



# Strategic Guidelines to Prioritize Early Childhood Development in the COVID-19 Response

Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office

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Strategic Guidelines to Prioritize Early Childhood Development in the COVID-19 Response

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## I. Context

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the rapidly spreading COVID-19 new coronavirus a global pandemic, as, by that moment, it had spread to 114 countries, infecting more than 118,000 people, and causing 4,291 deaths. COVID-19 ultimately affected all Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) countries, prompting governments to take different measures including closing borders, prohibiting travel and mobility, calling for general quarantines, and urging people to stay at home. This has implied the temporary closure of daycares, child development centers, preschools, and schools. Furthermore, the suspension of home-visiting centers affected vulnerable families, who, in some cases, had to adjust to distance services to continue their processes through phone calls, text messages, or virtual support.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the global economy and local markets, affecting national budgets, economic activities, and, ultimately, family income. In this context, families and young children are experiencing unprecedented challenges and risks. This implies the need to maintain, strengthen and develop all required assistance to enable parents and caregivers to protect their children and have access to the necessary means and tools to promote their development, health, and wellbeing.

This crisis has highlighted the critical role that families and primary caregivers play during early childhood. Children’s development will ultimately depend on the quality of their interactions with the primary adults in their environment, which include nurturing practices that respond to their needs. Therefore, countries must prioritize policies to support families in meeting their children’s needs and supporting their comprehensive development.

## II. The risk of not investing in early childhood

The current situation poses new challenges for providing care, protection, and learning opportunities for young children. In the long term, this can lead to intergenerational economic and social losses as society misses out on the benefits of early childhood development. All children have the right to develop to their full potential, and the early childhood years are critical for enabling this right.

The first years of life are a critical window of opportunity for brain development since at this stage, neural connections form at a rate that will never occur again. These connections depend on the environment where children grow and develop; in other words, brain development mostly depends on the quality of children's experiences and their interactions with adults. This process is essential as it lays the foundation for learning and influences children's physical and emotional wellbeing.

LAC countries have made substantial progress in investing in quality comprehensive services that promote children's full development during their early years and in strengthening parental roles and positive parenting among families. Therefore, it is necessary to escalate efforts to prevent the current situation from halting progress made at the regional level.

Countercyclical policies should be considered in times of crisis and economic slowdown or recession, as these will not only protect children and their families from the impact of an emergency but will also contribute to economic recovery at the country level. An analysis carried out by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Center (2014)<sup>1</sup> on the impact of the Great Recession (the global economic crisis that started in the United States in 2008) on children and adolescents, showed that the scope of this crisis and its repercussions varied depending to a large extent on the strength of social safety nets and the responses from governments. **Although child poverty increased in most countries (23 of the 41 countries analyzed)<sup>2</sup>, there were cases where it dropped considerably.** This was the case in countries that increased public spending on protection services, as these acted as countercyclical economic stabilizers, protecting children and adolescents.

Additionally, in an effort to advance the rights of women and girls, the region's countries committed in January 2020<sup>3</sup> to implementing gender-sensitive countercyclical policies to mitigate the effects of crises and economic recessions, including measures to further a public agenda on caregiving and unpaid work.

Regarding maternity and paternity leave, before the onset of the pandemic, the region had made some progress in extending leave time and in including paternity leave. Similarly, there were new efforts to expand leave time, given that in many countries, it was below the 14 weeks outlined in the International Labor Organization Convention 183. Paternity leave was considerably low (around five days on average) and only referred to the period immediately after delivery, which discourages co-responsibility in childcaring. Hence, the COVID-19 emergency context adds greater urgency to the need to insist on expanding maternity and paternity leave policies, so as to ensure the protection of children's health and wellbeing, and foster fathers' responsibility in caring and raising their children.

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF Innocenti Office of Research, 'Children of the Recession: The impact of the economic crisis on child wellbeing in rich countries', *Innocenti Report Card n°. 12*, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> According to this analysis and in terms of family income, in Greece, families with children lost the equivalent of 14 years of improved income between 2008 and 2012. Spain, Ireland, and Luxembourg lost ten years; Iceland, nine; and Italy, Hungary, and Portugal, eight. The situation is probably even worse for children from lower-income families.

<sup>3</sup> XIV Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, 'Santiago Commitment', Santiago, January 2020.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were 3.6 million 3-4-year-old children in LAC with developmental delays, who were at risk of failing to reach their full potential<sup>4</sup>; two of every three 2-4-year-old children suffered violent discipline at home; and one in every two 2-4-year-old children endured corporal punishment. The situation remains worrying since these figures are likely to increase exponentially as the socio-economic consequences of the crises escalate. In this context, the cost of failing to take action against COVID-19 will have long-term repercussions on the countries' future human capital.

COVID-19 and the measures adopted to mitigate its expansion affect the whole population but take a greater toll on people in low-income communities, those enduring emergency or human mobility situations, or environments affected by conflict. Daily subsistence challenges are exacerbated by preventive COVID-19 measures requiring physical distancing, by the limited access to clean water and soap for handwashing and hygiene, and also due to the lack of access to quality health services and available technology. Furthermore, as the economic effects of the pandemic become more evident, so will its impact on young children. The most vulnerable children -including those with developmental disabilities, suffering from low weight and malnutrition, belonging to ethnic groups, living in distant rural areas, and contexts of violence and/or human mobility - will be the most affected. Considering that development during this early stage of life is a window of opportunity for children's development, this lingering crisis can cause long-lasting effects on the youngest population.

High stress levels experienced by adult caregivers during emergencies have been documented. However, it should be noted that in the LAC region context, women are mainly responsible for children's care and rearing as well as household chores, and in many cases, they are exclusively responsible for the family's economic livelihood. This stress on parents and caregivers exposes young children to greater risks of suffering from physical and psychological abuse, and even abandonment. The breakdown of support networks and insufficient protection mechanisms, which occur during an emergency, increase the risk of human trafficking and exploitation, even of very young children. Many of these perils can be avoided by strengthening the capacities of professionals across different sectors, including emergency personnel, by providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills to relieve adult stress, and to improve their parenting skills, promote positive interactions between children and caregivers, detect high-risk situations, and manage referrals and necessary follow-up<sup>5</sup>.

### III. Principles for action

The Early Childhood Development Action Network ([ECDAN](#)), which UNICEF is a member of, recently published a call to action for governments, international organizations, bilateral and multilateral agencies, donors, non-governmental organizations, religious organizations, the private sector, academia and civil society organizations to prioritize the protection and support for the care of young children and their families in the COVID-19 crisis response and recovery process; and to maintain the necessary investments to guarantee young children's health and their physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. The seven suggested actions outlined below are a reminder of the principles that should guide joint actions during these difficult times.

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<sup>4</sup> Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia, *Identificar las desigualdades para actuar: Resultados y determinantes del desarrollo de la primera infancia en América Latina y el Caribe*, UNICEF, Panama City, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, *La violencia en la primera infancia: Marco Regional de UNICEF para América Latina y el Caribe*, UNICEF, Panama City 2017.

**1. Equality should be the cornerstone of COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.** Countries should guarantee innovative responses and equitable access to basic services for all children and, in particular, for those most vulnerable and at risk. Also, ensure the inclusion of the perspectives of young children, their parents/ caregivers, and communities in the COVID-19 response and recovery.

**2. Support and include parents and other caregivers in response and recovery efforts.** These actors are standing on the “front line” to protect and guarantee the continuity of care and learning for young children while juggling these responsibilities with work demands and subsistence challenges. Families’ wellbeing, including parents’ and caregivers’ physical and mental health, is essential for creating nurturing environments where children are protected. Materials to help talk to children about COVID-19 and to promote distance learning should be developed. Strategies to reach people without internet access/connectivity should be designed, as well as solutions to provide psychosocial support to parents and primary caregivers and to care for their mental health.

**3. Give priority to children’s protection.** In times of crisis, young children are more vulnerable to abuse, violence, exploitation, stigma, and neglect, as their family and community environments are destabilized, and their parents or primary caregivers experience increased stress. Therefore, it is necessary to: i) step-up efforts to prevent violence, abuse, abandonment, exploitation, and other risks threatening children; and ii) develop innovative solutions to identify children at higher risk and offer appropriate support solutions.

**4. Ensure that social protection efforts are linked** to health, nutrition, education, and child care services, as part of broader social protection initiatives to i) develop/strengthen child protection mechanisms; ii) promote family-friendly policies; and iii) support parents and caregivers with safe and appropriate care options for children.

**5. Protect and support frontline workers who provide services related to children:** i) Organize care and support services for frontline workers’ children, including psychosocial support (for example, for health personnel); ii) make sure that frontline workers have the necessary resources, knowledge and skills to focus on children’s health and wellbeing; iii) provide frontline workers’ with resources, such as simple and age-appropriate games and activities for their children, which caregivers can use for stimulation and play, in an effort to strengthen the family unit in a context of high stress and isolation.

**6. Maintain and increase investments with an integrated service approach** to meet the needs of children in terms of health and nutrition, learning opportunities, safety, protection, responsive care, and early learning. Considering that failure to act against COVID-19 will have costly long-term implications for future human capital, it is necessary to i) ensure national budget allocations for early childhood development programs, as well as parenting, childcare and mental health interventions; ii) include funding for early childhood development and child care services in all national COVID-19 responses and; iii) ensure the availability of specific emergency

### Why is investment in early childhood important?

- Early childhood is a decisive period for the fulfillment of children's rights.
- Evidence has shown that the early years are critical for laying the foundation for human development.
- Investment in early childhood is widely recognized as a cost-effective strategy to achieve fair and sustainable development. One dollar invested in early childhood development can yield a return of more than \$7 USD.
- Access to quality care services and family support policies, besides promoting co-responsibility between mothers and fathers, have a positive impact in reducing gender gaps, contribute to women’s economic empowerment and therefore on the reduction of child poverty.
- Early childhood interventions contribute to the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and can have a multiplier effect on SDG results. The link between early childhood development and equity, productivity, and sustainable growth is indisputable.

funding to provide job security and meet the needs of early learning centers and other social services that are facing enormous financial challenges.

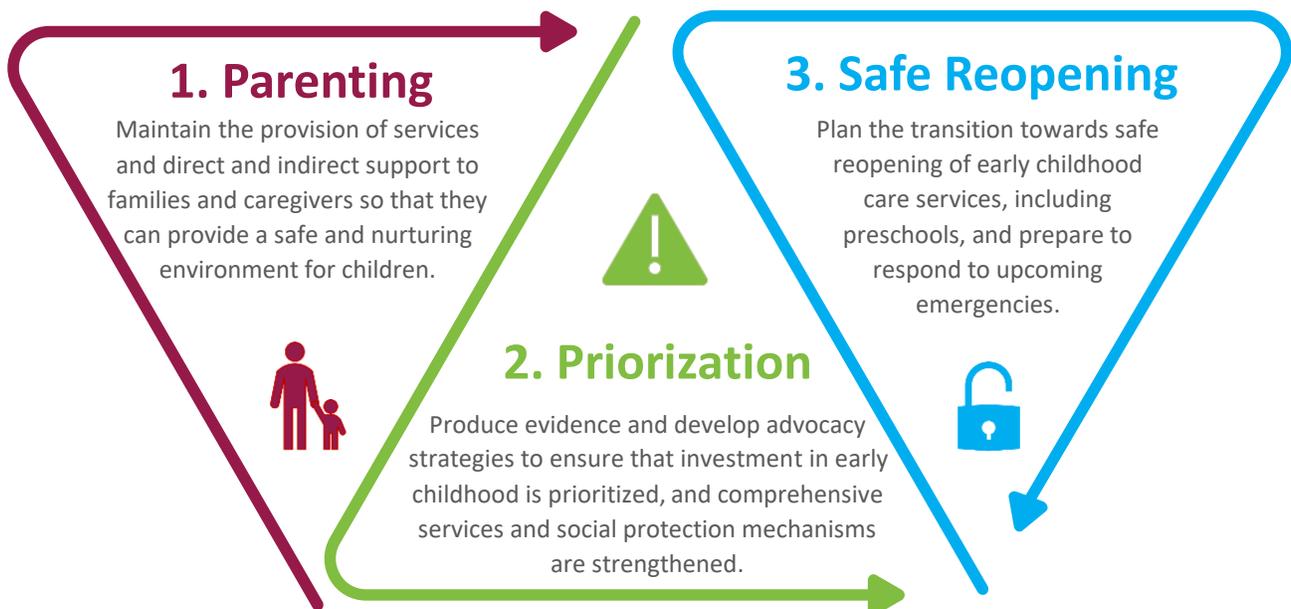
**7. Develop sustainable global and national pandemic preparedness, response and recovery capacities that include the protection and wellbeing of children and their caregivers:** i) strengthen data collection, analysis and research capacities to learn about COVID-19 and its repercussions; ii) apply lessons learned from past pandemics and create stronger and more responsive multisectoral systems and services; iii) include protection and support for young children and primary caregivers in national and global preparedness and response plans to deal with future crises.

## IV. Pillars of the COVID-19 response and recovery strategy

During emergencies, early childhood development requires an integrated response and a set of holistic interventions that address the needs of children from birth throughout the first eight years of life. It is critical that these interventions consider strengthening the dedicated human resource capacity for ECD, and advocate for a holistic approach to care for young children across sectoral responses<sup>6</sup>.

Besides the need for integrated and intersectoral interventions, it is important to have a response and recovery strategy that specifically accompanies partners and institutions specialized in comprehensive early childhood development. This response and recovery strategy should also guide the prioritization of efforts to provide a holistic response across the different sectors.

The following graph illustrates a three-tiered proposed coordination architecture for COVID-19 response and recovery, with key recommended activities.



<sup>6</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund, *Early Childhood Development in Emergencies Integrated Programme Guide*, UNICEF, New York, April, 2014

## **1. Maintain the provision of services and direct and indirect support to families and caregivers to enable them to provide a safe and nurturing environment for children.**

Considering that schools are closed in most countries and governments are asking families to stay home with their children, parents and caregivers are more than ever in charge of all aspects of their children's lives and responsible for providing them with the necessary experiences and opportunities to care and protect them, and enable their learning, health and wellbeing.

To perform these multiple functions while balancing their own mental health, parents need to be able to access key information and guidance to cope with their new realities, pressures, and changes and to receive support and resources to take care of their own wellbeing and mental health. Furthermore, they also require access to information on what the government, local authorities, and employers can do to support their children's learning, care, and wellbeing, as well as any assistance available to supply essential elements to their families. All information and support provided must take into account the diversity of families, acknowledging the many settings that exist, such as female-headed families, families with adolescent mothers, same-sex parents, among others, so that the responses offered adapt to different contexts and needs.

At the same time, mobility restrictions, the prohibition of crowds, as well as quarantine and containment measures to stop the spread of the virus, imply the need to identify and apply new service provision strategies and modalities to overcome these barriers. Therefore, when feasible, distance service solutions that avoid personal contact are gradually being established between health and education service providers and children and their families.

Because health and education systems were not sufficiently prepared and equipped to meet these new demands, support is required to: i) determine efficient modalities that can benefit all children and their families; ii) strengthen digital and technological strategies and; iii) provide quick training to professionals in the use of these new alternatives of service provision.

Service providers are also facing a new situation that not only requires a great deal of adaptation, but can also generate stress, anxiety, and discouragement. In some cases, providers are required to maintain their services, without necessarily having all the necessary equipment to do so safely.

### **Key activities to consider:**

- Support the development and implementation of communication campaigns and innovative solutions, including, among others, digital and technology-based solutions, to i) accompany and support mothers and fathers in their parenting role, promote learning and care while considering gender equality in care practices, as well as strategies for the prevention of domestic violence and; ii) help professionals and technicians working in care services, initial education, as well as those who make home visits, so that they can continue to provide these services to parents, caregivers, even at a distance.
- Support the dissemination of information aimed at vulnerable populations (people with disabilities, belonging to ethnic, rural, and migrant communities, among others) who cannot benefit equally from technology-based solutions.
- Support ministries of education and other governing bodies to develop and implement distance learning modalities that are appropriate for preschool children and their families (including the most vulnerable and those who cannot equally benefit from technology-based solutions).

- Support the development of adequate psychosocial support mechanisms for service providers, families, and children and adolescents.
- Develop guides and messages for employers that facilitate the implementation of family-friendly measures and policies.

## **2. Produce evidence and develop advocacy strategies to ensure that investment in early childhood is prioritized, and comprehensive services and social protection mechanisms are strengthened to meet the needs of the most vulnerable families.**

In the context of the current crisis, which demands fiscal efforts from governments and the allocation of exceptional resources to address the effects of the pandemic, it is essential to advocate for allocating the necessary resources to preserve essential services for young children’s comprehensive development. This also implies ensuring that the extraordinary measures adopted to expand social protection services effectively allow the most vulnerable parents and caregivers to guarantee their children’s protection and development. This involves supporting the generation of necessary evidence, capitalizing on existing knowledge to support effective advocacy, and guiding decision-making and planning.

### **Key activities to consider:**

- Strengthen and adapt monitoring systems, and support the generation of evidence, including information on the situation of children and their families, the socio-economic impacts of the crisis (considering the most vulnerable communities), and the potential cost of inaction. Analyses of specific situations related to Early Childhood Development, gender inequality and the distribution of unpaid care work should be carried out, given women’s and girls’ exacerbated vulnerability in the context of COVID-19.
- Advocate for the expansion of programs and activities aimed at promoting child development, especially in vulnerable groups such as children with disabilities, those belonging to ethnic, rural, and migrant groups, among others. Also, promote comprehensive care, including coordination with extended social protection programs and coupons and/or cash transfer systems for the most vulnerable families.

As part of evidence generation efforts, it is recommended that specific situations related to ECD, gender and care are analyzed:

- Possible work overload for women and girls caused by increased home and care-related responsibilities.
- Care strategies and childcare support for single-parent families relying on a single income.
- Care strategies aimed at health workers, who are predominantly female in the region’s countries.

## **3. Plan the transition towards the safe reopening of early childhood care services, including preschools, and prepare to respond to upcoming emergencies.**

It is crucial to support governments in careful decision-making, assessing and planning for reopening early childhood care services and preschool care and education centers, to ensure that these services and spaces are safe for children, their families, and staff, and are prepared for possible new waves of infections. This requires the adoption of policies, procedures and funding plans that ensure the quality and safety of schools and care services; strengthen their remote service provision (learning, support for parents, violence prevention and detection, etc.); financing investments in drinking water, basic sanitation and hygiene to mitigate risks; and implementing mechanisms to monitor health, wellbeing and protection indicators.

### Key activities to consider:

- Support the ministries involved in early childhood development (health, education, social protection, and finance, among others) to prepare action plans based on the different response phases and operational guidelines for the safe reopening of care centers and schools, and to prepare messages aimed at children, families and service providers, promoting hygiene and handwashing, appropriate coughing and sneezing etiquette, detection and referral of suspected cases, as well as education for the prevention of COVID-19, among others.
- Support systems to monitor and follow up on health, wellbeing, and protection indicators.
- Directly support efforts to strengthen services with all necessary measures to make them safe for children, parents, and main caregivers, as well as for service providers (including teachers).
- Support governments in the development of contingency and response plans to face new measures for service containment and closure in the event of a virus outbreak. These include measures to ensure the continuity of remote services, whenever possible, especially in the most vulnerable population and/or with limited connectivity.

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