

Effective child-focused education and nurturing care interventions

WHAT ARE CHILD-FOCUSED EDUCATION AND NURTURING CARE INTERVENTIONS?

Child-focused education and nurturing care interventions provide learning support directly to the child. In line with the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED Level 0), the support is typically provided by either centre- or home-based Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services outside the child's family and includes an educative and caring component with an active child development element.

The 35 child-focused interventions in this review (of a total of 109 studies; see further details under background) occurred in 29 countries in five regions – the widest geographical spread of all intervention types under consideration. The most frequently represented countries were China (five studies) and Bangladesh (four studies) while three interventions occurred in Indonesia and Ethiopia.

The child-focused interventions targeted three groups, namely preschool for children in the one or two years before starting school (20 studies), programs for younger children and programs without an explicit educational focus (11 studies) and short-term interventions for disadvantaged children (4 studies).

Twenty-seven of the 35 interventions had positive effects on learning. The impact of these interventions – one of six types of interventions in the review – confirmed previous results showing the largest effects for child-focused interventions compared with other ECEC interventions (Rao et al., 2017).

KEY MESSAGES

- ▶ The goal of interventions in this category tends to be the reduction of disparities in access to ECEC services.
- ▶ Effects of interventions differ depending on children's starting age, duration (length of enrolment) and dosage (number of hours per week).
- ▶ Training of staff is a key factor for success.
- ▶ Community buy-in also contributes to effectiveness.
- ▶ Child-focused ECEC interventions differ in terms of setting, staffing, design, and scale, depending on the context in which they are implemented.
- ▶ Participation in child-focused ECEC interventions may offer a protective effect on learning in later years, even where the quality of primary schooling is low.
- ▶ This type of intervention may be most applicable where government or donor support for ECEC can meet the resourcing needs of centre-based programs.

What works and why?

Child-focused ECEC interventions differ considerably in terms of their duration, focus, settings, staffing, resourcing, pedagogies, design and scope. In general, programs delivered over a longer period of time, requiring more frequent child attendance, providing staff training and achieving community buy-in are more successful than other programs.

KEY FACTORS AT WORK

Duration

The community-based program, known as Hogares Comunitarios de Bienestar (HCB) in **Columbia** had positive and significant effects on children's cognitive development for those that participated in the HCB program over 16 months (Bernal & Fernández, 2013).

The 'summer pre-school' intervention was a 10-week program designed to increase the school readiness of **Turkish** children from disadvantaged and multilingual environments by supporting their cognitive and linguistic skills during the summer prior to the start of school (Bekman et al., 2012).

Focus on equity

In **Chile**, preschool participation showed effects for urban but not for rural children (Förster & Rojas-Barahona, 2014).

In **Ethiopia**, a lack of focus on the ECEC subsector is creating a huge divide between children of rich and poor as well as rural and urban areas as data suggest that only 25 percent of the preschool-aged children have the opportunity to attend mostly fee-charging preschools (Woldehanna, 2016).

Training of service providers

Children attending state preschools in **Cambodia**, with greater access to resources and higher levels of teacher training, outperformed those attending community preschools or home-based programs (Rao, Sun, Pearson, et al., 2012).

Community buy-in

In the **Solomon Islands**, local community members were involved in building the preschool and creating hand-made learning and play resources, generating a sense of ownership and connection (Lee-Hammond & McConney, 2017).

Why implement such programs?

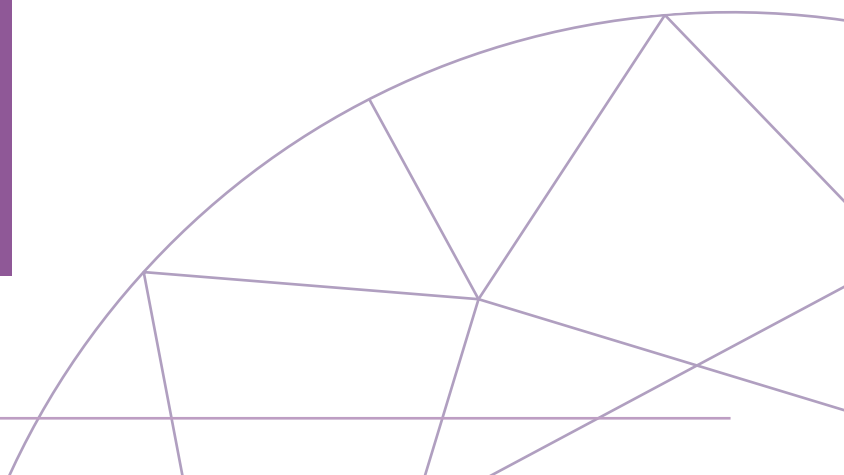
Investments in child-focused education and nurturing care are mainly motivated by structural factors at the country level. Analysis of the global expansion of ECEC service provision suggests that several country-level factors contribute to implementing child-focused ECEC programs, namely economic development, improvements in women's status and workforce participation and connections between a country and world society. Pressure on a school education system is another reason for implementation as ECEC programs help to ease demand for already overcrowded junior primary classrooms.

Findings from the scoping review suggest that provision of child-focused ECEC is often seen as a redistributive measure to combat the differences that arise from unequal ECEC participation of groups depending on wealth or location. Disparities may also exist along other demographic lines, such as children who do not speak a country's language of instruction at home and may therefore benefit from additional preparation for school.

Background

The global commitment to early learning has been expressed in the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals Agenda (SDG) (United Nations, 2016) and access to support for early learning is considered a human right for all children, whether provided by the family, community or institutional programs (UNESCO, 2013). Inadequate cognitive stimulation has been identified as one of the key psychosocial risk factors associated with poor child development – a factor that is modifiable, with the right interventions (Walker et al., 2007). Thus, insights into how early learning supports may be delivered effectively in various contexts are essential.

To this end, a scoping review of ECEC interventions in economically developing countries between 1998 and 2017, aimed at improving children's learning in the years before school, was conducted (Jackson et al., 2019). To gauge their effectiveness and to be included in the review, interventions had to have measured children's learning outcomes which, in line with the SDGs, could comprise cognitive, socio-emotional, language and motor development.



The 109 studies included in the review were grouped into six categories which aligned with a recent meta-analysis of ECEC interventions in low and middle income countries (Rao et al., 2017). The number of studies in each intervention category was as follows:

- ▶ Parent-focused interventions: 37 studies
- ▶ Child-focused education and nurturing care: 35 studies
- ▶ Quality: 20 studies
- ▶ Income supplementation: 8 studies
- ▶ Comparative: 5 studies
- ▶ Integrated interventions: 4 studies.

For a summary map of the evidence - using the Firefox browser - visit <https://datavis.acer.org/gem/early-childhood-interventions-gap-map>

This policy note summarises the findings from the scoping review regarding child-focused ECEC interventions to distil their key success factors for policy- and decision makers.

Implications

Program success for child-focused ECEC interventions is very context specific. Still, the following questions provide guidance for considering key factors prior to the implementation of ECEC interventions of this type.

- ▶ What are the options for child-focused ECEC programs in terms of settings? Centre-based? Home based? Co-located with a primary school?
- ▶ Who is the target audience of the program – both in terms of children and their parents/caregivers - and does it have a differentiated need?
- ▶ What is the program goal?
- ▶ Has a child-focused intervention been implemented in a similar culture/context and, if so, what are its specific success factors?
- ▶ Does the program involve in-service training of staff? If so, shorter more focused training tends to be more effective than other training.
- ▶ How can the community be involved?

FURTHER READING

Jackson, J., Ahmed, S. K., Carslake, T., & Lietz, P. (2019). *Improving young children's learning in economically developing countries: A scoping review*. Camberwell, Vic.: Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), Centre for Global Education Monitoring. https://research.acer.edu.au/monitoring_learning/38/

Rao, N., Sun, J., Chen, E. E., & Ip, P. (2017). Effectiveness of early childhood interventions in promoting cognitive development in developing countries: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Hong Kong Journal of Paediatrics*, 22(1), 14-25.

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