



EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

We work for all children to be healthy, safe and properly stimulated in the first three years of life—a critical time for shaping adult lives.

A poor start in life puts children's development at risk

Most children's brain development occurs in the first three years of life, when they are acutely sensitive to stimuli, both positive and negative. High quality nutrition, stimulation, play and other factors enhance cognitive development. But, stresses such as malnutrition, violence and neglect can leave lasting physical, cognitive and emotional effects.

Children who do not develop to their full potential in the first three years may face less opportunities throughout their lives. Countries that spend less on early childhood development (ECD) services and no government body in charge of coordinating those services or mechanisms to support parents. More than a third of children younger than 3 years may be at risk of suboptimal development.

China lacks public services for children aged 0–3 years beyond primary health care, especially in poverty-stricken rural and remote areas. There are no approved standards or policy guidelines for early childhood development (ECD) services and no government body in charge of coordinating those services or mechanisms to support parents. More than a third of children younger than 3 years may be at risk of suboptimal development.

UNICEF is working in partnership with the Chinese Government to expand ECD services across the country.

Our programme

UNICEF promotes integrated, community-based ECD approaches in China, advocating for and demonstrating the difference that a comprehensive package of services can make for children aged 0–3 years in rural and suburban areas. This package covers

- regular healthy growth and developmental assessment, counselling and follow-up
- nutrition counselling and nutrition-supplement provision
- responsive caregiving and early stimulation advice to parents
- play, learning and parenting guidance in ECD centres or neighbourhood groups
- assistance to disadvantaged families addressing child protection risks, as well as financial, social security and safety issues

UNICEF initiated multi-sectoral cooperation among government and civil society organizations in 170 communities in four counties. The aim was to jointly deliver an integrated package of services, and further pilot different delivery models that draw on this package of interventions to strengthen existing services and build up the ECD workforce. Based on our experiences, UNICEF advocates for public investment as well as coordination mechanisms to bring all parties together to tackle the health, development and child protection needs of

young children in China.

Different models for different contexts

Our models use different approaches to fit the different contexts in communities where we work:

1. *Community integrated service.* We partner with the All China Women's Federation in 170 communities/villages to recruit and train ECD volunteer women who can set up and manage a community service model that includes an ECD centre, a play group and home visits to inspire parent-child interactions and nurturing care.
2. *Integrating ECD into the health system.* We partner with the National Health Commission to incorporate the ECD package within services in 19 counties (in six provinces), including six counties focusing on children left behind by their migrant parents. A package of ECD services (health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, early stimulation, child safety) is provided via health clinics, home visits, and group sessions to improve the quality of nurturing care practices. Professional support for children at risk of developmental delays was also addressed in our programme by training health professionals to identify, counsel and refer children in need. We also reached out to families to inform them on appropriate child rearing methods and skills.
3. *Ensuring child protection in early childhood.* We partner with the China Ministry of Civil Affairs to provide professional social work services to children and families with protection and welfare risks. We also work with the National Working Committee on Children and Women to build the capacity of para-professional community-based workers to adapt ECD techniques into the activities of child-friendly spaces¹. Through these efforts, we prevent children from being exposed to violence in early childhood.

A model that works

By linking village health clinics, larger health facilities, ECD centres and social welfare and child protection services, we see greater coverage and impact of the five nurturing care interventions (nutrition, responsive care, child protection and social assistance, early learning support, and healthy growth and development assessment) that are critical for young children. Agencies working together rather than in isolation

means a better chance for children. Each can easily provide referrals for children with suspected developmental delays to specialized service facilities or for families who need protection and welfare assistance to the county-level civil affairs offices.

Improving services

Our proposed activity models are based on international best practice and scientific evidence, and adjusted for the Chinese context. They are designed to improve the skills and knowledge of all ECD service providers at the village level as well as the resources that enhance their work. This includes a parenting information portal, a Mothers Booklet with parenting tips, community health workers counselling cards and resource kits for home visiting services and group sessions.

Proven pathways to a better start in life

Evaluation results in two of the provinces where we work (Guizhou and Shanxi) show that integrated ECD interventions reduced developmental delays among children up to age 3 years by 18 per cent (from 43 per cent to 25 per cent) over an 18-month period. A review of the 60 communities in three other provinces (Hebei, Hubei and Hunan) over the same 18-year period found that 93 per cent of caregivers had increased their knowledge on childrearing, that 90 per cent had increased the amount of time spent with their children and that workers' and volunteers' professional knowledge and attitudes had improved.

Better standards for children

Our partnership with the Government and the evidence generated from pilots of the different models have led to improvements in resources that target children's health and development, including: the national reference standard for optimal development; the early intervention package for children at high risk of developmental delay; and, a basic ECD service guideline to standardize the process for assisting all children in rural areas.

¹The Government of China is working to establish a Children's Place (or a child-friendly space) in 90 per cent of communities across the country.

We launch the G20 Initiative for Early Childhood Development and stand ready to join all stakeholders in enhancing quality and sustainably financed early childhood programs that consider the multidimensional approach of ECD, as means of building human capital to break the cycle of intergenerational and structural poverty, and of reducing inequalities, specially where young children are most vulnerable.

— From the G20 Leaders' declaration on building consensus for fair and sustainable development in Argentina 2018

