
EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS- SHAPING THE FUTURE OF A PRODUCTIVE NATION

The prosperity of an economy heavily depends on the skills of its people. Skills development starts at an early stage of life and lays the foundation for a high level of achievement in school, career and life. It should be noted that the first three years of life is the most critical time to develop foundational thinking and character skills that motivate individuals to learn and function at very high levels. Early learning happens first at home and then in child care facilities, therefore it is very important that parents know the best way to develop their child's skills. Additionally, the efforts of parents should be supported by child care providers, paediatricians and other developmental resources.

A World Bank article 'Benefits of Early Child Development Programs,' states that:

'A vast body of research has demonstrated that Early Childhood Development (ECD) programs benefit children, families, and communities. The reduced dropout and repetition rates, improved school achievements, greater adult productivity, and higher levels of social and emotional functioning encouraged by ECD programs make them a highly cost-effective means of strengthening society as a whole by ensuring that its individual members live up to their full potential.

Evaluations of well-conceived programs designed to foster early development demonstrate that children who participate in these programs tend to be more successful in later school, are more competent socially and emotionally, and show better verbal, intellectual and physical development during early childhood than children who are not enrolled in high quality programs'.

Therefore, the benefits that ECD programs have on children and to a larger extent- society include:

- improved nutrition and health
- higher intelligence scores
- improved social and emotional behaviour
- better parent-child relationships
- less grade repetition and lower dropout rates
- higher school enrolment
- higher school completion rates
- increased earning potential and economic self-sufficiency as an adultgreater labour force participation

Reports which highlight the substantial long term impacts of such programs should not be overlooked. For example, in relation to improved cognitive development and school achievement, The World Bank sites four specific projects namely: Jamaica's First Home Visiting Program, Colombia's Cali project, Peru's Programa No Formal de Educacion Inicial (Pronoei),

and the Turkey Early Enrichment Project. It was found that children who participated in these programs scored higher on average, on intellectual aptitude tests than their non-participatory counterparts.

Early education activities are not the only means of improving a child's cognitive development. Another important factor which contributes to the positive development of a child is the quality of health and nutrition given. A longitudinal analysis of child nutrition in the Philippines shows that properly nourished children perform significantly better in school. The article states that, 'By providing psychosocial stimulation, ECD programs can enhance the efficacy of health care and nutrition initiatives. They can also help ensure that children receive proper health care. Children participating in the Colombia Community Child Care and Nutrition Project, for instance, are required to complete their immunizations within six months of entering the program. Programs can also monitor growth and provide food supplements and micronutrients, as in India's Integrated Child Development Services program, and can help with such existing public health efforts as mass immunizations. Other programs specifically aim at changing parent behaviour by educating parents about the health and nutrition needs of their children'.

It is important that countries invest in ECD programs as they yield a positive return on the wider economy in the long run. Art Rolnick Senior Vice President and Director of Research at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis points this out in his 2005 report 'Early Childhood Development on a Large Scale'. He writes 'Careful academic research demonstrates that tax dollars spent on early childhood development provide extraordinary returns compared with investments in the public, and even private sector. The potential return from a focused, high-quality early childhood development program is as high as 16 percent per year. Some of these

benefits are private gains for the children involved in the form of higher wages later in life. But the broader economy also benefits because individuals who participate in high-quality early childhood development programs have greater skills than they otherwise would, and they're able to contribute productively to their local economies.' He goes on 'Helping our youngest children develop their life and learning skills results in better citizens and more productive workers. Compared with the billions of dollars spent each year on high-risk economic development schemes, an investment in ECD is a far better and far more secure economic development tool.'