

learning and thriving

CHARMAINE SMITH from the Children's Institute explains how investing in children's development from a young age can put them on the road to success later in life.

What you put in during the early years of a child's life provides the building blocks for ensuring healthy, well-adjusted and thriving individuals as they grow older. Research has proven the first 1 000 days of life (from conception to two years) is a critical time for children's development. But it doesn't stop there.

As they grow older, children continue to move through different stages of development – physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, spiritually and morally – all these areas need attention. Assisting them to thrive in these areas is what early childhood development (ECD) is about.

ECD is like a "scaffolding process", explains Lizette Berry, an ECD expert from the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town. "If we don't make the necessary investments in the early years, it gets more difficult for a child to benefit from opportunities later in life. Early childhood is a critical 'window' of opportunity – but this 'window' will close; so we need to do all we can for young children within the critical early years."

Put simply, ECD enables a readiness to learn and thrive later on.

The importance of play

Creating opportunities for play that stimulate learning is a very important part of development, and parents and caregivers have a vital role in this.

Lizette says children need a stimulating, inviting and interactive play environment, and opportunities for play activities that are guided by a warm, caring and responsive adult. "We are their 'filters' – we need to expose them to stimulating and positive influences as often as possible."

What kinds of play are important? "Both indoor and outdoor play is important because the different settings help develop different skill sets in children", she explains. At the same time, play activities must be suitable for the developmental and learning needs of different ages. Between birth and 5 years, it is important to focus on physical, social and emotional development, as well as cognitive (early maths) and language skills.

How do children learn literacy and numeracy?

Literacy is learnt in phases. Ages 0 – 3 need play that stimulates:

- verbal and non-verbal communication,
- listening and speaking.

Literacy learning for ages 3 – 5 builds on these skills to increase:

- letter knowledge;
- print, vocabulary and book awareness, and finally
- early reading and learning.

Early mathematics skills for ages 0 – 3 help memory and problem-solving through for example:

- imitation and symbolic play, and
- sifting, sorting and classifying.

Ages 3 – 5 build on these to learn:

- the concept of numbers and their relationships and uses, and
- patterns, shapes, space and measurements.

The home is the most important place for early learning, which should begin at birth. Parents, too, are encouraged to take up opportunities to learn about raising and supporting a child by attending parenting programmes.

Providing a stimulating environment does not need to be costly, says Lizette, but it will need some planning and the investment of time: "For example, going for a walk with your toddler and naming objects that you see, identifying sounds and textures together is a lovely way to enjoy a Sunday afternoon. It's a fun activity and at the same time your toddler is improving observation, listening and language skills." Remember, children experience their world and learn best through play!

Lizette encourages parents and those caring for children to make play "a natural process of engaging with young children". Because children learn all the time, it is worth thinking about how to make it play time, all the time.

Safe play

While we as adults can, and should, be proactive to expose children to stimulating play that helps them learn and develop, we have a responsibility to "filter" out the negative elements in their world from harming them, explains Lizette.

"We must ensure that young children are safe and protected in any environment. So our public spaces need to be safe for young children and

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enable them to play free from danger." She encourages parents to mobilise and advocate if they are concerned about safety. For example, take up with your municipality or local counsellor concerns over the local play park; or poor street lighting, roads or pavements; or the need for adequate sport and recreation facilities and public libraries.

An essential package for ECD

While important, stimulation for learning is only one piece of the bigger picture. In fact, there are many areas of well-being that need attention to ensure children develop optimally. But there are a few vital support areas and services which as a "package" can ensure that children thrive as they grow up.

The government's provision of maternal and child health services is one part of such a package. These include antenatal care for pregnant mothers at clinics, including screening and supporting expectant mothers who have mental health or alcohol or substance abuse problems. It also includes preventing newborn babies from getting HIV from their mothers, and a range of health services for children such as immunisation and screening them for tuberculosis, for delays in their development, or for disability.

Nutritional support is another part of the package. It involves teaching mothers about breastfeeding and healthy food for children, and food supplements for children or mothers who need it after birth. Deworming children every six months from the age of one year is a simple, yet very effective, way of ensuring good nutritional health.



A third component of an essential ECD package is social services. These include getting a birth certificate for the child, which is used to access other government services like social grants, free health care and education. Social services also include child protection services to prevent or investigate child abuse and other harmful circumstances, and support to traumatised and vulnerable children.

The well-being of caregivers cannot be stressed enough, especially in a country like South Africa where many are raising children in the face of poverty, violence and substance abuse. So, support to primary caregivers is another element of the package. It includes access to parenting information, parenting programmes, and support services for parents who are depressed or struggling to cope. (see the below box, it lists some ways in which parents can take care of their own well-being.)

The last component of the package is support to children to learn. Home-visiting services and mother-and-baby groups for playful learning while the child is still very young, community playgroups, toy and book libraries

and ECD centres are services that can help children in the pre-school years. Thereafter, access to quality grade R and schooling in the foundation phase (grades 1 – 3) set them up for learning in the grades to come.

ECD services can protect young children from the negative effects of poverty, violence and neglect. There are many things that parents, caregivers and families can do to make sure young children get a good start in life. Some useful steps are included in the accompanying image.

About the Children's Institute

The CI is a child policy research and advocacy unit at the University of Cape Town. Our work focuses on key challenges for South Africa's children, especially poverty, inequality, HIV/AIDS, high child deaths, violence and abuse, and children's limited voice. We provide evidence to decision-makers and practitioners to use in their work for children. You can read more about ECD in our "South African Child Gauge 2013" publication on our website (www.ci.org.za), or contact Lizette. Berry at ucl.ac.za.

Taking care of yourself as a parent

- Pay attention to your health, nutrition, and emotional well-being.
- Speak to a trusted friend or family member if you are struggling to cope.
- Seek help and advice from a community organisation or government service such as a local clinic or social welfare office.
- Attend a parenting programme to enhance your parenting skills and ability to care for your child.

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