

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT: 3–6 YEARS

WHAT WE MEAN BY EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Early childhood development, or ECD, is about the ‘whole child’ – the physical, social and emotional, cognitive thinking and language progression of each young individual. We now know that quality activity in kindergartens (for children aged 3–6 years) influences how children become intellectually curious, socially confident and equipped with a solid foundation for lifelong learning.

WHY INVEST IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT?

Attending an ECD programme enhances:

- Language acquisition;
- Brain development;
- Cognitive skills development;
- Social and emotional development and well-being;
- Physical and motor development;
- School readiness;
- Improved learning outcomes in school and higher levels of education; and
- Economic returns of investment in ECD of up to 1:17.



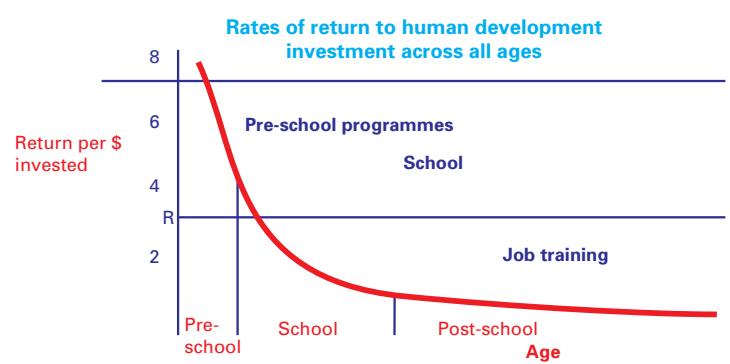
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ECD addresses disadvantage: Particularly critical is the potential of quality early stimulation to help children overcome disadvantage and thus break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

According to a renowned 2011 series on child development published in The Lancet medical journal (8 Oct, 2011): “By investing in early child development programmes, we have an opportunity to break the cycle of inequities that has dominated the lives of millions of children and families in low-income and middle-income countries.”

RATES OF RETURN

Economic analysis from four major ECD longitudinal studies demonstrated the economic returns on investment in ECD at 1:15-1:17, according to James Heckman, an American economist and Nobel Laureate for economics.



CHINA'S INVESTMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

UNICEF began working with the Government of China, the Ministry of Education in 2001 to demonstrate the positive impacts of good-quality ECD classes, especially for children in the most disadvantaged counties.

These early experiences combined with international research informed the Government of China's 2010 decision to provide access to three years of ECD centres for 70% of children aged 3–6 years as a public service by 2020. The Government has now increased the target to 75% by 2016 in the second ECD three-year action plan. The access rates are already up from nearly 45% in 2007 to 70.5% in 2014.

However, access rates are much lower in western areas: for example, in 2013, Shanghai had an estimated 100% gross enrolment rate, whereas it was 54% in Yunnan Province. The Government of China wants to address this gap. In 2011, the Government committed a staggering CNY 50 billion (US\$8.3 billion) to ECD in rural areas, especially in underdeveloped western provinces. By 2014, there were around 72,000 new kindergartens established, compared with 2009, and CNY 1.7 billion (US\$280 million) was invested in ECD teacher training.



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FROM THE FIELD TO POLICY: UNICEF OFFERS EVIDENCE FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENTS

UNICEF works with the Ministry of Education and its provincial and county education bureaus to gather evidence on the impact of ECD centres. UNICEF uses this evidence to inform national ECD policy and effective implementation.

Guided by its 'muddy boots' approach, UNICEF works with the Ministry of Education in piloting ECD approaches to find out what works best for the most disadvantaged children. Disadvantaged children

include those left behind with extended family by parents who migrate for work, children who have migrated with their parents to cities and ethnic minority children living in rural western provinces.

Where UNICEF currently pilots ECD activities: UNICEF has just begun to pilot ECD in five disadvantaged rural counties and in the municipality of Chongqing. At the project sites, UNICEF works closely with provincial and county education bureaus and engages parents and caregivers – including grandparents. UNICEF provides basic teaching and learning materials and training for kindergarten teachers. These ECD pilots – also referred to as child-friendly kindergarten models – have gradually replaced rote learning environments with child-centred play-based activities using toys, which are made of recycled and local materials. In Chongqing municipality, UNICEF is working with the National Working Committee for Children and Women



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ECD IS FUN: LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

Where there is no ECD curriculum or training for teachers on how to best teach young children, going to kindergarten is typically not fun, with rote learning, reciting Chinese characters and repeating numbers and arithmetic. The children appear bored, and there is little time for play or storytelling, which are key to early learning. UNICEF-supported ECD pilot projects in disadvantaged counties in China are transforming and enriching the early learning experience for children. Children learn through play, and they are happy and engaged.

and local education authorities to devise models for delivering high-quality ECD services to vulnerable migrant and urban poor children aged 3–6 years in kindergartens and communities.

HOW MANY CHILDREN, WHERE THEY LIVE AND WHERE THE ECD CENTRES ARE LOCATED

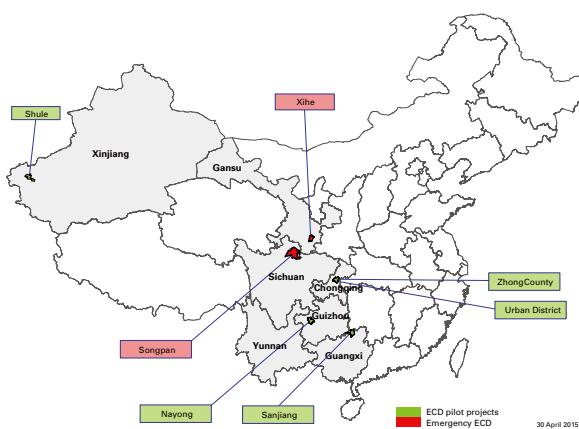
China has an estimated 274 million children, representing 14% of the world's children (2013).

There are about 45 million children aged 3 up to 6 years, 16% of all children in China. Of them, 11.7 million have been left behind in their hometowns by parents who have moved to find jobs in other provinces, while more than 5 million of them migrated with their parents (2010).

In 2014, there were 210,000 kindergartens (ECD centres for children aged 3–6 years) in China; about 137,300 of them were in rural areas, attended by 40.51 million children.

Source: UNICEF, Children in China: An Atlas of Social Indicators, 2014 (<http://www.unicef.cn/en/index.php?c=index&a=lists&catid=60>) and Ministry of Education data.

Baseline survey in five pilot counties: To gather evidence and demonstrate the effectiveness of the ECD strategies and practices in our five pilot counties over the next four years, a comprehensive baseline survey of kindergartens is being conducted in the counties. The findings will help refine the resource materials, guidelines and practices. It will capture children's development outcomes in cognition, language, health and physical development as well as teachers' competence levels. The baseline data will then be compared with evaluation data to demonstrate the extent to which the ECD piloted centres enable improvement of the developmental outcomes. In turn, this will help determine what works best in disadvantaged areas.



Location of UNICEF-supported ECD pilot projects

UNICEF HELPS CHINA DELIVER QUALITY ECD

Child-friendly kindergartens

A child-friendly kindergarten continues the ECD approaches, involving safe, healthy, nondiscrimination and effective teaching-learning that are proven to best enable child development and learning.

The piloting of the child-friendly kindergarten model, which began in 2009 in 31 poor counties, has resulted in many resources created for national use, with more to come. These resources are contributing to an 'ECD package', especially for rural kindergartens, that help teachers improve the quality of the learning experience. They include a set of child-friendly kindergarten curriculum guidebooks and a storybook-based school readiness curriculum.

CHILD-FRIENDLY KINDERGARTEN GUIDELINE (3–6 YEARS)

- Educational guidelines
- Curriculum planning guidelines
- Self-monitoring manual
- School readiness activities
- Trainers' guidance for school readiness curriculum

Among all quality ECD package, the **story-based school readiness curriculum** helps improve teaching abilities of poorly trained rural ECD teachers. It helps teachers focus their attention on the development of 5- to 6-year-olds' readiness for primary school. Built on eight traditional Chinese folk stories, the curriculum incorporates child-friendly group activities and step-by-step guidance for teachers. It is particularly useful for transforming rural kindergarten teaching from traditional rote learning to the more interactive and children-focused methodology.



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Future plans for child-friendly kindergarten curriculum:

The Ministry of Education intends to refine the child-friendly kindergarten and story-based readiness curricula by piloting its use in the five rural counties and the Chongqing municipality that UNICEF currently targets.

Child-Friendly Kindergarten Environmental Guidelines

In response to the massive construction following the Government's target for increased ECD access by 2020, UNICEF worked with the Ministry of Education to develop Child-Friendly Kindergarten Environmental Guidelines, which were published in 2013. They provide detailed requirements on how to create child-friendly spaces in kindergartens, including classrooms, stairs, canteens and toilets. The guidelines are being tested by relevant educational planning and construction administrators and will be further refined in the future.

Early Learning Development Guidelines for 3–6 years

UNICEF initiated and provided full technical support for the development of the national Early Learning Development Guidelines for 3–6 years, which were finalized in 2012. These guidelines help teachers and parents detail what skills a child should be able to develop at ages 3, 4 and 5. The Guidelines were introduced nationally through an MOE open announcement and trainer's training workshops in 2014, with participants from 34 provinces and autonomous regions. The Guidelines were also promoted to parents – an action that was met with tremendous positive response. In 2014, the UNICEF Wechat posting of the Guidelines received more

than 3.7 million visits within the first few days of the national launch.

Future plans for the Early Learning Development Guidelines

Guidelines: The Education Ministry is now promoting the standards nationally, and working with UNICEF in piloting effective implementation strategies nationwide, especially in the most disadvantaged counties.

ECD teacher training resource package

After the Government announced plans to rapidly increase access to ECD, many kindergartens had little choice but to use unqualified teachers, especially in rural and resource-poor areas. To quickly resolve the quality issue, the Ministry of Education asked UNICEF to test strategies for training both unqualified and qualified teachers.

Working with the Ministry of Education, UNICEF devised a training package for rural teachers. UNICEF introduced a 5–3 model, which involves initial training for five days, followed by individual study and then, months later, a three-day training. The package includes 23 training modules, including modules on:

- understanding the national kindergarten curriculum guidelines;
- the Early Learning Development Guidelines for children aged 3–6 years;
- how to plan and organize daily activities;
- creating a positive classroom environment;
- ideas for play, games and storytelling; and
- guide on working with and training parents.

The package includes booklets with tips for local trainers, accompanied with audio-visual materials of best practice lessons. For use in ethnic minority areas (particularly Xinjiang Province), UNICEF will translate the materials into bilingual Uighur and Chinese languages.

"Youjun and I talked on the phone the other day. She sounded thrilled when she reported the encouraging changes in the project kindergartens in Zhong County, in Chongqing of western China. She spoke of how teachers' professional skills had been enhanced, how the kindergarten environment had been upgraded, and children's activities enriched."

Lang Ma, Education Officer, UNICEF China

See blog post from Transforming Kindergartens for Young Children in Rural China (www.unicef.cn/en/index.php?m=content&c=index&a=show&catid=51&id=4185)

Future plans on ECD teacher training: In the next four years, UNICEF and the Ministry of Education expect to complete a national teacher training package and training strategy. This will be based on experiences learned through the rural teacher training resource package and piloting it in 400 kindergartens in five disadvantaged counties.

UNICEF will help to develop an assessment system for ECD teachers' professional competencies to raise the efficiency and effectiveness of training to all levels of teachers. The assessment system for ECD teachers' professional competencies should be completed in 2016-2017, when UNICEF will support the Government's national implementation of them.

National ECD assessment tools and monitoring and evaluation guidelines

UNICEF is currently helping the Ministry of Education to devise national ECD service quality-assessment tools for kindergarten quality.

UNICEF will also assist the Ministry of Education in developing ECD laws and guidelines for supervision and monitoring and evaluation.



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Pia Britto, UNICEF Senior Global Adviser on ECD (third from right, front row), and Chemba Raghavan, ECD Adviser, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (third from left, front row), visit the Ministry of Education's ECD quality-assurance tools team and UNICEF China team

Exploring a model for public-private partnerships

To ensure the access of children from middle and lower socioeconomic-level households to quality and affordable kindergartens, UNICEF is researching the potential for public-private partnerships for ECD. The study intends to generate a model for the Government to provide subsidies for universal access to private kindergartens while providing capacity-building training, supervision and monitoring.

National ECD campaign and ongoing advocacy for ECD

May is national ECD month for the Ministry of Education and UNICEF, when a national advocacy campaign on the importance of ECD targets parents. Each year a specific theme is chosen by the Ministry of Education. In 2015, the theme is "importance of parental love for children". The UNICEF Communication team also works with education colleagues on various communication and advocacy strategies throughout the year.



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Advocacy campaign for national ECD month 2015



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Tim Sutton, UNICEF China Acting Representative (fourth from left) and Liu Limin, Vice Minister of Education (fourth from right) help celebrate at the 2015 national ECD month launch

"We applaud the strong leadership by the Government of China to accelerate access to ECD services especially in the western and central regions of the country, where the majority of vulnerable children live," said Tim Sutton, UNICEF China's Acting Representative, at the launch of the fourth national ECD advocacy month in Nanjing on 22 May 2015. "Globally, we still have a long way to go to convince everyone of how critical this period of life is in a child's life. We know millions of the poorest and most disadvantaged children are missing out from these investments. We hope China's experience and commitment can inspire other countries to do as China is doing."

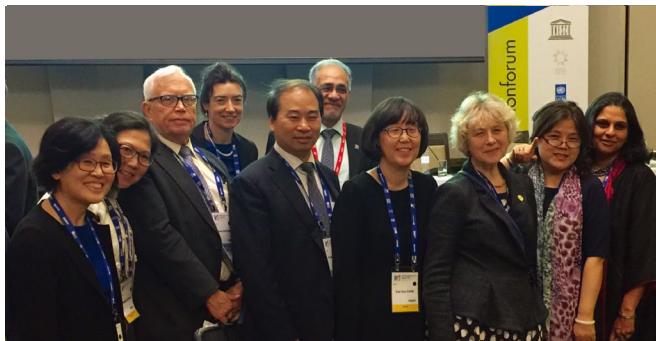
ECD in emergency and disaster risk reduction work

Responding to education needs in an emergency situation is a core element of the UNICEF mandate, which now includes ECD. After the immediate response and recovery to the massive 8.0-magnitude earthquake – the most devastating natural disaster to hit China in decades – struck south-western China on 12 May 2008, UNICEF next shifted to put ECD as a core element in its activities. In 2009, UNICEF set up ECD centres in Qing Chuan, Beichuan, Shifang, Mianzhu and Songpan counties in Sichuan, and Xihe County in Gansu, which were the most severely affected areas during the earthquake.

UNICEF China and the Ministry of Education advocating for ECD globally

UNICEF China with the Government of China is advocating globally for ECD to be central to the post-2015 development agenda. China's participation at the World Education Forum in Incheon, the Republic of Korea, which on 21 May approved the Declaration on Education 2030, highlighted the country's contribution to ECD and affirmed its global commitment to this agenda.

Dr. Wang Dinghua, Director General of Basic Education in the Ministry of Education, presented China's success in early childhood education at the Forum. He shared China's success story in addressing equity and recommitted China's global commitment to making sure ECD is a central pillar of the post-2015 development agenda.



The UNICEF China team with Pia Britto, UNICEF ECD Senior Global Adviser (far right), Wang Dinghua, Director General Basic Education 1 (fifth from left) and James Heckman, Nobel Laureate (sixth from left) during the World Education Forum

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Parenting portal

Parental demand for quality ECD information and services is increasing. In response, the Ministry of Education and UNICEF created a resource for parenting information that began with a computer website in 2012, followed by a kiosk service in 2013 and then a mobile phone application in 2014, which at last count had received 1.5 million independent users. The resource includes 269 ECD messages and 200 micro-videos covering critical issues of early childhood development from birth to age 6 years: daily care, nutrition and feeding, disease prevention, immunization, development and education, and safety and protection. Link: <http://yuer.cbern.gov.cn/> App: <https://appstore/cn/OiKPZ.i>

The parenting portal was presented by the Ministry of Education and extremely well received as a best practice during the World Education Forum in the Republic of Korea in May 2015, with significant interest from many countries in learning about the parenting portal and how to replicate it.



Parents using the ECD parenting website

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About UNICEF: UNICEF promotes the rights and well-being of every child, in everything we do. Together with our partners, we work in 190 countries and territories to translate that commitment into practical action, focusing special effort on reaching the most vulnerable and excluded children, to the benefit of all children, everywhere. For more information about UNICEF and its work visit: www.unicef.org

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