Early childhood development (ECD)

The situation

What children experience in early childhood – the bonds they form with their parents or caregivers, and early learning – deeply affects their future physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. Giving children a solid foundation in the early years is the best investment society can make in ensuring they succeed in life.

However, in Namibia, young children do not always get the best start in life. For many, the early years are riddled with poverty, malnutrition, disease and the lack of opportunities to play and learn the skills needed to do well in primary school. Evidence shows that regions with the lowest coverage of early childhood development (ECD) services, such as Kenene, Kavango and Omaheke, are not only the poorest performers in standardised achievement tests but also have the most over-aged learners in the school system, the highest dropout rates and the highest poverty rates.

Integrated ECD services are extremely limited in Namibia, especially in rural areas. Where they do exist, they are usually centre based and run primarily by the community or private individuals with little or no government funding and weak links, if any, with education, health and nutrition programmes.

Though early learning is critical for a child’s future, ECD does not begin at pre-primary level, but right at conception. The first 1,000 days between a woman’s pregnancy and her child’s second year of life are crucial. The right nutrition, health care and mental, emotional and physical stimulation have a profound impact on a child’s ability to grow, learn and eventually rise out of poverty.

The Government of Namibia has recognised the importance of integrated ECD. One of the objectives of Vision 2030 is to promote integrated ECD services and to develop the capacity of ‘educarers’ in this area. In 2009, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare developed an ECD policy, with emphasis on programmes for young children living in difficult circumstances. An implementation plan for this policy was launched in 2010. The newly passed Child Care and Protection Act makes provision for the regulation of ECD facilities.

Source: Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) 2013; UNICEF, Quality early childhood development (ECD) for children in Namibia: Giving children the best start in life! 2014.
Considering that children’s overall wellbeing is dependent not only on their cognitive development, but also on their physical, social, and emotional well-being, programmes that coordinate responses across all these components produce the best results. This is why UNICEF supports integrated ECD service delivery, especially for the most vulnerable children, and aims to improve the standards of care and learning in existing ECD centres throughout Namibia.

UNICEF in action

A key goal for UNICEF is to strengthen the capacity of all Ministries responsible for ECD to plan, implement and coordinate the provision of ECD services in Namibia. In order to do this, a number of structures and mechanisms need to be put in place. One of the first was to move the mandate of coordination for integrated ECD service delivery from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare to the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture. UNICEF and partner non-governmental organisation, PACT, supported this transition process whilst still maintaining the comparative advantage of each Ministry in delivering quality ECD services. A framework and costed plan were developed in 2014 and an ECD unit is being established within the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture where none had existed before. The ECD unit will play a key leadership role in the sector, while the costed plan will be used to leverage resources and inform advocacy to scale up ECD services in the country.

Strengthening the national coordination of the ECD sub-sector is being complemented by improving service provision on the ground. In 2015, UNICEF secured funding to pilot a low-cost and integrated ECD model for disadvantaged communities, which includes child protection and maternal and child health and nutrition, in addition to early learning. The model will also be inclusive in approach and ensure that children with disabilities are catered for. Five centres will be supported as integrated service delivery sites, helping the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture to take a fully integrated model to scale.

What more needs to be done

UNICEF will continue supporting the Government to build a strong ECD sub-sector and to ensure that disadvantaged children are reached by quality services. This will include:

- Continuing to support the low-cost integrated ECD centre pilot and scale-up,
- Supporting the first-of-its kind study on child rearing and infant feeding practices, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Social Services. The findings will be used to design parenting and community education material, focusing on communities where stunting is a major problem,
- Helping the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture to leverage more funding for the ECD sub-sector now that it has better capacity in planning and budgeting.