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Regional conference

Optimal early childhood development for every child

**Children cannot wait. They are growing now.
They need our support today.**

- UNICEF Montenegro Representative



Recognizing developmental risks, delays and disabilities in the first years of life and tackling them through early childhood intervention (ECI) is critical as it gives children a chance to develop to their full potential and to overcome developmental risks and delays or reduce the impact of developmental disabilities. Early childhood intervention can thus change a child's developmental path and improve outcomes for children, families and communities.

This was the key conclusion of the regional conference "Optimal Early Childhood Development for Every Child," which was organized in Podgorica, Montenegro on 9–10 November 2022, with the support of the Government of Montenegro, UNICEF and the European Union.

The objectives of the conference were:

1. To bring to the attention of key stakeholders (policy makers, practitioners, academia) the need to build national systems for contemporary early childhood intervention for children with developmental difficulties, in line with evidence-based practice, family-centred principles and international human rights standards.
2. To facilitate exchange of achievements, challenges and lessons learnt in providing contemporary evidence-based early childhood intervention services and strengthening ECI systems among policy makers and practitioners from countries in the Europe and Central Asia region.
3. To disseminate the findings of the national Situational Analysis on Early Childhood Intervention in Montenegro and generate a discussion on follow-up steps including the development of a national roadmap on early childhood intervention.

The conference gathered around 200 experts and representatives from relevant institutions from Montenegro and other European and Central Asian countries, and was organized within the regional programme titled “Mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on children and families in the Western Balkans and Turkey”; funded by the European Union.

Conference conclusions

Based on the plenary lectures, panel discussions showcasing countries’ experiences and small working groups, the following are the conclusions of the conference.

Early years provide a critical opportunity to support optimal child development

- The earliest years of a child’s life are a **critical, singular opportunity** to shape young lives and to lay the foundations for their health, wellbeing and future successes. This is the period when the child’s brain is most perceptive to learning new things. It is also the period when, thanks to the high plasticity of the brain, a child can completely or partially overcome developmental delays if supported in a timely and effective way in nurturing environments.
- It is estimated that about 15 per cent of children are experiencing developmental risks, delays or disabilities, and are in need of additional

developmental support. Early childhood intervention is a cost-effective intervention that provides high returns on investment in terms of improved outcomes of children, improved family wellbeing, as well as long-term financial and non-financial gains for entire societies.

- **Universal developmental monitoring** within primary health care is key for early detection and early childhood intervention. For early childhood intervention to start in a timely way, all children should benefit from universal developmental monitoring, which should identify the risks to optimal child development, as well as delays and disabilities, and enable prompt support for children and their families. Given the universal coverage with primary health care in Montenegro and throughout the region, primary healthcare centres seem to be best-positioned to ensure that developmental monitoring, using standardized monitoring tools, is part of routine health care provision. They have a great potential to identify every child and family in need of early intervention and facilitate provision of timely support through referral to community-based early childhood intervention services or to specialized health services that complement them. However, in order to fulfil this role, the level of primary health care needs to be strengthened. For instance, to enable universal developmental monitoring, primary healthcare centres may require policies mandating developmental monitoring, standardized tools, pre-service and in-service training of health workers, adequate organization of developmental counselling units, and quality data collection and management systems. Positive experiences from the region provide good directions on how these system changes can be implemented and fully institutionalized.

Contemporary, family-centred early childhood intervention is effective and evidence-based



- Every young child and family in need of additional support should have access to affordable, accessible and family-centred ECI services, provided in their proximity by interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary teams of professionals.
- Contemporary early childhood intervention builds on the existing evidence about how young children learn best, in natural environments, through routines and with adults they trust. That is why contemporary ECI puts the family at the centre while the role of a transdisciplinary team around the family is to help the family to build knowledge and skills, and find the time and energy to support the development and functioning of their children and the family as a whole. They should be provided in the natural environment of the child, including at home through home visits and in inclusive preschools, following the assessment of the child's and family members' needs and the creation of individualized family service plans. ECI services support children and families from birth through the transition to primary school, with a particular focus on the first three years of life.
- The use of ECI mobile teams could be expanded to help overcome social disparities related to service location and ethnic background.
- A process of transition from traditional approaches of support to children with disabilities to the contemporary model of ECI services represents a paradigm shift and requires professionals to endorse new methods of working with the family. Availability of training opportunities, exchange of experience and quality supervision are key in supporting this change in practice. Professionals need to be supported to develop the specific skills required for working effectively in partnership with the parents of young children with developmental delays and disabilities.
- Introduction of contemporary ECI services requires the building of **a national ECI system** that includes an overall ECI policy or a strategy, definition of the roles of all sectors at all levels (health, education, social welfare), eligibility criteria and standards of service provision and quality, sustainable financing, arrangements for continuous pre-service and in-service training of professionals and quality supervision and, finally, data collection and management systems that will enable oversight and learning.
- For all of the ECI system elements to fit into place, countries should develop a national **Roadmap** for early childhood intervention reform with concrete steps on how the system elements will be strengthened and the roles of key stakeholders defined.

- **The Situation Analysis of Early Childhood Intervention** is an excellent first step and a useful tool to start the process of introducing or strengthening ECI services, as it provides evidence on the current practices, needs and available resources in terms of physical and human capacities. The Situation Analysis provides a foundation for development of a national Roadmap that should also take into account the national values and culture, resources, political realities and economic conditions when building a pathway towards a national ECI model that adheres to the key principles of contemporary ECI practices.

- Building on the findings of the ECI Situation Analysis, the transition to a new ECI system can entail modelling of contemporary ECI in demonstration sites. It is important to select service providers in leading municipalities that are known for their acceptance and promotion of innovations.

Collaboration of all sectors and parents is key to success

- The transdisciplinary nature of ECI services requires close collaboration and coordination between the three key social ministries responsible for health, education and social welfare, and the regional and local authorities, so that all the available resources are employed to deliver a jointly defined vision of the national ECI model. An organizational structure for coordination should be established at the national level, including representatives of parents.

- Considering that parents and caregivers have the leading role in enhancing the development of their children, parents and parents' associations are key partners in development and implementation of ECI services, and should be involved in all the phases of ECI system building. Family-centred practices support families in attaining the goals they hold for their children and the other family members, and provide much-needed psychological support for parents and families. Special attention should be paid to involving fathers to empower them and promote sharing of responsibilities between caregivers.

Photos: Duško Miljanić

