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### **Early Childhood Development -Challenges in India**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Early childhood care has been recognized and prioritized all over the world. It is more important in developing nations compared to the developed ones. Birth to six years, is the period when the foundation of cognitive, physical, socio – emotional development, language and personality are laid. The development starts in the womb. Hence this period is divided into sub groups – Conception to birth, Birth to six months, Six months to 3 years, 3 years to six years. ECD, refers to the holistic development of the child. Every year 1.5 million children die in India before reaching the age of 6 because of lack of care and protection. Those who survive, don't reach their full potential. They do not receive adequate nutrition, care and opportunities to learn. It is proven by neuroscience research that 90% of the child's brain growth occurs by the time a child is 5 years of age. This paper aims to find the best means and method for early childhood developments in India.

**Key words: Early Childhood,adequate nutitions,emotional development,care & protection**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

In fact investing in young children through ECD programmes – ensuring they have the right stimulation, nurturing and nutrition – is one of the smartest investments a country can make to address inequity, break the cycle of poverty, ensure gender justice and contribute to human development. There are ample reasons to believe how critical the early age is for a small child. However, the worst sufferers are poor and neglected children as they suffer from the adversities of being poor like inadequate access to basics like food, shelter, water, sanitation, education and health.



### **Why ECD be a priority?**

India has the world's largest ECD programme, the Integrated Child Development Services Scheme (ICDS). It was launched as a central government scheme in 1975 and since 2010 has been by the Centre and States on a cost – sharing basis. It offers children, adolescent girls and pregnant and lactating mothers a package of services from local anganwadi(childcare) centres. These include -

- Supplementary nutrition,
- Growth monitoring

- Primary healthcare,
- Immunization,
- Referral to secondary healthcare and pre-school education.

However there are significant problems with the implementation of this scheme at the grassroots level as it lacks adequate human and financial resource, effective implementation, coordination and convergence with various departments at various levels.

As a result of low priority, the situation is dismal –

A.4 out of 5 children under 3 years of age in the country are anemic (National Family Health Survey (NFHS 3) )

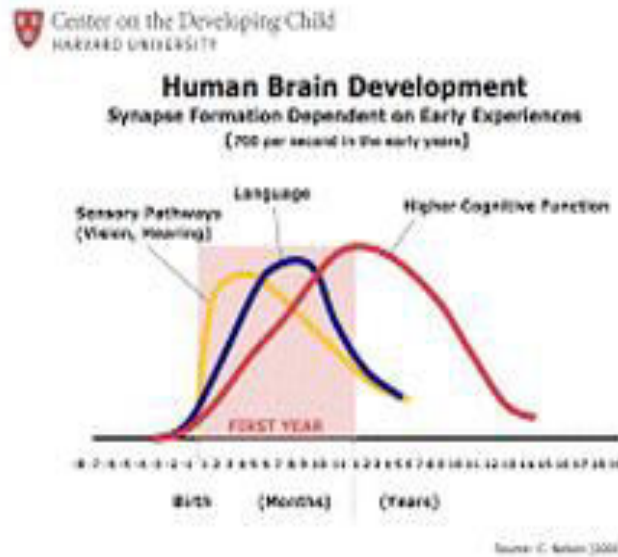
B.4 out of 100 babies are not alive to blow the candle on their first birthday

C.The National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-4 data for 15 States shows that 37 per cent of children under the age of five are stunted; 22 per cent are wasted while 34 per cent under the age of 5 are under weight.

Despite the disturbing data for the second year in a row, Union budget for the child health interventions was slashed from Rs. 15,483.77 crore last year to Rs. 14,000 crore. ICDS, the flagship programme implemented by the Women and Child Development Ministry (WCD) to improve child nutrition in the country, being fundamental to marginalized children in India saw 7 percent reduction in fund. Reduction was very disappointing especially after the Economic Survey of 2016 which clearly said that ‘India needs to invest more in improving nutrition among children to capitalize on the demographic advantage offered by its young population. Also the survey called in for more spending on maternal and child healthcare if India needs to grow at a faster pace.’”

Positive signals of prioritization in the Global and National Policy Environment:

- Inclusion in SDGs - a ray of hope- In all this debate, it is heartening to note that the International communities are also recognizing the importance of ECD. ECD is included in Goal 4 and y mentioned in target 4.2: “By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education”.



- **ECCE Policy and National Food Security Act** - The youngest citizens of India got its first Policy, the Early Childhood Care and Education Policy, 2013, which is progressive and calls for comprehensive, integrated and holistic interventions on ECD clearly articulating state responsibility as a provider, regulator and enabler. The National Food Security Act make the Supplementary Nutrition Programme at AWCs a mandated entitlement with norms defined.

### **CRECHE THROUGH MOBILE**

Mobile Creches have been working on ECD for the children in economically marginalized and vulnerable situations last four decades. Our childcare interventions have been aimed towards providing holistic care to children under six in poverty to address the child's right to nutrition, care, learning, health and protection. It also enables the women and families from unorganized sector. MC does advocacy with the Government for positive changes in law-policy-programme. Our logo depicts very clearly the life cycle approach - women, children, the young girl and how through the provision of quality childcare all the needs for the three constituencies are addressed. Today, India is one of the fastest growing economy in the World.

Yet, life for many of India's children continues to be defined by deprivation, hardship and the battle to survive. The quality - of - life for India's children have not kept pace with the country's economic development. We can do better for our children, can't we?

Despite the initiatives taken by private and public players, ECCE is faced with a lot of challenges in our country, where it is not just day care alone but a dire necessity for overall development of children, observes Sindu Aven.

### **Socio Economic Analysis in the Present Context**

The emerging socio-economic environment in India is driving the need for standardization of quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). It is also propelled by the efforts of the government towards a fruitful implementation of the RTE Act, the thrust of which is free and quality education to all children. Another factor driving this need for standardisation is the growth of nuclear families across cities. Looking at the current developments, ECCE is seemingly headed for a better future. It is, however, imperative to understand the impending challenges for map effective implementation of the standardised approach for preschools in India.

### **Beyond assembly line**

Given that our society and lifestyle is changing at a startling pace, parents want to provide a relevant foundation to their children's education. The focus of pedagogies is shifting from dishing out inert clones off an assembly line, to producing thinking and dynamic individuals. Teachers today are recognizing the importance of early childhood development, as well as the complementing aspects of individual growth, peer interaction, self-reliance and learning through exploration rather than through evaluation and assessment. This has become central to the teaching system. Accordingly, schools and preschools across the country are implementing the nuances of these ground-breaking approaches in teaching.

### **Curriculum**

The focus, hence, is on catering to overall child development rather than academic readiness or cognitive development alone. However, ensuring quality benchmark parameters in preschools undoubtedly aims at upscaling standards through standardisation. Unfortunately, when it comes to local customisation and administering a curriculum tailored to suit the specific learning needs of a child, standardisation of curriculum might come as a challenge. It, however, does not mean focusing on academics alone, but paying equal attention to developing life-skills, offering fun-based exploratory learning activities to the child during his formative years.

### **Holistic development**

How can these factors be taken care of through ECCE? A guideline for preschool standardisation and draft policy 2012 for the National Early Childhood Care and Education is a major push in this direction. The ECCE Policy brings in the role of the Indian Government to ensure comprehensive holistic development for all children till the age of six years and preparing a child for formal schooling. While the policy looks at initiating reforms and measures, the scope of early childhood program goes far beyond basic literacy programs.

### **Children And School Going**

In addition to overall awareness programs on health, hygiene and nutrition, making the child school-ready is equally important. ECCE looks at building social, behavioral and emotional competencies. Helping to develop a mind that is attentive to appropriate and child-centric curriculum, intuitive to perceptions through adherence to life-skills, curious to explore and learn through fun-based exploratory learning activities, and to build a body that works with the correct reflexes in children through activities that develop gross motor skills, ECCE is at the overall grooming of a child.

### **The Quality of Child Care :**

In India, ECCE initiatives are offered through various public and private centres called Anganwadis, Balwadis, playschools, preschools, day care centres, crèches, kindergartens, and preparatory schools. ECCE, however, has not yet seen much of consistent quality drive in our

country, more so, in the absence of steadfast centralized policies and regulatory bodies. The access to ECCE is to be transformed into quality care with optimal hygiene, development, and fun. On one hand, the vast cultural, social, and contextual diversities account for customization and personal care, while on the other, freezing quality benchmarks relies on formulation of standard guidelines, which in itself is a challenge.

Given the initiatives that a few of the pioneering private and public players have taken, we have reasons to believe that ECCE is headed for a brighter and better future in our country where it is not just a day care alone but a dire necessity for overall development of children. Of course, certain issues will always remain critical, such as standard audits and compliance with optimal hygiene and infrastructural requirements. While optimal child-teacher ratio should be observed, sensitivity to a child's need for emotional and social development is also important.

Interestingly, if we compare the Indian scenario with the global one, we are far from reaching our goal. Early Childhood Care and Education has seen effervescent trends on an international platform. Organizations such as the OMEP (Organization Mondiale pour l'Education Pré-scolaire), which is an international, non-governmental and non profit-making organization, is working on all aspects of early childhood education and care. It defends and promotes the rights of children to education and care worldwide and supports activities improving accessibility to high quality education and care. Today, India needs initiatives such as OMEP to focus on issues related to Early Childhood Care and Education.

According to IWFF “The promotion of child development in India is gradually being viewed as a meaningful objective of national development policy. The government has invested in an impressive 2000 Primary Health Centers, 130,000 sub-centers, 2000 community health centers, over 500,000 trained birth attendants, and 400,000 community health guides. However, there are also a great number of overlapping uncoordinated programs and an inadequate development policy. A meaningful policy on child development must address removal of all environmental constraints on child growth and development in the intrauterine phase, late infancy and early childhood, primary school ages, and adolescence.”

In Trichy an integrated survey was conducted . The study was jointly done by Thozhamai and Samakalvi Iyakkam at 500 anganwadis in 20 districts across the state from June 2012 to December 2012. It exposed the pitiable situation of several ICDS centres where young children are served nutritious food. In Trichy district alone more than 1,100 ICDS centres are functioning. But only 31 centres were taken up for the survey. The survey found that 51.6% of the centres are functioning in old buildings and concrete roofs of 22.6% centres are damaged.

"The survey results are just the tip of the iceberg. In fact, many ICDS centres in the district are in dire straits. Our study reveals that the purpose of the ICDS centres to provide early childhood care education will not be served if such a situation prevails," A Devaneyan, director of Thozhamai, said.

The objective of eradicating malnourishment among children cannot be achieved with meagre fund allocation, the report noted. The report also pointed out that 32.3 % of the centres don't include greens and vegetables in the lunch. "The government provides 56 paise per child for food. Of which, only 25 paise is allotted for buying vegetable for a child. So, many staff at the centres don't include vegetables. Hence, it is clear that the children are deprived of nutritious food."

Many centres don't have proper ventilation, water, electricity, toilet, chairs, kitchen garden, according to the survey. On the safety of the children in the centres, the study found that many centres were used for dumping cement bags, rice bags, and government-free bicycles. "It seems the ICDS centres are not considered as the platform where the younger generation can get healthy. The government should take them seriously and allocate special funds in the budget," said Devaneyan.

Due to poor upkeep of ICDS centres, urban parents hesitate to admit children in the anganwadis. In rural areas, the daily wage labourers have no other option other than leaving their children in the centres. "We don't want the government to withdraw the scheme and the private players to take up the project. But we demand the government to revive the project to



create a healthy future for India," said Devaneyan.

### CONCLUSION :

The emotional, social and physical development of young children has a direct effect on their overall development and on the adult they will become. That is why understanding the need to invest in very young children is so important, so as to maximize their future well-being.

As more women and mothers enter the workforce, child care has become an increasingly important public policy issue. Many families, particularly those with modest incomes, have trouble financing its cost. Poor quality of care is another persistent problem. Low wages for child care workers tend to promote high turnover and inexperienced providers, and a patchwork of state regulations inadequately addresses these concerns. State governments have a number of programs that tackle some of these issues, but many problems still remain unsolved. Evidence tells us that a person's life successes, health and emotional wellbeing have their roots in early childhood. We know that if we get it right in the early years, we can expect to see children thrive throughout school and their adult lives. Both nature and nurture (genes and environment) influence children's development. The quality of a child's earliest environments and the availability of appropriate experiences at the right stages of development are crucial determinants of the way each child's brain architecture develops.

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