

## Early Child Development (ECD)

### Introduction

The early childhood years from conception through the first five years, especially 0-3 years, is a critical period which lays the foundation for the child's lifelong growth and development.

- **Growth** refers to specific physical changes and increase in size.
- **Development** refers to acquisition of skills to handle physical and mental functions.

Growth and development of the child is holistic, meaning that the child's health, nutrition, cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional needs are all important. Furthermore, growth and development are inter-related, meaning that physical growth effects brain development while social and emotional well being influences growth.

Understanding the early childhood development process enables caregivers to take necessary steps towards fulfilling the whole development of the child and ensuring the best possible start in life.



### What does Early Childhood Development Mean?

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is about the whole child and refers to the child's gradual acquisition of capacity and skills to handle increasingly complex physical movement, thoughts, language, feelings, emotions and interaction with others. There is no alternative but to take appropriate measures to support the full growth and development of children during their earliest years. This will ensure that there is a proper foundation for lifelong healthy physical growth and mental development.

### Process of mental development

Development of the child's future intelligence, personality and emotional, social and moral behaviour depends on what and how he/she learns during this period. Growth and development are systematic and continuous, they begin before birth and continue throughout life. This process is rapid in the early years (0-3) due to the intense development of the brain which controls these mental functions. Providing appropriate care and stimulation during the early years is vital for proper development.

### Facts about brain development

- The brain cells (neurons) are the basic elements which carry out its functions.
- While in the mother's womb, a baby's brain cells increase at an astonishing rate. Therefore a pregnant mother needs a balanced diet, a healthy physical condition, rest and mental peace in order to ensure the proper increase of brain cells of the baby.



- By the time a baby is born, he/she will have billions of brain cells. The number of brain cells does not increase after birth.
- Brain cells carry enormous potential but cannot function alone. Cells need to be connected with one another to be able to function.
- Eighty to ninety percent of the connection of brain cells occur during the first five years after birth, and the majority of these connections take place during the first 3 years.



UNICEF/FU002778/Gabriel Accascina

## "Use it or lose it"

Playing with, talking to and touching babies and very young children is very important because repeated interactions with and stimulation by the caregivers are vital for making connections of brain cells.

Through interactive care during the early years, connections which are made and are used repeatedly become permanent. By contrast a connection that is not used at all or not often is unlikely to survive. In this way, brain development is truly a "use it or lose it" process.

Lifelong development opportunities will be missed unless there is appropriate attention to the mental development needs of children during the early childhood period.

- The network formed by the connection of brain cells is crucial for the brain to function to its full potential.
- Activation of the brain cells is required for making connections with one another.
- Brain cells require stimulation for activation which happens through the child's interaction with others. Interactions that engage all the five senses can stimulate cells of all parts of the brain.
- Interactive care enables a child to have interactions with others. Stimulation through interactive care needs to be given to the child:
  - Everyday, repeatedly from birth to five years
  - In an age appropriate way
  - In multiple ways to give the child the opportunity to use his/her five senses
  - In a safe, secure and enabling environment, and
  - In an equal way both for the girl and boy child

## As caregiver in the child's development

As a care giver you can help build a strong foundation for the child's holistic development during these early years and ensure that the child has the best possible start in life and a greater hope of reaching their full potential.

## For more information please contact:

The United Nations Children's Fund  
3rd & 5th Floors, FDB Building  
360 Victoria Parade  
Suva, FIJI

Telephone: (679) 330 0439  
Fax: (679) 330 1667

Mailing Address:  
UNICEF Pacific  
Private Mail Bag  
Suva, FIJI

Email: [suva@unicef.org](mailto:suva@unicef.org)

[www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)

# Early Childhood Development

