Start Right with Early Childhood Care and Education

Global Action Week: 22-28 April 2012
Asia-Pacific Regional Joint Statement

Every child has the right to survival and development and this right begins at birth. On the occasion of the Global Action Week, UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC), Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAD), Save the Children and UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office are calling upon all governments and society as a whole to commit to and invest in early childhood care and education and ensure that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children are given particular attention.

Early experiences influence the developing brain and lay the foundation for life. From the prenatal period through the first years of life, the brain undergoes its most rapid development and a child’s early experiences determine how well the brain matures and whether its architecture is sturdy or fragile. A child’s early years will influence not only how a child grows but also how the rest of childhood, adolescence and adult life will unfold. Positive early experiences provide a foundation for sturdy brain architecture and a broad range of skills and learning capacities. Chronic, unrelenting stress or adversity in early childhood, caused by extreme poverty, repeated abuse or severe maternal depression, can lead to lifelong problems and compromised developmental trajectory.

Stable, loving relationships are essential for healthy growth and development. Children develop in an environment of relationships that begin in the home and include siblings, extended family members, early care and education providers, and members of the community. Numerous studies have demonstrated that when children experience secure and responsive relationships and supportive environments as early in life as possible, they grow up protected from the damaging effects of stress and adversity that many of them are exposed to. In fact, the family environment of young children is a major predictor of cognitive and socio-emotional abilities, as well as of a variety of lifelong outcomes such as crime and health. Furthermore, father involvement from the start helps translate to positive child development outcomes, as well as addresses gender equality in education issues.

Early childhood care and education programmes secure an equal start to all children and prevent the consequences of early adversity. ECCE programmes play a key role in ensuring an equal right to development and education for all children by tackling the barriers and inequity at the start. Early childhood education is not only about academic competencies – opportunities for play and exploration and non-academic skills, such as social relationships, are just as critical to consider. Research has shown that children who participate in early childhood programmes are ready for school better, enrol in school and complete school on time, plan their families better, earn higher household incomes, become productive adults and educate their own children. Furthermore, vulnerable and highly at-risk populations are consistently shown to benefit the most from high quality, comprehensive ECCE programmes. For these reasons, early childhood care and education yields the greatest investment returns than any other levels of education and training. Early intervention does pay off in the long run.

The World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien, 1990) makes clear that “learning begins at birth” and highlights the importance of the first years of a child’s life in determining future educational achievement and developmental outcomes. This message was reinforced again in the World Education
Forum in Dakar when the international community came together in 2000 to reaffirm their commitment to meet the 6 Education for All goals by 2015. The first goal being: “expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children”.

The Asia-Pacific region is diverse in geography, religion, political systems, ethnicity and language, and it includes countries with widely varying levels of economic development. Pre-primary enrolment rates vary from as low as 1% in Bhutan to 57% in Malaysia to as high as 99% in Thailand. Reports from this region indicate that while progress has been made in the expansion and improvement of early childhood care and education, much still needs to be done to decrease under-5 mortality rates, reduce stunting, provide services for children under-3, increase equitable access to quality early learning programmes, and ensure smooth transitions to primary school.

Regional surveys have repeatedly found that lack of multi-sectoral coordination continues to be a major barrier for providing comprehensive early childhood care and education in the Asia-Pacific region. In many countries, health, nutrition, social protection and education are often considered responsibilities of different, independent ministries/agencies, despite the research evidence that integrated and holistic services combining health, nutrition and stimulation yield greater benefits for children than health or nutrition alone. It is therefore imperative to communicate broadly the need for holistic early childhood programmes. Expanding coverage to ECCE programmes promotes not only the development of young children but also the education of poor adolescent girls who can attend school instead of taking care of young siblings at home. Finally, promoting functional literacy of women will have a tremendous impact on mothers’ roles in early childhood care and the value they will place on pre-primary experience for their little children.

There should be no compromise on providing the highest quality of early childhood services to families and children, especially to poor and disadvantaged communities. This joint statement calls on all countries to pay closer attention to and invest in early childhood, by providing quality care and education to every young child, so that strong foundations are created even before birth. If we truly believe in lifelong learning for all, we cannot do any less.

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