

# LEARNING MUST GO ON:

## Recommendations for keeping children safe and learning, during and after the COVID-19 crisis

The scale of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education systems and on children and young people's learning and wellbeing is increasing daily. This truly is a global crisis which is preventing children and adolescents in every country, including those affected by conflict and displacement, from fulfilling their right to quality, safe and inclusive education. With Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), the global community committed to realising the right to quality education for all children and adolescents by 2030.

**The COVID-19 crisis puts this promise into jeopardy more than ever before.**

As of early April, most countries have introduced nation-wide early childhood care, school and university closures affecting nearly 91% of the world's student population – **more than 1.5 billion learners**.<sup>1</sup>

**Governments and donors, in collaboration with national and international partners must urgently ensure safe, inclusive access to emergency distance learning, with psychosocial support and social emotional learning components during and after the COVID-19 crisis.**<sup>2</sup> This can be done by supporting governments to plan and develop flexible national education systems, to give teachers and caregivers the right support to deliver distance learning and by maintaining and increasing international funding to

countries most in need. Additional support will be required in contexts already affected by conflict and displacement and environmental emergencies to help ensure the most vulnerable children are not left further behind.

Quality education can provide a sense of predictability and routine for children, and can help to provide a safe, protective and nurturing environment for them to learn and develop. In emergencies, education can be lifesaving and life sustaining. During the COVID-19 response, it can play a critical role in protecting public health, keeping children safe, ensuring continuity of learning and promoting mental health and psychosocial wellbeing.

This brief highlights some of the potential impacts of school closures on children, with a focus on the most marginalised, including those already living in crisis and conflict contexts. **It provides recommendations for governments and donors, together with partners, to ensure that safe, quality and inclusive learning reaches all children and that education systems are strengthened ready for the return to school.**

A comprehensive curation of free and accessible resources to support the response during the COVID-19 is available on [INEE's website](#).<sup>3</sup>

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Continue learning:** Even with schools closed, learning must continue. Governments, donors and partners must support schools and teachers to develop emergency distance learning materials and activities accessible to all children, particularly the most marginalised.
- **Protect wellbeing:** Physical, mental health and psychosocial support should be fully integrated into educational responses.
- **Address needs of marginalised children and youth:** School closures should not further exacerbate educational inequalities on the basis of gender, poverty, disability, ethnicity, religion, geographic location and more.
- **Support the specific needs of children and youth affected by conflict, humanitarian crises and forced displacement:** Quality education can play a critical role in mitigating the harmful impact of crises on children's wellbeing and supporting their recovery.
- **Support teachers and parents:** The response should consider the importance of protecting the wellbeing and economic security of teachers and parents.
- **Strengthen education systems in preparation for school reopening:** Government health authorities should decide when schools reopen and all educational authorities should adhere to the Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools.<sup>4</sup>
- **Maintain and increase financing:** Increased funding will be essential to support the continuation of learning for all children, including marginalised groups.

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# Schooling may stop, but learning must not: The impact of school closures on children & recommendations for action

As schooling stops, learning should not. Governments with the support of donors and other partners must meet the challenges now facing so many children, including the most marginalised.

## CONTINUING LEARNING

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The right to safe, quality, inclusive and equitable education does not end in times of emergency. The longer children and youth are unable to attend school, the more likely it is they will never return, especially girls and those from low-income households. With school closures, children and youth need alternative ways to grow, develop and learn.

In many countries including Argentina, China, France, Japan and Rwanda, Republic of Korea, Malawi and Somalia new distance education modalities are being introduced or scaled up.<sup>5</sup> While this is generally a positive step, it can bring increased pressure on teachers, who are themselves affected by the emergency and require support and training to facilitate remote learning. For some of the most vulnerable and marginalised children, across all countries, access to online learning or through television or radio may not be an option and other alternative distance learning materials to be used at home will be necessary.

The critical needs of young children and their parents and caregivers must be addressed as part of the response. Families with young children are finding themselves living in a new reality, without their normal access to learning, play and care, and for many their already limited access to learning is at even greater risk. Social emotional learning, play-based learning and support to parental engagement is critical for the youngest learners during this time of adversity.<sup>6</sup>

As global and national attention is turned to meeting the learning needs of children out of school because of COVID-19, strategies must be expanded to include children and youth who were already out of school as a result of poverty, gender, disability, forced displacement and those affected by conflict and existing humanitarian crises.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

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- Governments, donors, partners and community members must support educators to develop distance learning materials and activities that follow the [Principles for Digital Development](#). These can utilise existing tools and practices to provide creative means of learning, during and after the crisis. All emergency distance education should respect the rights of the child and meet the [INEE Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies](#).<sup>7</sup> These must reach every child, and can include: take-home materials, Interactive Radio Instruction, educational television programming for all ages, web-based/ online, SMS/mobile learning, resources for parents (recognising that parents alone cannot fill the gap), and resources for peer-to-peer learning.
- Governments and their partners should ensure community members can participate safely, without discrimination in the analysis, design and implementation of new distance learning responses.
- Ministries of Education, partners and donors should plan for examinations missed due to the crisis or find an alternative method of certification and progression.
- Early Childhood Development activities and materials should be promoted through these channels and programmes to ensure that the youngest children continue to develop and learn through play, based on the recommendations in the Nurturing Care Framework.<sup>8</sup>



Jenaica, 4, (pink headscarf), and her family read together at home, in Mindanao, Philippines. © SavetheChildren /Hannah Adcock

## PROTECTING WELLBEING

Humanitarian crises of any type or length can profoundly impact the well-being of children and youth, can disturb family and community cohesion, and create feelings of isolation, uncertainty, fear, anger, loss, and sadness. School closure and extended periods of self-isolation at home may negatively impact the mental health and well-being of children and youth, including by increasing their feelings of frustration and confusion. For some children it may increase the risk of exposure to child labour, violence and exploitation.

Thousands of children and young people globally have lost or will lose parents, caregivers, family and friends as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, this will bring enormous emotional distress. This should inform a package of support measures that can complement continued learning and proper mechanisms to assist children who are at increased risk of homelessness, neglect and malnutrition.

Following the outbreak of Ebola in 2014-2016 in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, agencies provided essential psychosocial support to children to help them recover from their experiences, referring children for further assistance where necessary, and provided protection and support to children who lost their caregivers. Similar support must be provided now.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Governments should adhere to the [Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools](#). Schools and other learning facilities should not be used as temporary health facilities, to avoid the risk of contamination and delayed return to school.
- Governments, donors and partners, should provide alternative forms of distance education which include psychosocial support to protect child and youth wellbeing and mitigate the impacts of trauma during - and after - the crisis.
- Social and emotional learning activities should be integrated into the curricula for online and other forms of alternative distance education, whenever possible.
- Educators are advised to consistently implement practical, good-quality psychosocial interventions, as outlined in the INEE background paper on psychosocial wellbeing and social and emotional learning in emergencies.<sup>9</sup>

## IMPACT ON MARGINALISED CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The impact of school closures extends beyond disruption to education and carries multiple, secondary risks to marginalised children and children from low-income households. These children and youth rely on schools to access other services such as school meals, child protection services, specialist support for children with disabilities and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). For example, in the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh, the closure of temporary learning centres not only means children are not learning, but many will not be receiving critical daily healthy meals. Some school systems have set up takeaway meals; others are advocating for cash transfers or voucher systems that would allow families to purchase food normally provided by schools.

Across all countries, the poorest families with adults who are unemployed or in unstable employment may see their incomes further diminish. This increases the risk of children being forced to work to contribute to the household budget and preventing them from ongoing learning during the crisis. Following the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, boys reported being involved in mining and petty trading, whilst girls reported being involved in collecting firewood for sale.<sup>10</sup>

Some countries are already addressing equity in access to ICT-based learning in the COVID-19 crisis. China is offering mobile data packages and telecommunications subsidies for students. In France, efforts are being made to lend devices to the 5% of learners who do not have access to the internet or computers.<sup>9</sup>

Specific policy and resources will be required to support the most vulnerable and marginalised children, across all contexts. In low-resource, fragile or conflict-affected countries, increased flexible investment from donors for the most marginalised children should be prioritised.



Solar-powered radios can be distributed to households. © SavetheChildren

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- School closures should not further exacerbate educational inequalities on the basis of gender, poverty, disability, ethnicity, religion, geographic location and more. COVID-19 policies and interventions should be equitable and address the different needs and risks faced by these vulnerable children and youth.
- Measures and additional funding should be put in place to support the most marginalised children and youth to access alternative forms of education. This could include cash transfers, provision of additional food, access to free health care.
- Governments, donors and partners must prioritise access to inclusive distance learning for these groups, targeting investments, and adapting curriculum and/or delivery modes to meet their needs.
- All actors supporting alternative means of education during the COVID-19 crisis should include child protection considerations in the development and roll-out of those learning tools, with particular attention to the most vulnerable children and youth. These should meet the Child Protection Minimum Standards.



Syrian refugee children studying at home in Jordan. © UNICEF/UNI304422/Matas

## CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFECTED BY HUMANITARIAN CRISES

More than 75 million children across the world's crisis and conflict-affected countries already urgently required support to access quality education. Millions of forcibly displaced people are living in overcrowded, under-resourced refugee and internal displacement sites with poor hygiene and sanitation facilities, and limited access to learning opportunities.

Outbreaks of COVID-19 in humanitarian settings including in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Kenya, Syria and Uganda, could be catastrophic and require specific attention. It is important that governments, supported by donors where necessary, allow the equal distribution of healthcare and education services for refugees and internally displaced people and ensure that the education response addresses the needs of these children through accessible distance learning in the appropriate language of instruction.

Quality education plays a critical role in mitigating the harmful impact of conflict, reducing the risk of violations such as sexual violence and recruitment into armed forces or armed groups. Finding alternative means to protect and support the most vulnerable children and youth is an urgent priority.

The closure of schools as a result of COVID-19 means that vacant schools are at risk of being used by a range of non-education actors. This may include the use and/or occupation of schools by non-state armed groups and the military, increasing the risk of armed attack. This is a particular danger as militaries are mobilised in the medical response, for example to build field hospitals. COVID-19 may also lead

to an intensification in conflicts, with the risk of exacerbating existing humanitarian situations and increasing the incidents of attacks on schools. The resulting damage to school infrastructure may prevent schools from safely reopening and increase the amount of time children are out of school.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Governments and donors should target investment and response strategies to support the protection, wellbeing and access to the learning of children and young people affected by conflict and existing humanitarian crises.
- Refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people should be included in all government-led responses to ensure the continuity of education during the COVID-19 response. This should recognise that refugee and host communities may have limited access to technology, and connectivity can be prohibitively expensive. Some of these issues can be overcome by using UNHCR's [Connected Education](#) resources.
- Governments must continue to endorse, implement, monitor and report on the [Safe Schools Declaration](#).
- Schools should not be used as medical facilities or shelters to ensure the rapid return of children when it is safe to do so.
- Monitoring and reporting of attacks on education and military use of schools should be strengthened at national level in order to inform effective prevention and response during and after the COVID-19 outbreak.

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## THE IMPACT ON GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

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School closures may have a disproportionately harmful impact on girls, particularly the most marginalised and deprived. Analysis indicates that girls are almost two and a half times more likely to be out of school if they live in conflict-affected countries.<sup>12</sup> The gap between the numbers of girls and boys out of school is likely to increase due to COVID-19, as girls are less likely to return to school following extended school closures.

Without access to safe schools and learning spaces, girls are frequently tasked with care responsibilities and are at increased risk of child and forced marriage, early pregnancy, domestic and sexual violence. These long-term consequences may be exacerbated by existing gender discrimination and harmful social norms. During the outbreak of Ebola in Sierra Leone, cases of teenage pregnancy more than doubled to 14,000.<sup>13</sup> Fear of sexual assault was common, and children told stories of girls being attacked and raped, even in Ebola-quarantined households. Gender-based violence can also increase during community lockdowns as reported recently in China.<sup>14</sup>

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

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- Specific measures should be taken to ensure girls' and young women's education continues even when schools are closed. Importantly, this must recognise that technology may not be accessed equally by girls and boys.
- Governments should invest in schools and teachers to ensure distance learning activities and materials are gender-sensitive.
- Ensure all actors involved in the delivery of distance education, including teachers and parents, have the knowledge, skills and support to mitigate the risks of gender-based violence and prevent sexual exploitation and abuse. Include access to easy to understand information on safe referral practices. Guidance should be given on the use of online platforms, mobile devices and other measures to mitigate any increased risks.

## CHILDREN AND YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

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Children with disabilities often face multiple challenges to access inclusive education, which is exacerbated during times of crisis. Distance learning activities and tools, including radio, TV and online lessons, should be adapted (or alternative provision made) and accessible to children and youth with disabilities, including for children and youth with visual or hearing impairments.

Children with disabilities may be more likely to have accompanying chronic health conditions that can put them at greater chance of infection and may mean they are more likely to miss out on opportunities to learn at home whilst schools are closed. School closures also lead to disruptions in daily routines which can be particularly difficult for children who may require reliable routines and cause stress for families with children with disabilities who require additional support.

The closure of residential schools and day centres may put children with disabilities at risk of abuse and put more pressure on caregivers at home who may be absent or sick. Provisions must be made to strengthen home care. Some countries are keeping some schools open to accommodate children who cannot be cared for at home, such as France, Japan and the Republic of Korea.

Provision of inclusive education, together with other essential services, must inform the planning and implementation of distance learning to ensure children and youth with disabilities are not forgotten. Their right to education must be respected, including in times of crisis.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

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- Distance learning activities and tools, including radio, TV and online lessons, should be accessible to children and youth with disabilities, with curriculum and modes of delivery adapted to be inclusive, including children and youth with visual or hearing impairments.
- Provisions must be made to strengthen home care in case of closure of residential schools and day centres which may put children with disabilities at risk of abuse

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## THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL CLOSURE ON TEACHERS, SCHOOL STAFF AND PARENTS

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Teachers are not immune from the impact of COVID-19 – or any emergency. As the world looks to teachers to take on new ways of working to support distance learning, it is vital that teacher well-being, along with their economic security is part of every response. As teachers become separated from their learners and schools, they also risk becoming isolated from their colleagues. Keeping teachers connected during this crisis and supporting them to provide distance learning could have significant long-term gains for teacher wellbeing and professional motivation. Teachers whose own children are affected by school closures or sickness will also need extra support at this time. Additional assistance will be required for female teachers, who are more likely to take on caring responsibilities.

Prior to COVID-19, there was already a global teacher shortage – the world needs 69 million new teachers to reach the 2030 SDG targets on education.<sup>15</sup> The current COVID-19 crisis could further exacerbate this shortage as teachers fall sick and could be forced to leave the profession if their salaries are not guaranteed. In collaboration with partners, Ministries of Education and Finance must ensure teacher salaries are sustained during this time to ensure continuation of education and ensure schools have the staff they need to re-open at the end of the pandemic.

As governments and other actors take action to support the continuation of learning they must include teachers in every stage of policy, programming, and research design with the recognition that teachers bring invaluable knowledge and expertise to the education system, and should be involved in the decisions that affect them, personally and professionally.

Equally, when early childhood development centres and schools close, parents are often asked to facilitate the learning of children at home and can struggle to perform this task, due to other priorities including work commitments or limited education and resources, creating greater inequalities in children's learning opportunities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

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- Ministries of Education and Finance should ensure continued payment of salaries and incentives for teachers and school staff during and after school closures, to retain existing teachers. They should ensure sick and parental leave policies are introduced or acted upon.
- Ministries of Education and civil society organisations should work with school communities to ensure that up-to-date messages about COVID-19 are delivered to teachers, parents and children in a way that is easy to understand, limits panic and distress, encourages adherence to health messaging and reassures that education can continue through distance learning options.
- Governments, partners and donors should ensure teachers are aware of support services for themselves and for students, psychosocial support and existing referral systems to protection and health services.
- Ministries of Education, donors and partners should support pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes to ensure teachers are qualified and equipped to teach and support their students when schools reopen.
- Governments and partners should invest in teachers' skills, including digital, to facilitate effective online learning, where possible.



Harriet\* reads her school notebook at home in Bidi Bidi refugee settlement in Northern Uganda. © Louis Leeson / Save The Children

## FINANCING THE EDUCATION RESPONSE TO COVID-19

As schools close, the need to secure greater funding to maintain continuity of education during this crisis is even more critical. This requires increased investment in education systems, and for new investment to support alternative forms of distance education, investment in teacher training and innovative, accessible technology.

Critically, governments must maintain and increase domestic spending on education. Education Cannot Wait has responded rapidly releasing funds through their First Emergency-Response (FER) Window, as have the Global Partnership for Education and other organisations, taking swift action to meet unprecedented increasing needs. Donor governments must continue to allocate flexible funding to education through both bilateral and multilateral aid recognising that this crisis will be unpredictable.

United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee has launched a new Humanitarian Response Plan<sup>16</sup> worth a total of \$2 billion to fight COVID-19 in 51 countries across South America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, identified as being most in need to support, from April to December 2020. It includes allocations for the education response. This funding gap must be urgently met by the international community and a significant proportion of the appeal funds must go to education.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Governments must commit to maintaining and increasing their national education budget allocations, to ensure education systems are stronger and more resilient after this crisis.
- Bilateral and multilateral donors including Education Cannot Wait, the Global Partnership for Education and the World Bank should continue to commit to strengthening the COVID-19 education response, including aligning to gaps identified in the COVID-19 Humanitarian Response Plan. Bilateral donors should top-up existing support to these multilateral funds and ensure that application and approval processes are aligned in order to reduce the burden on stretched country teams.
- Donors should reduce, or be flexible in, donor compliance and risk burden for implementing agencies to ensure rapid response during this unpredictable crisis.
- Donors should meet their commitments to localisation, ensuring that local and national organisations are funded to respond to the crisis – recognising their local expertise and ability to reach marginalised populations, particularly given global travel restrictions.
- Governments and partners ensure education is included in national strategic response planning and budgeting processes and secure education as a key sector or pillar within the response at country-level.





Girls wash their hands at school in the Solomon Islands © Plan International

## PLANNING FOR SAFE REOPENING OF SCHOOLS

Planning for the safe reopening of schools should start from the onset of the crisis. Special attention should be paid to health and hygiene measures and ensuring the education system is prepared to address possible protection issues on reopening of schools. Additional catch-up classes or Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) may need to be provided after children return to school, to ensure they can reach their educational potential. A useful tool to determine what programme is appropriate is the Accelerated Education Working Group Decision Tree.<sup>17</sup>

There is an opportunity to use the innovations employed during this crisis to improve education systems around the world. Few countries have crisis-sensitive education plans. The COVID-19 emergency is an opportunity to “build back better” and to address education systems’ past weaknesses, including access to safe sanitation for all learners. Strengthening WASH systems could help prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- All educational authorities should continue to adhere to the [Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools](#), released by UNICEF, WHO and IFRC and endorsed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and review the [Technical Note: Protection of Children during the Coronavirus Pandemic](#) to assess the risks that affect children in their own context. They should advocate to other relevant authorities to ensure children are as protected as possible from these risks, whether within the school, home, or community.
- Government decisions on school openings must be guided by Ministries of Health and health partners, based on reliable public health information which takes into consideration the wider package of interventions in place like social distancing and home quarantine and the preparedness of the school to reopen.
- Local education, protection and health authorities should support communities to keep schools safe and maintained, ensuring they have the resources they need to implement health and safety protocols.
- Before reopening, schools should have policies and protocols for infection prevention and control in place to maintain a safe environment and prevent future outbreaks.
- Donors and governments should heavily invest in WASH facilities in schools which do not already have adequate provision in order to help prevent further COVID-19 outbreaks.
- Civil society organisations should work with Ministries of Education at all levels to address discrimination, stigma and social exclusion in schools and support community mobilisation efforts to reassure teachers, learners and parents when it is safe to return to school.

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## IT IS POSSIBLE TO KEEP CHILDREN SAFE AND LEARNING

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As governments, with support from donors and other partners, adapt policy, planning and implementation of new emergency distance education for the more than 1.5 billion children and youth out of school due to COVID-19 - and other emergencies – it is imperative that multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms are strengthened. **Ministries of Education, donors and partners should support a coordinated education response by strengthening existing sector coordination groups and/or Education Clusters or UNHCR’s coordination in refugee contexts and by allocating resources to strengthen information management and joint assessments.** Relevant government ministries including Education, Health, Water, Gender, Social Affairs, Children and Youth should establish functional multi-sector coordination mechanisms for COVID-19 response at national, local and school levels to ensure a holistic response for children out of school, ensuring continuing access to services usually provided through schools.

Understanding the needs, priorities, experiences and capacities of different groups of children will be essential to ensure the quality and accountability of a coordinated national and international response to this crisis. Global and national stakeholders should document and amplify the experiences of girls and boys affected by school closures and distance learning (including the roll-out of child friendly complain and feedback mechanisms) as a result of COVID-19 to education stakeholders.

Education is a fundamental human right that enables children to reach their full potential. This right is not suspended during times of crisis. In the face of unprecedented school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic there has never been a greater need to ensure every child can continue to access education and learning. **All stakeholders need to work together to keep children and youth safe, supported and learning, during and after the pandemic. We must work to ensure the most vulnerable children – including those living in poverty, with disabilities, girls and crisis-affected children and youth – are not left even further behind.**

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## REFERENCES

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- 1 See UNESCO website for latest figures <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>
  - 2 Partners is used as a shorthand to refer to UN agencies, civil society, networks, teacher unions, philanthropic foundations, private sector, academics and others at local, national, regional and global levels.
  - 3 It also provides links to some examples of global action being taken including by UNESCO, UNICEF, Education Cannot Wait, the Global Partnership for Education.
  - 4 [https://www.unicef.org/media/65716/file/Key%20Messages%20and%20Actions%20for%20COVID-19%20Prevention%20and%20Control%20in%20Schools\\_March%202020.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/65716/file/Key%20Messages%20and%20Actions%20for%20COVID-19%20Prevention%20and%20Control%20in%20Schools_March%202020.pdf)
  - 5 <https://gemreportunesco.wordpress.com/2020/03/24/how-are-countries-addressing-the-covid-19-challenges-in-education-a-snapshot-of-policy-measures/>
  - 6 SEL, play based learning and support to parental engagement
  - 7 <https://inee.org/standards>
  - 8 <https://nurturing-care.org/>
  - 9 <https://inee.org/resources/inee-background-paper-psychosocial-support-and-social-emotional-learning-children-youth>
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