong capabilities are established (or not). Therefore, what happens to a child, and the opportunities provided to a child in the first years are crucial in determining lifelong outcomes. While there remains ongoing debate about the degree to which early disadvantages or trauma can be reversed later on, including targeted interventions that aim to ameliorate problems, it is clear that adequate

attention to the first months and years (including prenatally) of a child's life ensures the best possible start in life.

What is a World Fit for Children?

- It is a world where it is understood that development is continuous and that **learning begins at birth** for every child no matter what their circumstances or abilities.
- It is a world that recognises that the best possible start to life depends on the quality of earliest years of life and that this is the foundation on which future child development rests. Attention to early childhood care and the emotional, psycho-social, cognitive, spiritual development as well as to the health, survival and primary education needs of children is critical to providing the foundation for lifelong learning, and active and productive participation in society.
- It is therefore a world in which those involved in the care, development and education of children are supported in their responsibilities.

We are therefore particularly concerned with the lack of reference to ECCD in the

Global Movement for Children's Rallying Call and included as principles in the Outcome Document, 'A World Fit for Children'. As such we have added more prominent references to ECCD in Points 3, 7 and 10 of the Global Movement's Outcome Document. These are shown in bold below.

Point 3: Care for Every Child

All children must enjoy the highest attainable standard of health, especially through immunisation, good nutrition and diet, **holistic care (as critical to survival, growth and development), opportunities for play and stimulating activities**, clean water and adequate sanitation, proper housing and a safe and healthy environment.

The Global Movement Outcome Document, mentions care, but only as it relates exclusively to good health and survival. Care is critical to survival, growth and development. It needs to be understood that child development is not synonymous with child health, that survival and development are simultaneous and that development is not something that occurs after survival. At the same time that children struggle not to die, they



struggle to develop mentally, socially and emotionally. Child survival is part of ECCD, but it is not the whole picture. Once a child has survived, the question must be asked: what is the quality of life for that child, and how can that child realise her/his potential? Children who are helped to survive, and then are basically ignored by their society until they reach school age, frequently develop serious health and mental deficits that may persist and which will generally impede their

ability to participate productively in their society.

Our understanding of the two-way interactive relationship between psycho-social well-being and nutritional status and health has increased enormously in recent years. This synergism between different aspects of children's development means that holistic approaches are vital and need to address both children's physical and psycho-social well being.

Thailand: A chance for children project; Children from Bangkok slums are looked after by their grandmother photo: Srilada Ketwong, Foundation for Slum Child Care

In the absence of a more holistic human development/social justice framework, agencies often overemphasise the physical status of children, because, by its very nature, progress in the areas of children's psycho-social development is more complex to assess, whereas weight or completion of immunisation schedules are easier to measure. However, there is promising work in the development and use of ECCD indicators being undertaken by various groups including the CG (See *Coordinators' Notebook 24*, 2001) which explores the issue of measuring outcomes (or disabilities and delays) in supporting young children's overall development using a broader rights-based framework, giving due attention to all aspects of children's development and to what extent adults are meeting their obligations.

ECCD needs to be given its place – it needs to be stated as a goal in 'A World For Children' and reference should be made to programme activities that are not solely health related.

Point 7: Educate Every Child

All girls and boys must receive a compulsory, free primary education of good quality **and access to lifelong**

learning opportunities, beginning with the pre-primary years including non-formal ECCD activities in homes, communities, etc.

Point 7 of the Global Movement document asks us to educate all children. However, the explanatory statement that follows in the document emphasises obligatory and free education. That statement obviously pertains to formal schooling and to primary schooling. But it does not make sense if applied to 'education' and 'development' during the earliest years, most of which occur in and around a child's home and community. If we believe that learning begins at birth as indicated in the Jomtien and Dakar Declarations related to Education for All, it is important to realise that basic education begins then too. What is more **basic** than a solid foundation for all later learning?

In supporting the **youngest children**, it is especially important to recognise that ECCD programmes play a crucial role in establishing basic education for all. Support for young children does not merely refer to establishing preschools or infant classes. It refers to all the activities and interventions that address

the needs and rights of young children and help to strengthen the contexts in which they are embedded: the family, the community, and the physical, social, and economic environment.

Emphasis needs to be placed on developing and using approaches which recognise, respect and build on families' achievements and the very real constraints they face in supporting their children's overall development/learning and ensuring their rights. This is a very different way of thinking about education and basic educational strategies than is normally understood when discussing the needs of primary and secondary students.

A case in point: the only eccd goal and only two eccd-related strategies in the entire Outcome Document, 'A World Fit for Children' are included in the goal of 'Promoting Healthy Lives'. There is not one eccd-related goal or strategy under the broad goal of 'Providing Quality Education'. While one outcome of eccd programmes is that they can help children to be more successful in school, the early years are a crucial phase of human development and **not** merely preparation for later years.

While a focus on primary education is undoubtedly important, evidence strongly suggests that **eight is too late** to start paying attention to children's learning needs. By the time a child reaches school age, most key wiring, language abilities, physical capabilities and cognitive foundations have been set in place. It is also important for ECCD to be rooted in education because it is the psycho-social aspects of children's development which have the most significance for long-term social change and sustained realisation of children's rights. The psycho-social piece of ECCD is inevitably dealing with the sort of people we want our children to be and the kind of society we work towards – central to all of our work in education as a whole. The great strengths of quality ECCD programmes are their emphasis on developing children's understanding of their world and supporting the confidence, communication skills and flexibility they need to interact effectively with that world – dealing with real life changes, better able to obtain their rights and to be active, contributing members of society.

ECCD as a field has valuable experience to share, including effective strategies

for supporting young children in their development, supporting families, and what is of greatest interest to many primary level educators, helping to make schools readier for learners and learners readier for school. Furthermore, early childhood programmes can also benefit women and older siblings by freeing them from constant child care responsibility so they can learn and seek better employment and earnings.

Point 10: Fight poverty: invest in Children

Because children suffer the most from poverty, the fight against it must begin with them. This includes investing in social services that benefit the poorest children and their families, such as basic health care, **early childhood programmes** and primary education. At the same time, the well-being of children must be a priority objective of debt relief programmes, development assistance and government spending.

Point 10 lists only health care and primary education as solutions in the fight against poverty. By providing a 'fair start' to all children, it is possible to modify distressing socio-economic and gender-related inequities. The

unhealthy conditions and stress associated with poverty are accompanied by inequalities in early development and learning. These inequalities help to maintain or magnify existing economic and social inequalities. In a vicious cycle, children from families with few resources often fall quickly and progressively behind their more advantaged peers in their mental development and their readiness for school and life, and that gap is then increasingly difficult to close.

In summary, it is critical that we pay proper attention to young children's issues as well as those affecting older children. International trends (for example: migration; nuclear families; girls and women's heavy workloads; increasing school enrolments; HIV/AIDS; globalisation and dependence on cash economies that threaten women's decision-making control and insecurity; and so on) affect every aspect of young children's lives.

ECCD as central to a child rights strategy ensures a proactive approach in reducing exploitation (rather than just being reactive) by building families' and communities' sense of engagement with their children's rights from an early age,



Zimbabwe: Kushanda Project
photo: Paula Nimpuno

thus increasing the supportiveness of the environments in which children are growing up and reducing the number of children who need protection or rehabilitation projects. At the same time we are strengthening the abilities of children to have a say in their own futures.

It is essential that all who are involved in influencing the context in which children live, learn and grow – family members to international policy-makers – meet their obligations. This includes supporting the position of Early Childhood Care and

Development in the Global Movement for Children's Rallying Call and the final version of the Outcome Document 'A World Fit for Children' because Early Childhood Counts. ○

note

*The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development is a consortium of networks, donor agencies, private foundations, NGOs and its Secretariat, all working to improve and promote programming, policy-making and research related to young children and their families in the Majority World. Website: www.ecdgroup.com