

Ensuring Best Start in Life for Children:

The Power of Parenting



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The Belgrade Early Years Call to Action

Ensuring the Best Start in Life for Every Child in Europe & Central Asia:
Empowering Parents and Strengthening Support Systems

This document is an outcome of the REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND PARENTING, held on 25-26 June 2024 in Belgrade, Serbia.

Context

As we conclude the Regional Conference on Early Childhood Development and Parenting, leaders from over 20 countries of Europe and Central Asia affirm that the early years of a child's life are crucial for their lifelong development and well-being and for the wellbeing and human capital development of nations. We acknowledge that supporting parents and caregivers is essential to ensuring every child has the best possible start in life. We launch the **Belgrade Early Years Call to Action**, a call to governments, partners, donors, academics, practitioners and parenting associations to commit to strengthening early childhood development and parenting support systems across Europe and Central Asia. This call to action is a pledge to prioritize the needs and realize the rights of young children and their families, ensuring every child in the region has the best start in life.

Recognizing that

- 1. The first five years of life represent a critical window of opportunity** when experiences and environments have an outsized impact on a child's brain architecture and future potential of children and nations.
- 2. Children need nurturing care in order to achieve their potential** - health, nutrition, early learning opportunities in safe environments, supported by responsive parents. Yet, many across the region are still lacking such care and early stimulation, with vulnerable and marginalized facing the greatest risk.
- 3. Parents and caregivers hold the key to influencing what our societies look like** – both now and in the future. Parenting decisions, especially during the first few critical years of life are especially important in shaping a child's lifelong development, wellbeing, and contributions to society.
- 4. Parents want to do the best for their children, but they need support in the form of policies, programs and services** that are strength-based, multi-disciplinary and family-centred, adequate information, and community resources, to provide nurturing care and stimulating environments for their children and to take care of their own well-being.
- 5. The parenting needs will continue to change in response to new challenges and threats**, including those associated with emergencies, social and economic trends, and climate change requiring agile and resilient systems that can promptly adjust to the evolving family needs.
- 6. Investing in early childhood development and parenting support** yields the biggest returns for individuals, families, and societies as a whole.

We hereby commit to:

- 1. Adopt a whole-of-government approach to the early years.** Prioritize early childhood development and parenting support in national and local level policies and budgets and adopt multi-sectoral national strategies, action plans and policy frameworks, fostering and incentivizing collaboration across health, education and social welfare sectors, including in humanitarian settings.
- 2. Ensure access to universal health care and strengthen facility based and outreach services** to support comprehensive child health, nutrition, development and responsive caregiving, through quality perinatal care, home visiting, developmental monitoring, parenting education and counselling, and early childhood intervention for children with developmental risks, delays or disabilities and their families.
- 3. Increase access to high-quality, inclusive early childhood education and care services (ECEC),** in line with EU Barcelona and SDG targets, with a particular focus on play-based learning, reaching the most vulnerable children and families, supporting parental engagement, and transitions between homes, ECEC services, and schools.
- 4. Develop and implement a national comprehensive parenting support system that leverages the power of health, education and social welfare sectors.** Scale up evidence-informed parenting support programs that meet the needs of parents across the three levels - universal, targeted and intensive- using a universal progressive approach, empowering mothers, fathers and other caregivers with knowledge, skills, and resources to provide nurturing care and stimulating environments for their children and to take care of their wellbeing.
- 5. Implement family-friendly policies,** including adequate parental leave for both parents, support for breastfeeding, child benefits, and affordable, quality childcare, to create enabling environments for families to thrive.
- 6. Strengthen child protection and social protection services to improve family support in the early years,** prevent institutionalization, ensure protection from adversities such as poverty and violence and ensure young children are growing up in safe family environments.
- 7. Strengthen early identification and early childhood intervention systems, coordinated by health, education and social welfare sectors,** to provide timely family-centered support for children with risks, developmental delays or disabilities and their families, ensuring referrals to other support services and transition to inclusive education.
- 8. Promote positive social norms around responsive caregiving, early learning, and gender-transformative parenting through social and behavioural change approaches** embedded within universal information provision, routine services and programs for parents, including for fathers, as well as community engagement initiatives.
- 9. Invest in strengthening workforce across health, education and social welfare sectors,** equipped to deliver high-quality, responsive services and support to young children and their caregivers, emphasizing interpersonal communication skills.
- 10. Harness the power of technology and innovation** to reach and support parents and caregivers at scale, while ensuring equity in access to digital resources.
- 11. Enhance data collection and exchange, monitoring, and evaluation systems nationally and locally** to track progress in early childhood development outcomes, policies and programmes, and ensure that the voices of parents and children are heard.
- 12. Foster partnerships with parents and between governments, civil society organizations, the private sector, academia, and international organizations** to mobilize resources, share knowledge, leverage expertise, and accelerate progress towards our shared goals for young children and families.

To fulfill these commitments, we will adopt the NURTURE approach in our actions:

- N** - Network and collaborate between countries in the region, between sectors, and between partners
- U** - Utilize evidence-based practices and policies, leveraging best practices and current science
- R** - Reach the most vulnerable families, and adopt a universal-progressive approach to service delivery
- T** - Train and empower the multi-sectoral early childhood workforce
- U** - Uplift parenting through innovative solutions, and supportive programs
- R** - Review, monitor, and evaluate our progress across countries for continuous improvement
- E** - Engage communities, parents and children as partners and co-creators of programs and services

We call upon all stakeholders to join us in these commitments to ensure that every child in Europe and Central Asia has the opportunity to reach their full potential. By investing in the early years and empowering parents and caregivers, we invest in a brighter, more equitable future for all. **The time to act is now. Together, we can transform the lives of millions of young children and build stronger, more resilient societies for generations to come.**