

Invest early to build a strong foundation for national development

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The children are our future. A phrase that is so overused that it does not evoke the kind of sentiment and response that it should. However, it is an undeniable fact that the future of any society relies on its ability to care for and nurture the health and well-being of the next generation. When societies fail to provide children with strong foundations to build healthy and productive lives, it compromises the future prosperity and well-being of everyone.

Continued and enhanced investment in early childhood development is key to ensuring that South Africa supports its children's development and well-being into the future and allows them to break free from the intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality. A rights-based approach also promotes that children are regarded as human beings with inherent value and agency who should be afforded opportunities for development and participation in society.

What is early childhood development?

To understand why it is important to invest in early childhood development (ECD), it may be useful to unpack what is meant by ECD.¹

- **A period in the life course**
The process of development is continuous and ongoing, but the early childhood years (from the beginning of pregnancy to the first day of school) is the period of most rapid physical growth and brain development. What happens in the early years is critical for a child's developmental trajectory and impacts their physical and mental health and well-being, educational achievement and economic participation throughout the life course, as well as that of the next generation.²
- **A process and an outcome**
Development is both a process and an outcome. For young children, development is a continuous process of acquiring

Table 2: Glossary of key terms

Early childhood development	The processes by which children grow, develop and thrive – physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, morally and socially - from conception until the start of formal schooling.
ECD service	An ECD service is a service that intends to promote the development of children from birth to school-going age, which is provided regularly by a person who is not a child's parent or caregiver. ⁵
ECD programme	Programmes that provide one or more forms of daily care, development, early learning opportunities and support to children from birth until the year before they enter formal school- including both early learning programmes and parent support programmes. ⁶
Early learning programmes	These are ECD programmes that are attended by children on a part-time or full-time basis, in a range of spaces, and which provide early learning and development opportunities. These include ECD centres, playgroups, day mothers, as well as toy libraries and mobile ECD programmes. ⁷
Parent support	A broad range of programmes and interventions to support one or more aspects of parenting or to promote parents' well-being. These are provided to a parent or primary caregiver.
Primary caregiver	The person primarily responsible for the daily care and well-being of a child.
Nurturing care	An environment created by caregivers. It ensures children's good health and nutrition, protects them from threats, and gives them opportunities for early learning, through interactions that are emotionally supportive and responsive. ⁸
Nurturing Care Framework	The NCF provides evidence-based guidance to help countries design policies, programmes and services that support and enable families to provide nurturing care.
Responsive caregiving	Care that is prompt, consistent, contingent, and appropriate to the child's cues, signals, behaviours and need.

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skills and abilities across the domains of motor, cognition, language, social and emotional development.

The developmental process is similar for all children, but rates at which children acquire skills may differ and is largely influenced by the interplay between their genes, physical and socio-cultural environments and experiences.

In the early years of life, children’s brains develop at a speed of more than one million new neural connections per second. Such rapid brain growth and development is most pronounced during the first three years, laying the foundation for lifelong physical, cognitive, and social-emotional functioning.^{3, 4} These rapid neuronal connections are made in response to the child’s interactions with the environment. Thus, development is the result of the interaction between the environment and the child, with genes and experiences interacting to shape the architecture and functioning of the developing brain.

Why is it important to invest in early childhood development?

During the early childhood period, particularly from pregnancy to three years, there is heightened receptivity and plasticity of the brain which develops in response to intrinsic and extrinsic stimuli. It is during this time that supportive interventions to promote health and development may be the most beneficial, and adverse experiences and exposures may be the most harmful to children’s development.⁹ Supporting children’s

development is therefore imperative, especially for the millions of children who live in disadvantaged and vulnerable families and communities and who face multiple adversities. Early deficits are compounded and become increasingly difficult to reverse beyond early childhood.⁹

Children are much more likely to grow and develop to their full potential if they are healthy and well-nourished; protected from childhood illnesses and malnutrition, unintentional injuries, violence, abuse and neglect; and given adequate learning opportunities and have responsive caregivers. This is referred to as nurturing care.⁸

As development is multi-dimensional, sequential and interrelated, young children need a range of supports and services to nurture their overall growth and progress. Their optimal development also depends on whether they have access to comprehensive services, protected by law, including health, education, birth registration, nutrition, care and protection, access to basic services, information and participation, among others.

Global and national commitments

Early childhood development is recognised as a fundamental right of every child in enabling them to achieve their full growth and development potential.¹⁰ All countries that have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) are duty-bound to provide universal access to essential services for children’s survival, growth and development, with a specific focus on protecting the most vulnerable children. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s General Comment No. 7, provides clear guidance to countries on how to fulfil these rights.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development¹¹ has also embraced early childhood development as central to the global transformation agenda. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline specific commitments and targets that directly influence the services and enabling environments that young children need to grow and develop to their full potential (see Figure 2). At the same time, early childhood development is essential for attaining many of the SDG targets.

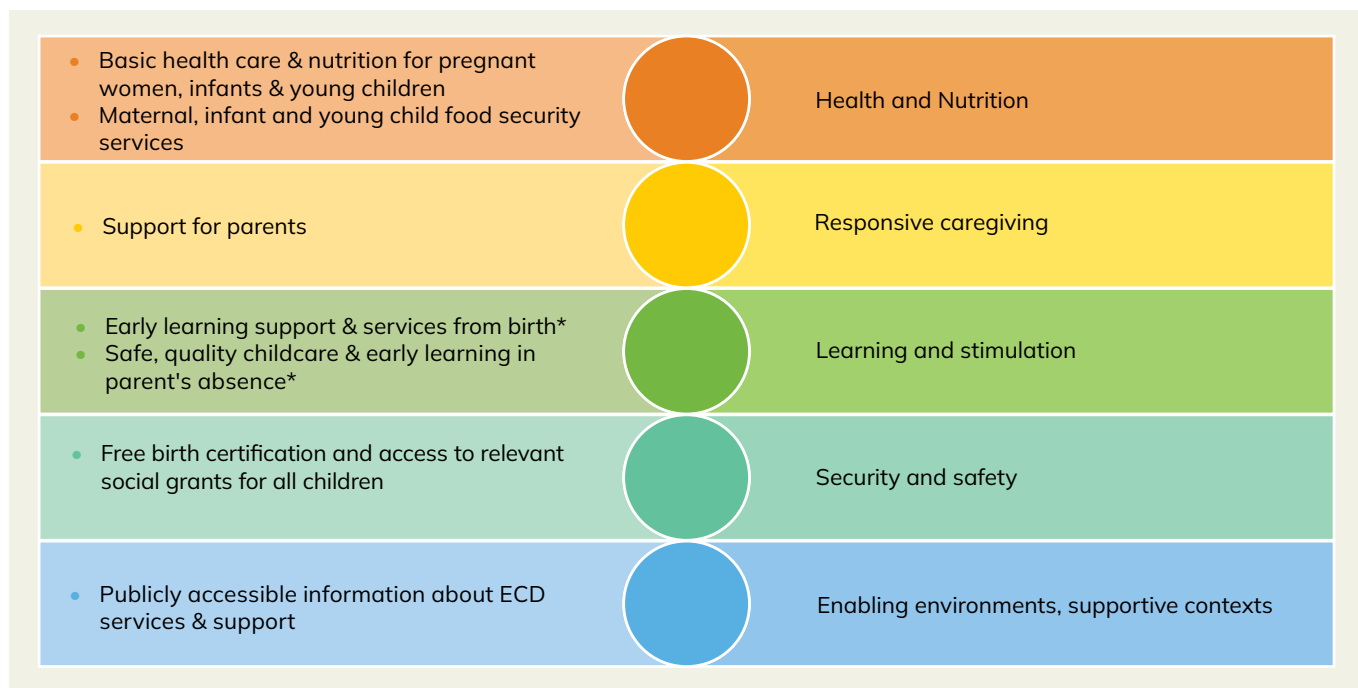
The Global Strategy for Women’s, Children’s and Adolescents’ Health 2016 – 2030 (‘Survive, Thrive and Transform’)¹² further articulates this by adopting a life course approach that aims to create an enabling environment that improves physical and mental health and well-being at every age, and across generations. Similarly, global institutions such as the World Bank, UNICEF, WHO and UNESCO have made early childhood development a priority in their programmes of work.

Figure 2: Putting Nurturing Care at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals



Adapted from: World Health Organization. *Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development: A Framework for Helping Children Survive and Thrive to Transform Health and Human Potential*. WHO: Geneva, 2018.

Figure 3: Essential services in the NIECD Policy and Nurturing Care Framework



Through collective global action, the Nurturing Care Framework (NCF) was developed and launched at the 71st World Health Assembly in 2018.⁸ The NCF serves to build on key scientific evidence, such as the 2017 Lancet Series: Advancing Early Childhood Development: From Science to Scale,¹³ and describes what young children require to survive and thrive, and the transformations needed to enable them to do so.

South Africa has a rich policy environment to support early childhood development. The Constitution¹⁴ expressly recognises children’s rights and a host of sectoral policies and plans have been developed to implement services related to these numerous rights. Similarly, the National Development Plan 2030¹⁵ identifies early childhood development as key to realising its vision of reducing poverty and inequality through human capital development and the social and economic inclusion of historically marginalised people.

In 2015, South Africa adopted the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECD Policy),⁶ which outlines a multi-sectoral approach to promoting the health development and well-being of young children. The Policy prioritises the provision of ECD services to vulnerable families and acknowledges that it is the responsibility of government to provide comprehensive ECD services to ensure that all children develop to their full potential.

The NIECD Policy is South Africa’s principal policy governing the delivery of ECD services across a range of sectors and spheres of government. It provides for a set of essential services and supports for young children and their families (see Figure

3), and it promotes a life course approach to development targeting children from conception until the year before they attend formal schooling.

Ensuring all young children realise their potential

In other words, promoting early childhood development is so much more than preparing children for school. Sustainable investment in the provision of a basket of essential services and support is imperative to enable every young child in South Africa to realise their potential over the life course, and into the next generation.

Effective interventions to support optimal early growth and development, and to enable nurturing care, are available and backed by credible evidence. Integration of interventions into existing health, education and social service systems is also possible and affordable.^{13, 16}

Adopting a life course approach and applying the principles of nurturing care from early childhood into adolescence supports the development of human capital, and promotes equity and human rights.¹⁷ Building strong foundations in the early years and extending and enhancing development during subsequent developmental stages can propel national and sustainable development for South Africa.

Yet South Africa pays a high price, presently and into the future, by investing too little, too late, and by failing to promote, support and invest in effective ECD interventions. Children under five who are at risk of poor development are likely to experience multiple disadvantages in their lifetime, including earning about

a quarter less of average adult income per year. At country level, the loss is estimated to be nearly two times the gross domestic product spent on health.¹³ Harnessing the potential of ECD interventions to ameliorate poverty and inequality, and curb complex societal challenges such as violence, gender discrimination, and child maltreatment is therefore critical for pursuing a just, equal and sustainable society.¹⁸

A catalyst for national development

The NIECD Policy provides evidence of how quality ECD services have positive outcomes for society by:⁶

- Enhancing the mental and physical health of children and adults, reducing maternal and under-five mortality, and preventing violence and injury, HIV, TB, and non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and obesity as outlined in Figure 4;
- Improving school enrolment, retention and performance by enhancing early cognitive development and school readiness, and intervening early to prevent and address developmental delays and disabilities;
- Building a stronger economy as improved education outcomes drive increased employment, productivity, tax revenue and gross domestic product;
- Reducing poverty and inequality by prioritising services for children in poor households, in order to enhance care,

stimulation and learning opportunities and enabling all to develop to their full potential;

- Building a safer and more inclusive society by promoting caring, nurturing relationships in the home and helping children cope with stress in ways that prevent violence and promote social cohesion.

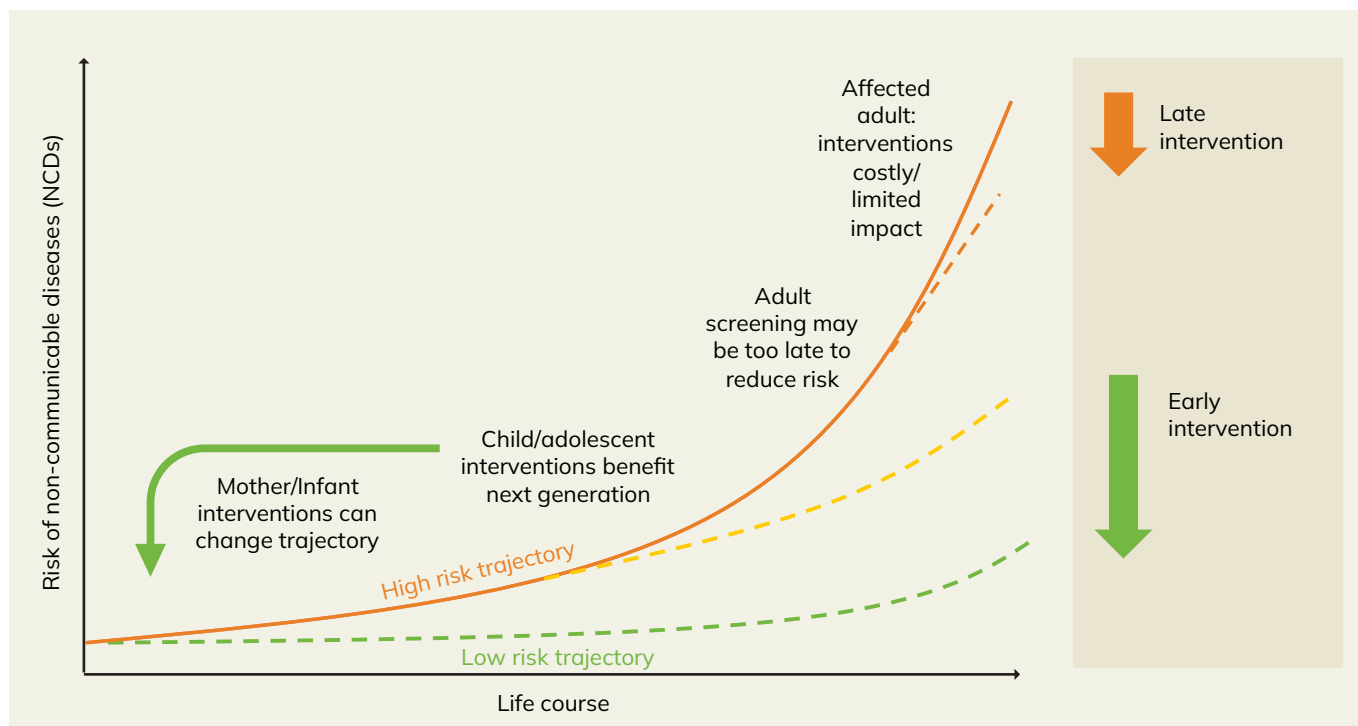
What is needed to enhance the development of young children in South Africa?

Given the strong evidence that early investments in young children can level the playing field and drive national development, this issue of the *South Africa Child Gauge* aims to provide a clear, evidence-based vision to guide policy and practice by:

- Reflecting on recent progress and current challenges;
- Identifying key priorities and opportunities to strengthen policy and practice;
- Showcasing examples of promising practice – and considering how to take these to scale

The first three chapters provide an introduction to the science of early childhood development and the policy vision that guides the delivery of services to young children and their families, followed a review of recent progress and the current status of early childhood development in South Africa.

Figure 4: Early intervention improves health outcomes across the life course



Adapted from: Hanson MA, Gluckman PD. Early developmental conditioning of later health and disease: physiology or pathophysiology? *Physiological Reviews*. 2014 Oct;94(4):1027-76.

- **Chapter 1** unpacks the science of early childhood development and describes how children's developing bodies and brain are shaped in powerful ways by their experiences. Each stage of development builds on prior growth and learning, which is why it is critical to create a healthy foundation during the first 1,000 days of life when the human brain is being built. This includes protecting children from adverse experiences and creating a nurturing environment that supports their optimal health, care, nutrition and development.
- **Chapter 2** presents a set of child-centred indicators to reflect on the current status of early childhood development services in South Africa across the domains of health, nutrition, care, protection and early learning. The chapter tracks progress in outcomes and the delivery of essential services since the introduction of the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECD Policy) in 2015 and reflects on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young children's access to services.
- **Chapter 3** introduces the key provisions of the NIECD Policy and government's commitment to develop a publicly funded, integrated ECD system and ensure that all young children and their caregivers can access quality services. It then focuses attention on the extent to which government has succeeded in implementing five priority programmes including: support for pregnant women, new parents and children under two years of age; a national food and nutrition strategy for children under five; provision of universal early learning opportunities; inclusion and support for children with developmental delays, difficulties and disabilities; and public communication about the value of early childhood development.

The following four chapters focus on three key domains of early childhood development: health and nutrition, care and support, and early learning.

- **Chapter 4** reflects on South Africa's global and national commitments to ensure young children not only survive but thrive and reach their full potential and how this shift in the thinking has informed the design and delivery of an expanded package of health services. It reflects on progress since 2016 and identifies opportunities to enhance the coverage and quality of care.
- **Chapter 5** focuses attention on the central role of families in providing a safe, loving environment and building a strong foundation for healthy relationships and early learning. It describes how poverty and violence compromise caregivers' mental health and capacity to care for young children, and then identifies a range of strategies to promote nurturing care and strengthen support for caregivers and families of young children.
- **Chapter 6** reflects on progress in ensuring universal access to quality early learning opportunities from early stimulation in the home to more structured learning opportunities delivered through playgroups and ECD centres. It highlights how access and quality is essential to redress inequalities. It then identifies a range of strategies to enhance early learning with a strong focus on early stimulation in the home and learning through play, coupled with investments in the education and training of ECD practitioners.
- **Chapter 7** then focuses on children in need of extra care and adopts an equity lens to highlight the ways in which South African children are exposed to multiple forms of adversity – from poverty and hunger to violence and neglect. It explores how to strengthen systems and intervene early to support young children and families who are in need of extra care and improve outcomes.

The final section of the book focuses attention on how to strengthen the ECD system including the need for:

- an enabling policy environment;
- adequate financial and human resources;
- strong data systems to support population-based planning, monitoring and evaluation;
- leadership and coordination to deliver a complex package of care and support across different sectors and spheres of government; and
- effective delivery systems to ensure services reach children at the right place and at the right time.

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