



## ECD: A CRITICAL OPPORTUNITY FOR INCLUSION<sup>1</sup>

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The right to education is well entrenched in our Constitution and clearly articulated in international treaties to which the South African government is a signatory. Both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child contain specific articles relating to education. Under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, realizing the right to education requires States Parties to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels. The term ‘inclusive education’ is well known both internationally and in South Africa. Indeed, we have a policy – White Paper 6 ‘Towards an inclusive education and training system’ – which reflects the principles of inclusion in education, as well as a 20-year road map of implementation. While the limitations of the schooling system for children with disabilities has been discussed elsewhere, I would like to turn our attention to a critical issue that is often overlooked: *What happens to children with disabilities before they reach school-going age? What is needed to ensure their inclusion in opportunities for early learning and stimulation as part of early childhood development (ECD)?*

It is significant to note that the research undertaken to inform the formulation of White Paper 6 *did* acknowledge the importance of early childhood development, and indeed recommended that ECD be viewed as ‘the foundation for inclusive education’. However, this was not incorporated into the policy and its focus is almost exclusively on the schooling system.

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<sup>1</sup> This opinion piece was written for PAN:Children by Sue Philpott from the Disability Research Action Team (DART).

What is ECD and why is its omission from the inclusive education policy a cause of concern? ECD is understood as being the process of cognitive, emotional, physical, spiritual, social and communication development of the child between conception and entry into formal schooling. Ilifa Labantwana (2013) has defined an ‘essential package of support for vulnerable children’ which identifies services required for the development of every young child. These are *adequate nutrition, primary health care, caregiver support, social services and opportunities for early learning*.

Because ECD-related services focus on the first 1000 days of a child’s life, it is of value to reflect on what happens in this very early stage. Pregnancy is a time of anticipation and of expectation of every mother, but also a time of vulnerability and anxiety about the safe birth of a healthy baby. Difficulties before and/or around the time of delivery that lead to disability of a child have devastating effects on the mother and other family members. At a time when every mother needs support in bonding with, feeding and nurturing her infant, a mother of a disabled child may experience anger, blame and/or rejection by family members who accuse her of bringing a curse on the family.

It is at this very early stage – particularly during the first 1000 days – when mothers and families of children with disabilities need a great deal of support. In particular, they require comprehensive ECD services that are responsive to the unique situation of their child.

Components of the ‘essential package’ provides a useful framework to identify the services that young children with disabilities require:

- ✓ With respect to *nutrition*, the provision of vitamins, supplements (such as Vitamin A and folate) and micronutrients to improve the nutritional status of mothers and young children has been well documented. Children who struggle to swallow or latch on for breastfeeding are at risk for malnutrition and thus nutrition-related interventions must take cognisance of specific functional limitations.

- ✓ Local clinics as part of the *primary health care system* provide immunizations for young children and the Road to Health Booklet contains a chart of developmental milestones, which can be used to track the growth of children for different domains. This is an opportunity to identify young children with developmental delays or disabilities and refer them to appropriate services, such as Physio, Speech or Occupational Therapy.
- ✓ *Caregiver support* is also critical to enable parents or caregivers to provide the loving environment and relationships that are so essential for every child's development. Caregivers of children with disabilities may need information about the child's condition and their prognosis and skills on how to deal with the child as well as psychosocial support from someone who understands what they are going through.
- ✓ As part of *social services*, social grants have been found to have a positive impact on child nutrition and access to health facilities, and children with disabilities may need to be assisted to access the Child Support Grant or the Care Dependency Grant. In addition, because children with disabilities are disproportionately affected by abuse and neglect, child protection services are essential to provide them with timely and effective responses.
- ✓ In order to develop to their maximum potential, all children need *opportunities for early learning and stimulation* and active play in a safe and stimulating environment. Children with disabilities may need particular support for this, especially when they are not able to move around freely due to visual or physical impairment. In many ways, facilities and programmes for early learning lend themselves to inclusion of children with differing abilities. By their very nature, they are flexible and child-centered, and their curricula allow for child-directed learning. Groups tend to be smaller than those in schools and they are not subject to rigid assessment processes. The inclusion of children with disabilities in early learning has many benefits. It enables parents to connect into the support of the programme and therefore mitigates their isolation. It also provides an environment of learning and stimulation for the child which is far richer than if they were at home on their

own. In addition, it provides all children with opportunities to learn tolerance and how to live and play creatively with difference.

‘Inclusion in ECD’ is not just about children with disabilities being in local centres. It is about activating all aspects of services for young children to be responsive to those at risk, identifying and supporting their development in every way and strengthening the role of parents as the ‘primary teachers’ of their children.

Recognition of the importance of ECD for children with disabilities on an international scale is reflected in the recent WHO & UNICEF publication [Early Childhood Development and Disability: a Discussion Document](#) (2012) that gives a number of pointers to the way forward. It emphasizes that children with disabilities need to be included in mainstream ECD policies, systems and services which support and maximize their development potential. This needs to be aligned with programmes and services which specifically target young children with disabilities and their families, such as community-based rehabilitation. There also needs to be representation of children with disabilities and their families in all ECD-related activities including policy development, service design and programme monitoring. Further, including children with disabilities in ECD requires capacity building of human resources within different sectors, particularly to ensure early identification and early intervention. Those that need to be targeted include Community Care Givers, ECD practitioners and primary health care nurses. This needs to be underpinned by wide-spread public awareness and understanding about children with disabilities as well as appropriate data collection and research.

In summary, building an inclusive education system and working towards an inclusive society requires action at the very beginning of the life course. The challenge is to begin with the youngest children and their families, welcoming every child as part of our diverse society, and providing appropriate services to support them to develop to their full potential.

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