

Implementation of Care for Child Development in Latin America and the Caribbean

ADVOCACY PAPER

Making nurturing care a reality for all young children

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Contents

Why invest in Early Childhood Development.....	5
Risks to Early Childhood Development remain high in the region.....	8
Increasing global and regional commitments for ECD and nurturing care actions	11
Emerging evidence, frameworks, and “tools” – making nurturing care a reality for all children.....	14
Regional experiences: CCD adaptations and five country rollout	18
Five-Country CCD Case Studies	21
Highlights of lessons learned from five Country Case Studies.....	23
Conclusion	28
Endnotes.....	31

Why invest in Early Childhood Development



“Investing in early childhood development is one of the best investments a country can make to boost economic growth, promote peaceful and sustainable societies, and eliminate extreme poverty and inequality. Equally important, investing in early childhood development is necessary to uphold the right of every child to survive and thrive”¹.

During pregnancy and throughout the first thousand days of life, the brain is especially sensitive to environmental influences. Scientific evidence shows that during the first years of life, “more than one million new neural connections are formed every second”², impacting on the most fundamental elements of the young child’s health, well-being, and future development. Young children who are exposed to adverse family and environmental conditions, combined with toxic situations —poverty, insecurity, malnutrition, gender inequality, disasters, conflict, and exclusion—, are at greater risk for not developing to their full human potential, especially if they do not experience nurturing care during their early years of life³.

Considering the most recent Early Childhood Development (ECD) evidence, greater country recognition is required to respond to the urgency of guaranteeing increased and sustainable investments in ECD. International studies reveal that timely interventions that seek to improve responsive parenting and caregiver practices, combined with significant improvement of ECD services (health, nutrition, protection, early intervention, and education, among others), achieve better results and cost less than future, remedial interventions that attempt to compensate for long-term, negative consequences related to health, education, earnings, and overall well-being⁴.

What to Consider



More than 80 per cent of a human brain is formed in the first three years.

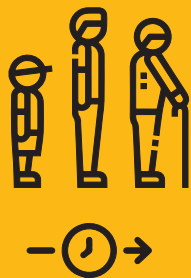
The human brain develops faster from conception to age 3 years than at any other time.



In this period, **parents, close family members, and other caregivers** are the closest to the young child and thus **the best providers of nurturing care.**



In order to provide caregivers with time and resources to provide nurturing care, **policies, services, and community supports need to be in place.**



Nurturing care **improves health, productivity and social cohesion throughout a lifetime**, and the benefits continue into the next generation.



Every additional US \$1 invested in ECD can yield a **return of between US \$ 6 and US \$ 17.**



Nurturing, protecting, and supporting caregivers and children is essential to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

A young child with dark hair is sitting on a wooden floor, focused on playing with a grey substance in a clear plastic container. The child is wearing a white tank top with a Mickey Mouse graphic and the text '100% WHITE'. The background is softly blurred, showing a dark-colored chair or stool. The lighting is warm and natural, highlighting the child's concentration.

**Risks to Early
Childhood
Development
remain high in
the region**

In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), problems of inequality, poverty and violence are common structural factors that persist, affecting the most vulnerable populations, especially women and children. Despite the achievements of the last two decades, these barriers continue to persist, exacerbated by: health and climate related emergencies, low economic growth in the region, increasing extreme poverty, social crises, and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to an analysis of outcomes and determinants of ECD for children 3 and 4 years old (in LAC), “approximately 3.6 million children 3-4 years old in the LAC region are lagging behind and are at risk for not reaching their full potential” and “Children from the poorest households and living in hard-to-reach communities are more likely to experience delays in early development”⁵.

As witnessed in the region, the abovementioned problems affect children most profoundly in their health, nutrition, learning opportunities, safety and protection, and long-term physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. In addition, young children with developmental delays and/or disabilities often face additional barriers and are at higher risk for facing neglect, discrimination, and exclusion. “The accumulation of adversities, beginning before conception and continuing throughout prenatal and early life, can disrupt brain development, attachment, and early learning”⁶.

Who are those children lagging behind in LAC?

Engagement and participation frequency of children in learning activities



Children of less educated mothers.



Children from less educated mothers (primary or less) are **1.7 times less likely to be on-track in the Literacy-Numeracy domain.**



Children living in poor households.



Most children with inadequate ECD live in the most impoverished households.



Children living in rural areas.



Children in rural areas are **1.8 times less likely to be on-track in the Literacy-Numeracy domain** than children in urban areas.



Only 1 out of 6 children 3-4 years old engages with their father in early learning activities.



Chronic malnutrition is 4 times higher in children from the poorest households.



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Increasing global and regional commitments for ECD and nurturing care actions

Prioritizing ECD investments is one of the most effective, long-term decisions and commitments a country can make to eradicate extreme poverty, boost shared prosperity, and promote peaceful and sustainable societies. *Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)* and *The Global Strategy for Women's, Children's, and Adolescents' Health (2016-2030)* have proposed goals for 2030 to advance in actions that end climate related emergencies, extreme poverty, malnutrition, and inequality. In addition, both have embraced young children's development, seeing it as central to the transformation that the world seeks to achieve by 2030. One of their shared targets is to "ensure that all girls and boys have equal access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education (...)" (SDG target 4.2)^{7, 8}. An increasing number of regional countries have demonstrated their growing commitment to ECD, as reflected in the expanded development of national ECD policies, increased investments, and design of multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms.

As seen globally, "despite substantial progress in early childhood development research, programmes, and national policies since 2000, services are of varying quality with uncoordinated and inequitable access, especially for children younger than 3 years"⁹. Through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), efforts are required to ensure that young children not only survive but thrive.

Key messages from The Lancet Series



The burden and **cost of inaction is high.**



Young children need **nurturing care from the start.**



We must deliver multisectoral interventions, with the **health sector as a starting point to reach other sectors involved with the youngest children.**



We must **strengthen government leadership** to scale up what works.

**Emerging evidence, frameworks,
and “tools” – making nurturing
care a reality for all children**



Over the past decade, significant advances have been made on global, regional, and country levels to strengthen the foundation for more integrated, rights based and sustainable ECD country efforts, with multi-sector involvement. The 2016 The Lancet ECD Series highlights early childhood development at a critical and opportune time when global commitment is increasing, as expressed in the SDGs, and demonstrated by LAC regional and country ECD actions. This third The Lancet Series presents the most recent scientific evidence for related interventions. This and past The Lancet Series (2007, 2011) on early child development proposes proven pathways for implementation of early childhood development at scale. “Nurturing care” is emphasized, with a priority focus on young children below 3 years of age and their main caregivers; a life course perspective; and multi-sectoral interventions that improve early childhood development. The sequence of the following events has led to the emergence and development of the Care for Child Development (CCD) package, with positive results in the region.

- **Updated and relevant scientific evidence** on multiple aspects of early childhood development was presented and disseminated for advocacy, policy development and implementation, as seen in multiple LAC country level use of the 2016 **The Lancet ECD Series. – Advancing Early Childhood Development: from Science to Scale.**

In 2018, **World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, World Bank Group, Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN), and Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health (PMNHC)** combined with other key partners, developed and “placed into action” the **Nurturing Care Framework for Early Childhood Development**, focusing on helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential.

The Nurturing Care Framework (NCF) is based on the most recent ECD evidence and provides a roadmap to achieve ECD related goals of the SDGs and of *the Global Strategy for Women’s, Children’s, and Adolescent Health (2016-2030)*. The framework promotes “five interrelated and indivisible components: good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning.”¹⁰ The NCF promotes and provides a holistic vision for early childhood care and learning as a foundation for advancing the right of all young children to develop to their full potential. The Framework calls for intersectoral approaches that prepare and support front line workers from all key sectors to assist and enhance caregivers’ capacities to provide responsive care and early learning opportunities for young children, especially the most vulnerable¹¹.

- Existing global and country level approaches, initiatives and programmes have been identified, documented, shared, and supported for rollout and expanded, to advance concrete results for young children and their families –advancing towards making nurturing care a reality for all children. One such example is the **Care for Child Development (CCD)** approach which has been

identified as a particularly successful parent support programme, promoting nurturing care in low- and middle-income countries¹². Center and community-based multi-sector services providers, trained in CCD, learn to guide and support families by introducing play and communication activities that promote nurturing care that is sensitive and responsive to their young child's needs, in addition to providing a stimulating early learning environment.

One of the principles on which CCD is based on is that young children and their primary caregivers gain essential knowledge and skills, through play and sensitive and responsive communication with their main caregivers and other family members. For this reason, it is essential to support parents and other caregivers to encourage play, playful interactions, and exploration during the young child's daily routine, within home and community contexts¹³. In the LAC region, important results have been achieved to advance nurturing care in selected countries, through the combined use of the three mentioned elements.




**Regional experiences:
CCD adaptations and five
country rollout**

The implementation of CCD in LAC began in 2012 with a regional review process by 15 LAC and United Nations ECD experts from 11 countries, followed by a CCD adaptation process based on expert recommendations to adequately respond to regional challenges, priorities, and opportunities. The main adaptations identified included: the need to expand and coordinate the provision of intersectoral ECD services; the urgency to address the serious situation of home-based violence against young children; the importance of incorporating a gender approach in parenting including the promotion of the active participation of fathers, and the inclusion of family-based actions in support of young children with developmental delays and/or disabilities and their caregivers¹⁴.

As a result of this work, the updated LAC CCD resource pack included recommendations and tools to: i) expand its use in various services and settings, beyond just the health sector; ii) make explicit the incorporation of fathers, as well as other family members, in play and communication activities; iii) prevent violence against young children; iv) support mothers and fathers of young children with developmental delays and disabilities to develop and utilize sensitivity and responsiveness skills through play and communication activities; and v) redefine and value play and toys through strategies for families to use as part of their daily routine, including use of household items as appropriate “instruments” for exploration and play.

To date, CCD has been implemented in 11 LAC countries (Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Dominican Republic, various English-speaking, Caribbean countries, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru) with different stages of development, coverage, and multi-sector

involvement. One major advantage of the LAC CCD version has been the flexibility and adaptability of this approach which has allowed for a diverse range of implementation strategies to respond to each country context and challenges. This also included the often urgent need to respond to emerging humanitarian crises and emergencies, as often faced in the LAC region. Based on the significant CCD implementation experiences, it was felt that countries, decision-makers, and stake holders would benefit from the wealth of lessons learned accumulated, to support the further strengthening and expansion of CCD use in the region¹⁵.

A close-up photograph of a young child with dark hair, wearing a purple shirt with a pink ruffled collar, pouring water from a green plastic cup into an orange plastic cup. The child is looking down at the cups with a focused expression. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

Five-Country CCD Case Studies

The UNICEF LACRO Office, with the support of The LEGO® Foundation, prepared five country case studies – including Belize, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Paraguay, and Peru – with the aim to document and disseminate valuable lessons learned, for use by a wide range of key national decision makers, ECD technical professionals, and cooperation agency staff, involved in the design, field testing and implementation of policies, services and programmes aimed at advancing nurturing care, benefiting early childhood development and family support¹⁶.



CCD Case study:
The experience of
Belize



CCD Case study:
The experience of
Dominican Republic



CCD Case study:
The experience of
El Salvador



CCD Case study:
The experience of
Paraguay



CCD Case study:
The experience of
Peru



Highlights of lessons learned from five Country Case Studies

1. CCD: A holistic approach in Early Childhood Development service delivery¹⁷

- **CCD encouraged and supported intersectoral work.** Through CCD socialization and training mechanisms, different sectors and actors that were used to working in silos, came together and identified strategies to deliver their services in a coordinated manner. This allowed to create a platform to develop a common framework, facilitating the delivery of integrated services.
- **CCD enriched and strengthened services and programmes.** The CCD training process, involving participants from various sectors, enabled the incorporation of CCD components as part of the diverse ECD services and programmes. As a result, services provided were strengthened with a comprehensive view of ECD and family involvement, along with the incorporation of learning through play and communication, as central elements for early childhood development.

“We have evolved from each sector doing its part to an idea where everyone understands comprehensive early childhood care from a unified perspective and a little more work is being carried out on the issue of articulation.Now, our work will follow development standards. Health and education sectors are now speaking the same language regarding the topic of child development”*

– Ministry of Education officer, El Salvador

***Source:** United Nations Children’s Fund, *Care for Child Development. Case Study: The experience of El Salvador*, UNICEF, Panama City, 2021.

2. CCD provided families with concrete tools for nurturing care.

- **CCD positioned play and communication as essential activities for early child development.** CCD has allowed to highlight the importance of play and communication as essential activities to promote early childhood development and to strengthen stronger emotional ties between the caregiver and their children.
- **CCD strengthened the leading role of families and promoted the active incorporation of fathers.** CCD trained personnel shifted from directly working with young children, to working with caregivers in a supporting and guiding role, by strengthening parents' and caregivers' skill, encouraging direct playful interaction with their young children. At the same time emphasis was placed on encouraging male's participation and engagement with the child. This change provides an important opportunity for main caregivers to develop nurturing care skills.

3. CCD increased the motivation of front-line service providers and has transformed their practices

- **CCD changed the way staff relate to families.** Service providers established relationships with families based on sensitive, respectful, and caring support and guidance. Through the inclusion of CCD training activities in early intervention or rehabilitation services, important advances were made to prepare service providers with skills to support families with young

children with developmental delays or disabilities, recognizing that all young children can learn and have a right to play. Furthermore, service providers modified their workspaces to ensure the environment is child friendly with emphasis on early stimulation and play and developed support materials for caregivers and families.

- **CCD inspired and motivated staff working with families.** Frontline workers reported being more motivated and accomplished with their work, after the adoption of the CCD approach and experiencing firsthand its effects on families and children. Incorporation of CCD has not been seen as an additional burden and has been understood as a positive transformation of their tasks and interventions. Frontline workers reported they have observed concrete changes in families: e.g., the development of a loving bond between caregiver and their children through eye contact, or how play and communication activities were incorporated into everyday caregiver-child interactions, generating enjoyment in both young children and parents, especially when they recognized positive changes in their interactions.

4. CCD is a positive contribution in contexts of emergencies or humanitarian crises

- **CCD provides loving and sensitive care and learning opportunities in responding to health emergencies.** One of the reasons for the significant momentum that CCD gained in the region was due to its crucial role as part of the Zika virus health emergency response and

the resulting increase in newborns born with congenital Zika syndrome. The integration of the CCD approach in health, and early childhood intervention services, targeting children with developmental disabilities, allowed the strengthening of service providers' capacities and attitudes, enabling them to provide adequate support to families and caregivers. The interventions focused on ensuring parents and guardians could provide their children with nurturing and protective environments. In several countries, CCD implementation promoted a wider agenda of family support, early child development and inclusion of young children in vulnerable situations, including those with developmental delays and/or disabilities.

- **CCD strengthened response to emergencies** Thanks to CCD multisectoral approach, it was possible to adapt it to each country's contexts and needs. In Belize, for example, the content was used to respond to a hurricane emergency, where temporary learning spaces were implemented, and children aged 0 to 3 were supported with play-based activities, key in the CCD approach. In other LAC contexts, CCD was used to strengthen frontline workers response to support migrant families.
- In the current COVID-19 emergency context, **countries have faced significant challenges to ensure continuity of CCD training and to provide sustained support for families and children.** Countries have adopted a variety of mechanisms, including adapting the training for online delivery, and the increased use of media and mobile phones to reach families. These proved to be viable mechanisms to reach and support families with appropriate guidance and play-based learning activities.



Conclusion

The CCD rollout and implementation experiences in LAC countries have generated a wealth of knowledge, lessons learned and multi-country capacity for short and long-term CCD utilization. These important initiatives have been strengthened through the provision of timely technical assistance and operational instruments by the UNICEF Regional Office (LACRO). As found through the recent documentation process, CCD's design, multisectoral and multi-staged approach proved critical to achieve country-level key results. Recent and relevant ECD evidence, along with the use and promotion of the global Nurturing Care Framework, supported the stimulation of national interests for ECD investment and strengthening of related policies. Advocacy efforts, combined with multi-sectoral CCD training, aided the process to secure country buy-in and to promote a unified understanding of the importance of CCD.

As seen globally, CCD has and is playing a key role in the operationalization of the NCF on a national level: fomenting sustainable actions at local level, strengthening parents and caregivers' abilities to play and communicate with young children and promoting children's socioemotional, physical, and cognitive development. In the future, further efforts are required to scale up proven country strategies, to continue to reach the most vulnerable children and families, and to strengthen sustainability of CCD actions, embedding them in countries' and regional efforts to ensure the implementation of all elements of the Nurturing Care Framework.

To learn more about CCD

CCD case studies in five countries: Reports with the experience of Belize, El Salvador, Paraguay, Peru, and Dominican Republic. These case studies highlight the main achievements, lessons learned, and opportunities for CCD to be implemented and scaled up.

Growing and learning through play web article is a synthesis of four key aspects of CCD implementation in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Introductory course in Care for Child Development (CCD): Course designed to enable participants to become familiar with the CCD approach, learn about CCD implementation processes in various LAC countries, and discover how this approach can help strengthen different services serving children and their caregivers.

Care for Child Development (CCD). Orientation materials: In this resource pack, you can find participant guides, cards to work with families, and outreach materials.

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