UNICEF Thailand
Early Childhood Development
2022-2026
In 2019, 90% of pregnant women received four or more ante-natal care visits, while 99% delivered their baby in a hospital or health care centre.¹

Immunization coverage is progressing towards universal and more than 82% of children aged 18-23 months have been fully immunized against preventable childhood illnesses.¹

Over 13% of children under 5 in Thailand are currently stunted, nearly 8% are wasted and over 9% are overweight.¹

86% of children aged 3-5 years attend an early childhood education programme.¹

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**EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT**

**The programme**

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme aims to ensure that every child in Thailand gets a healthy start, experiences quality learning opportunities and develops to their full potential in a safe and nurturing family environment, school and community.

The programme will support government and non-government partners to deliver quality ECD services that reach all children below 6 years of age and their families. UNICEF will support the provision of quality and affordable childcare services and improve pre-primary education so that children are ready to learn when they start school. Parents will also be engaged and supported to provide stable, nurturing and protective environments for their children and to understand the importance of ECD. The programme considers the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for children caused by school lockdowns and economic instability and the inequalities these have exposed. UNICEF will promote the involvement of institutions and organizations, service providers, practitioners, parents and community leaders from all sectors across ECD activities.

UNICEF will work with four key ministries to implement the programme, including the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. Other UNICEF partners, including UN agencies, non-governmental organizations, foundations, academia, regional networks and national coalitions, will also be integral to the successful delivery of results.

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Background

Early childhood – from conception to age 6 – has a profound impact on a child’s future. When children are loved, nourished and cared for in a safe and stimulating environment, they develop the skills they need to embrace opportunities, bounce back from adversity and thrive.

These early years lay the foundation for a child’s future social, emotional, cognitive and physical abilities as well as lifelong learning. UNICEF recognizes the long-term positive impacts of investing in ECD and over the last decade, sustained investment alongside government and other organizations has resulted in significant progress for children under 5.

Over 90 per cent of women attend routine check-ups during pregnancy, while 99 per cent deliver their baby in a health facility. Under-five mortality rates for children are relatively low and have been on a continual decline for over 30 years, while 82 per cent of children aged 18-23 months have been immunized against preventable childhood illnesses. Most children in Thailand (9 out 10) are developmentally on track, measured in terms of physical, literacy-numeracy, social-emotional and learning indicators.

Despite these significant health gains, challenges still remain for many younger children, particularly those living in rural areas and in border provinces, children living in families headed by a non-Thai speaker, children from poor households and children whose parents have a low level of education.

Poor nutrition can cause irreversible damage to the body and brain development of infants, with lifelong consequences. The nutritional status of children in Thailand under 5 years is a concern, with indicators around breastfeeding, stunting, wasting and overweight all deteriorating.

There is limited data available in Thailand around children with disabilities which means they do not have access to the specialised health, nutrition, early learning and pre-primary education services they need. Evidence on the impact of ECD services for these children is also limited and existing services focus largely on child developmental delays through a medical lens, for example visual and hearing impairment diagnosis, while emotional and disorders are not adequately addressed.

Government policy in Thailand recognizes the importance of ECD, and services are prioritized across different ministries including health, education, social services and interior. However, these services often remain disparate and are not effectively coordinated to provide children with adequate opportunities and support to learn in a manner appropriate to their age.
and needs in a safe and loving environment. Insufficient understanding among parents of the importance of high-quality child development experiences means that many children do not receive appropriate care and stimulation at home. Many parents, particularly fathers, do not engage in learning activities with their young children or nurture their individual needs. Initiatives to shift parental understanding, values and beliefs to recognize the importance of ‘responsive caregiving’ as well as programmes that strengthen the knowledge of parents have not been prioritized nationally.

In Thailand, there is a lack of appropriate and affordable childcare services for children under 3. With only three months maternity leave in place, many working mothers face a difficult choice when returning to work. Almost one in five children aged 0 to 4 live with neither their mother or father, and many working parents leave their young children with grandparents and other extended family members. Accessing affordable early childcare and education is particularly challenging for poorer families, particularly in urban areas.

Existing services for the 0-3 age group operate in an unregulated environment and vary across the public, private and non-governmental sectors with different curricula and pedagogy. This has resulted in inconsistencies in caregiver trainings and qualifications. COVID-19 lockdowns have also left many parents struggling to balance childcare and paid employment, with the burden usually placed on women.

Pre-primary education is the foundation for a child’s future learning – children in pre-primary education are more than twice as likely to be on track in early literacy and numeracy skills than children missing out on early learning. Approximately 85 per cent of children aged 3-5 years now attend ECD centres or pre-primary education – a success that has been the result of strong political will and attention to equity. While excellent progress has been made in narrowing the gaps in pre-primary education, enrolment among children in different income groups, migrant children and children from ethnic minorities still shows disparities.

More than 20 per cent of children who do not attend pre-primary education have delayed development in literacy and numeracy and are less likely to attend primary education. Only 60 per cent of children living in households headed by a non-Thai-speaker attend primary education, compared with 78 per cent of children living in Thai-speaking households.

**Partners**

- Ministry of Public Health
- Ministry of Education
- Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior
- Regional and provincial health offices
- National Early Childhood Development Policy Committee
- National Economic and Social Development Commission
- National Early Childhood Development Policy Committee Secretariat
- Bangkok Metropolitan Authority
- Raks Thai Foundation
- Foundation for Slum Child Care
- The Creative for Reading Culture Promotion Foundation
- WHO
- UNESCO
- Thai Health Promotion Foundation
- Civil society organizations
- Private sector
- Think tanks
- Academia and experts working in ECD
- Training colleges and medical associations
- Foundations
- Community-based organizations
Giving children a better start to life

Nurturing care refers to the overall health, nutrition, security and safety, responsive caregiving and learning received by children at an early age, provided by parents and family interactions within a supportive environment. It also includes an integrated focus on inclusive ECD with a view to strengthen services for children with developmental difficulties and disabilities.

In partnership with the Ministry of Public Health and partners, including WHO, the Thai Health Promotion Foundation and other community organizations, UNICEF will promote active engagement with nurturing care through integrated, inclusive health and nutrition interventions for children aged 0-3.

Through training and communication initiatives, UNICEF and partners will work with existing health and nutrition services to build their skills and knowledge to integrate nurturing care practices into their services. Health services in the most vulnerable provinces in the south of Thailand will be targeted as well as community-based organizations.

What we do

- Assess existing health and nutrition services and advocate for inclusive early childhood interventions and nurturing care approaches within these services.
- Support the development of a comprehensive set of communication and education resources for parents and caregivers that will inform them of the importance of the early years in children’s lives and help them build an enabling home environment.
- Support the training of frontline health workers to implement these messages while orientating medical associations and hospital networks to adopt them as well.
- Support the Government to target the least resourced health offices and community-based organizations in provincial areas to implement inclusive and nurturing care interventions.
Providing quality, affordable childcare for all children under 3

UNICEF will support the Government of Thailand to ensure adequate financial resources and personnel across sectors to coordinate, plan, implement, monitor and make accessible high-quality universal early childhood care and education services, giving priority to hard-to-reach, excluded and disadvantaged communities and children.

UNICEF will support the development of new policies and programmes by conducting a comprehensive analysis of current childcare preferences, demand and supply, and associated costs of childcare services for children under 3 in Thailand, including a feasibility assessment of public-private partnerships. This data will feed into a national strategy on affordable and quality childcare and learning services for children under 3.

In partnership with public and private sector stakeholders, UNICEF will model evidence-informed early childhood education and care services in underserved areas and promote better childcare business models.

What we do

- Conduct an analysis of childcare in Thailand for children under 3 that will inform a government strategy for affordable and quality childcare.
- Work with private and public sector to promote better childcare business models informed by evidence.
- Support the Government by providing technical assistance to develop improved quality of early childcare services, including a caregiver curriculum and certification for the workforce and facilities.
UNICEF will work with partners to improve pre-school services for children aged 3-5 years with the aim of adequately preparing them for entering primary school.

Through an ongoing partnership with local government authorities, UNICEF will focus on improving the quality of ECD centres at the subnational level across the country. Parents will be supported to enrol their children in early childhood education and engage in their children’s early education. The quality of learning in ECD centres and kindergartens will be improved through trainings and the development of standards and tools for teachers. Children living with disabilities will also be targeted through packages of inclusive education interventions in ECD centres and kindergartens, including health screening and early detection.

UNICEF will also work with partners to generate evidence on existing services and the outcomes they achieve, as well the role of parents in children’s learning and well-being in the Thai context. This research will influence policy and national and subnational conversations that support children’s early learning and well-being outcomes, as well as facilitate a more efficient approach to pre-primary education across multiple service providers.

What we do

- Support the Government with interventions to ensure parents are informed to enrol and support their children in early education across Thailand.
- Develop standards, tools and learning platforms for early childhood teachers so they are equipped to support early language and literacy and the holistic development of children, with an enhanced focus on parental engagement.
- Support the Government to improve disability-inclusive education in pre-schools through teacher training, creating linkages with social protection services, early health screening and by addressing stigma.
- Support research and generate data on early childhood education services that can help build evidence to inform policy for improving early learning and development outcomes, including improving the financing of ECD centres.

“She only has a few stuffed toys to cuddle in her sleep,” said Veerawan, a single mother in Samut Sakhon province, explaining her daughter’s excitement. To help keep young children like Nong Khao-hom playing and learning despite COVID-19 disruption to early learning centres, UNICEF and partners distributed Magic Box sets of books, toys and parental guidelines to Thai and migrant families.
UNICEF worked with policy makers to support the passage of the 2019 Early Childhood Development Act with its focus on a multi-sectoral and coordinated approach and engaged various ministries to develop the National Early Childhood Development Plan to better integrate services.

The new Country Programme will build on this previous policy work with the aim of strengthening the capacity of both state and non-state partners for improved and better-coordinated ECD policy and implementation. It will focus on making available data and evidence to support annual monitoring of ECD in Thailand as well as assessing the effectiveness of spending.

UNICEF will also work with community service organizations and use its convening power to engage stakeholders through networks and coalitions to create an enabling and demand driven ECD system.

What we do

- Provide capacity-building support to the Early Childhood Development Secretariat for effective and coordinated governance structures, implementation and oversight, monitoring and evaluation, and public engagement mechanisms.
- Work with key stakeholders to develop an annual report on ECD in Thailand, including an intersectoral monitoring framework and expenditure analysis to assess progress and inform priorities.
- Convene a national coalition of civil society organizations, think tanks, academia and experts working in the ECD space and provide support with tools, resources and skills that will allow them to engage, advocate and mobilize community action on ECD.