

## **Early Childhood Development – What is it?**

*Early Childhood Development (ECD) is a holistic, integrated, inclusive approach to programming, research and policy for young children up to 6 years of age and requires a healthy, safe and nurturing environment that includes opportunities to support the emotional, social, physical, cognitive, and spiritual aspects of children within the context of their community that welcomes their participation and empowers them as a basis for their future.*

Pueblito's work in ECD encompasses the fields of health, nutrition, education, and also includes rights and protection as well as respect for partnership with families and communities recognizing their individual natures.

Experts from the field of neuroscience have succeeded in demonstrating that the first years of a child's life are critical for establishing the foundation for later development and learning that will ultimately see the child through to successful adulthood. More than three decades of brain research demonstrates that the brain is almost entirely developed by the time a child enters school.<sup>1</sup> Pre-eminent Canadian experts J. Fraser Mustard and the Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain, in their groundbreaking *Early Years Study*, have advanced our understanding of the implications of brain research by stressing the importance of critical periods on the "wiring" of the brain.<sup>2</sup> As the brain develops, the child's experiences influence the rate and kind of development that takes place. There are key windows of opportunity in which children require different kinds of stimulation to maximize the developmental stages of the brain. Parents and caregivers need to be educated about the importance of mother's prenatal health, proper nutrition, the importance of touching and physical affection, responsiveness to the child's physical needs, and engaging in play with the infant/child to stimulate learning and development because all these factors create the most favourable environment for optimal brain development.<sup>3</sup>

Play, a child's vehicle for learning, is a multi-faceted phenomenon which is enhanced in an environment that is responsive and rich in stimulation. Play has an important role in the development of language and numeracy. As the child explores objects, she discovers meanings and relationships between objects and people. Language is attached and new words and concepts are expanded on and clarified. Children begin to see the connections and make predictions. The key to optimal development during early childhood is adult intervention to facilitate a nurturing and stimulating environment that supports child development based on the child's evolving needs.

### ***ECD: A Strategic Investment in Humankind***

Investing in the early years of child development is an economic investment with tremendous long term pay offs for policy makers and political leaders; research links quality ECD programs to

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Young, "Early Child Development: A Stepping Stone to Success in School and Lifelong Learning", March 18, 2002, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Early Years Study. 1999. Final Report. Hon Margaret Norrie McCain and J.Fraser Mustard, co-chairs. April. Toronto: Children's Secretariat.

<sup>3</sup> Marie Goulet, Faculty, Centre for Early Childhood Development, George Brown College

continued education and academic success, gender equity is facilitated because of equal early learning opportunities, delayed and reduced reproduction rates for women who participated in ECD programs as children, higher wages as a result of better skills and education, and a reduced need for government spending on correctional services.<sup>4</sup> In short, ECD has the potential to pave the way for a more equitable and productive society. Studies of the cost-benefit ratios of investing in early childhood programs demonstrate impressive results, anywhere from two up to seven dollars return for one dollar invested;<sup>5</sup> research further shows that policies that seek to remedy deficits incurred in the early years (because of inadequate developmental stimulation and care), are much more costly than initial investments in the early years (Duncan and others 1998, Heckman 1999, Ramey and others 2000).<sup>6</sup> For the international cooperation community and the countries it serves, ECD is a powerful tool for sustainable development and a solid investment in humankind.

### ***Effective International Development through ECD***

International recognition of Early Childhood Development as an effective community development tool is relatively new. Traditionally conceived of by western society as either the care of young children for working parents, or preschool for the middle-upper classes, ECD breaks down some of the barriers faced by children and families living in poverty. ECD programs can provide quality care and stimulation for children by teaching parents and caregivers how to facilitate child development. Without this instruction to adults, the reality for many poor children is that they are often left unstimulated for long periods of time, have insufficient interactions with adults, suffer from malnutrition not just for lack of financial resources, but largely because adults don't have the necessary information about young children's needs. According to the *Early Years Study*, "negative experiences in the early years, including neglect and/or absence of appropriate stimulation, are likely to have decisive and sustained effects."<sup>7</sup> Mary Eming Young of the Human Development Network of the World Bank writes that the positive effect of ECD programs can change the developmental trajectory of children born into poverty.<sup>8</sup> More and more evidence shows that poor and disadvantaged children and families particularly benefit from early childhood interventions.<sup>9</sup> Thus ECD is a particularly effective tool to fight poverty and its implications in developing countries.

The international community is already aware that it must contribute more resources and work more effectively to meet the UN Millennium Development Goals. ECD has the power to address seven of the eight goals:

1. Investing in ECD is a long-term plan for *eradicating extreme poverty and hunger* by developing a better skilled and more resilient population.
2. Quality early childhood education improves the efficacy and cost efficiency of primary schooling by creating school readiness which leads to greater success and thus reduces grade repetition and drop out rates, an important step towards *universal primary education*.
3. Equal access for girls and boys to gender sensitive ECD programs contributes to a *gender equitable society*.

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<sup>4</sup> See the section "Why ECCD?" on the web site of the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development at [www.ecdgroup.com](http://www.ecdgroup.com) and the article "Invest in kids' taken literally" by Maja Beckstrom on [www.TwinCities.com](http://www.TwinCities.com)

<sup>5</sup> Studies listed on the World Bank web site section on ECD at [www.worldbank.com](http://www.worldbank.com)

<sup>6</sup> Mary Young, 2002 p. 13

<sup>7</sup> Early Years Study p. 5

<sup>8</sup> Mary Young, 2002 p.8

<sup>9</sup> Mary Young, 2002 p.12

4. ECD services that provide good prenatal care and follow-up complemented by immunization and health and nutrition programs for babies and infants can effectively *reduce child mortality*.
5. Comprehensive ECD services that include prenatal care and education *improve maternal health* and reduce maternal mortality.
6. HIV/AIDS affects young children too. By working with families ECD practitioners can help *combat HIV/AIDS* transmission to young children through education and care; integrated ECD programs can address the special needs of young children affected by HIV/AIDS and good health education and treatment programs help communities protect young children from HIV/AIDS and many types of disease.
7. ECD programs must be integrated with community development programs, especially environmental concerns, in order to *ensure environmental sustainability*, a future for the world's children.

The Education for All (EFA) initiative is a critical path to meeting the millennium goal of achieving universal primary education. Early Childhood Development is fundamental to meeting this goal which is also a right guaranteed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. At the Dakar meeting in April 2000, improving early childhood care and education was prioritized as one of the six comprehensive goals of EFA. The results of a study of 19 ECD programs in developing countries concluded that early education programs correlated highly with improved school readiness, probability of on-time enrolment in primary school, lower rates of grade repetition and dropout, and improved academic performance overall.<sup>10</sup> All of these results make a substantial impact on both the quality and provision of education. Again the investment arguments cannot be ignored: analysis of existing data suggests that well-targeted ECD programs in fact cost less – and produce more dramatic and lasting results – than education investments at any other level (van der Gaag and Tan 1998).<sup>11</sup>

Early Childhood Development further complements EFA goals since ECD is a means of eliminating gender disparity by providing fundamental early learning opportunities to girls and boys thereby giving both genders an equal start in life. Also quality early childhood education programs tend to provoke greater demand and attention to quality as children move up the ladder to primary education; therefore a good early childhood program helps improve all aspects of quality of education, another goal of EFA.

### ***HIV/AIDS, an Increasing Threat to Young Children in Latin America***

HIV/AIDS is growing everywhere, but in Latin America and the Caribbean the problem remains virtually unrecognized despite high prevalence rates. Honduras, where Pueblito plans to begin work in 2005, is the most heavily affected Central American country. In Honduras, the adult prevalence rate is 1.6% and 14,000 children have already been orphaned by the disease, staggering numbers for a country with a population of only 6.6 million people.<sup>12</sup> In the Caribbean, Pueblito is already working in the Dominican Republic, population 8.7 million people, and the prevalence rate is 2.5% which means 130,000 adults are living with the disease, and 33,000

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<sup>10</sup> Myers, Robert. 1995. *The Twelve Who Survive: Strengthening Programs of Early Childhood Development in the Third World*. Ypsilanti, Mich: High/Scope Press.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Young, 2002 p. 8

<sup>12</sup> Information on Honduras at [www.unaids.org](http://www.unaids.org)

children have been orphaned.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the region, mother to child transmission (MTCT) is increasing as more women are affected during their reproductive years and sadly, the gains made in recent years in maternal and child health are being reversed as the impact of HIV/AIDS grows unchecked.<sup>14</sup>

The challenges for young children affected by HIV/AIDS have not yet been addressed in Latin America, but experts at the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) identify the main risks to young children who live in affected families as follows:<sup>15</sup>

- Parents/primary caregivers with HIV/AIDS are frequently unable to respond to nurture their young children.
- Affected children suffer severe emotional distress becoming overly anxious and suffering night terrors, and becoming socially less reactive to the stress around them.
- Children's material needs are often unfulfilled because of the financial burden of treatment and/or loss of income generation ability by the parents.
- Where parents have died, night terrors persist and children may have to adapt to new primary caregivers.
- Stigma is high in Latin America and affected children suffer from discrimination.

Additionally, programs must consider the trauma for the children not just of being orphans, but also of being separated from their siblings. In many families, the caregivers who take on the responsibilities of raising the child may not be able to care for all of the siblings in one place and so many times HIV/AIDS further divides families already suffering losses.

Pueblito, as previously mentioned, is already working in affected communities in the Dominican Republic and is almost certain to enter into heavily affected communities in Honduras since the prevalence rate is so high. ECD interventions can provide an important support to children and families at risk. Pueblito, with its focus on inclusive programming, is able to provide its programs and services to nurture the development of all young children in a given community, and with even greater benefits to those at risk.

### ***Gender and ECD***

Gender equality, a cross-cutting theme of all CIDA programs, is also advanced through ECD programs. Social values are modeled and taught to children from birth onwards and so the kinds of experiences they have in early childhood have the power to raise truly equitable generations. By giving all young children the same complete start in life society takes a big step in ensuring future success at personal, social and academic levels, the impact of which can last a lifetime. Beyond the girls and boys benefiting from an equal start in life, both mothers and siblings, usually sisters, benefit in a variety of ways: women who can access low cost or free child care services have the potential to earn more; when children participate in center based programs, mothers can have breaks from child-rearing that allow them to balance competing responsibilities, and siblings are also freed up from child care duties releasing them from domestic child labour and enabling them to continue their own schooling. The ripple effect benefits women across multiple generations.

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<sup>13</sup> HIV/AIDS STI Unit, Pan American Health Organization, 2002 and [www.unaids.org](http://www.unaids.org)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Presentation by Dr. Rafael Manzin to the annual meeting of the Consultative Group on ECCD in Washington, May 20, 2003

Around the globe, responsibility for child rearing in the early years of life falls most often to women leading to women's domination of the child care and early education fields and usually also the organizations that coordinate those services. The provision of early childhood programs and services generates a simultaneous impact for children and families because while children are receiving essential stimulation and care, parents and primary caregivers in our programs are empowered through the education and support they receive. In addition where programs provide child care services the burden of competing responsibilities for women is lessened and women's time is potentially freed to allow participation in the workforce which is often an economic necessity.

Since sound early childhood programs recognize the family as the most important support a child has, parent involvement in programs is key to their success. Gender equality must also be addressed from the male caregivers' point of view: how can men (particularly father figures) participate fully in early childhood programs? The answer is complicated for two reasons: one is that in many communities in Latin America, like in many other cultures, men's bonding and caring for children is not always valued and may even be discouraged so men are often not engaged in care giving. Men may be seen by other men as less masculine if they engage in child rearing. The second obstacle is that women also often reject the notion of male involvement, so the same women who are overburdened by having sole responsibility for child care may also thwart attempts by men to become more active fathers and caregivers. Yet new interest has been ignited in the area of fatherhood highlighting research that demonstrates no biological difference between mother and father bonding with a child, nor with their abilities to care for a child, and studies underline the positive impact fathers have on child development.<sup>16</sup> Further, the Convention on the Rights of the Child reinforces the value of fatherhood by asserting the child's right to be cared for by both parents if possible (UNCRC Article 18). The result is a call to international agencies and governments to take fatherhood into account in program design for young children.

### ***Quality ECD, Realizing Every Child's Right to Life, Survival and Development***

The need for quality early childhood programs is universal and their provision is a fundamental right as the essential services provided by a quality integrated ECD program are guaranteed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In the developing world since the threats to child survival are multiplied and the chances of having quality care and education are reduced, young children are commonly denied their right to the best possible start in life. All countries in Latin America have signed and ratified the UNCRC and so nations must prioritize the provision of quality programs and services for all young children, regardless of race, gender, age, or special needs in order to meet their obligations and the fulfillment of children's fundamental rights. It is not sufficient for children to survive, they must be assured the best possible care and education so that they develop optimally as they grow and mature and fulfil their potential in this world and our future.

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<sup>16</sup> Data presented at the landmark International Fathers Summit held in England in March 2003. More information available from [www.fathersdirect.com](http://www.fathersdirect.com).