

Early Learning Roadmap in Response to COVID-19 : Keeping Young Children Safe, Loved and Learning

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The pandemic threatens young children's development in unparalleled ways. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 250 million children (43%) younger than 5 years were at risk of not reaching their developmental potential¹ and millions of children were facing a global learning crisis, where even after several years of school, they could not read, write or do basic math². Global surveys studying the impact of the pandemic have shown that over 1.5 billion children have missed out on school and 10 million may never return, especially girls who are now being forced into early marriage³. Moreover, a third of households experienced domestic violence, 82% of poorer households reported a loss of income, and 89% had difficulties accessing healthcare and medicine due to the pandemic⁴.

Effects of prior pandemics confirm the risk of both immediate and long-term adverse consequences for children, with particular risks faced during early childhood, when brain architecture is still rapidly developing and highly sensitive

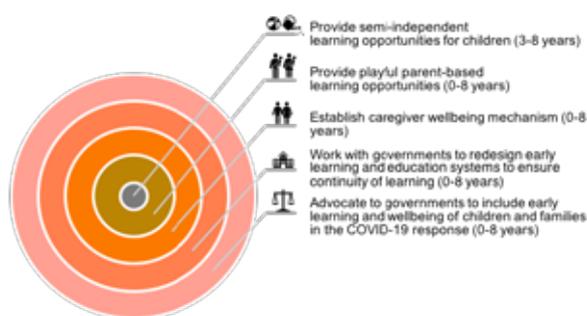
1 [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(16\)31389-7.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(16)31389-7.pdf)

2 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2017/09/26/world-bank-warns-of-learning-crisis-in-global-education>

3 <https://www.savethechildren.net/save-our-education>

4 <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2020-press-releases/during-covid-19-children-in-poverty-experience-greatest-financial-education-loss-highest-risk-of-violence>

to environmental adversity⁵. When children grow up deprived of stimulation, with low interaction with adults, and ongoing, persistent stress, their young minds fail to build or maintain important brain connections. This ongoing "toxic" stress causes visible changes in brain structure⁶ and can have damaging effects on children's learning, development, behaviour, and health across the lifespan⁷. Yoshikawa, et. al (2020)⁸ claim that follow-up studies of individuals in utero during pandemics, natural disasters and famines show the potential for life-long negative consequences of such shocks⁹. Save the Children must ensure that early learning and wellbeing is an essential part of the COVID-19 response.



This roadmap to ECCD programming in the context of COVID-19 aims to support countries to implement, monitor, and evaluate experiences throughout the stages of a crisis and to enable governments

and other ECCD actors to advocate for and operationalize caregiver wellbeing, parenting and semi-independent learning. It focuses on establishing a caregiver wellbeing mechanism to set the foundations for early learning and development, strengthening the capacity of the caregiver to support young children's learning,

5 Shonkoff J.P., Garner A.S. Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health; Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care; Section on Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics. The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics*. 2012;129:e232–e246.

6 <https://www.impact.upenn.edu/our-analysis/opportunities-to-achieve-impact/early-childhood-toolkit/why-invest/new-brain-research/>

7 https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2005/05/Stress_Disrupts_Architecture_Developing_Brain-1.pdf

8 Yoshikawa, H., et.al (2020). Effects of the Global Coronavirus Disease-2019 Pandemic on Early Childhood Development: Short- and Long-Term Risks and Mitigating Program and Policy Actions. *Journal of Pediatrics*. 223: 188–193.

9 Almond D. Is the 1918 influenza pandemic over? Long-term effects of in utero influenza exposure in the post-1940 US population. *J Polit Econ*. 2006;114:672–712. King S., Laplante D.P. Using natural disasters to study prenatal maternal stress in humans. *Adv Neurobiol*. 2015;10:285–313 Lumey L.H., Stein A.D., Kahn H.S., van der Pal-de Bruin K.M., Blauw G.J., Zybert P.A. Cohort profile: the Dutch Hunger Winter families study. *Int J Epidemiol*. 2007;36:1196–1204.

providing semi-independent learning opportunities, working with governments to ensure the continuity of learning throughout the stages of the pandemic, and advocating with key actors to include ECCD in response efforts. The roadmap draws from country experiences to demonstrate how to create an environment for homes, in partnership with supportive caregivers, as well as how to ensure that young children receive quality semi-independent experiences through other channels. The roadmap aims to foster a shift in thinking around how enabling homes can protect childhoods and mitigate learning loss in emergency contexts. The expected results are that:

1. Caregivers with children of 0–8 years have knowledge of stress management strategies for themselves and their children.
2. Caregivers with children of 0–8 years engage their children in learning and socio-emotional learning activities and apply more positive parenting practices.
3. Children of 3–8 years receive semi-independent learning opportunities at home.
4. National/local governments are implementing a learning strategy for children of 0–8 years that ensures continuity of learning throughout the stages of the pandemic.
5. National/local governments plan for and allocate resources to support the wellbeing and development of young children and their caregivers, especially the most vulnerable, in the COVID-19 response.

Objective 1: Establish a caregiver wellbeing mechanism (0–8 years)

In times of crisis, caregivers are more prone to stress, anxiety and depression, which reduces their ability to engage with their children.¹⁰ Therefore, caregiver wellbeing, which encompasses mental health and psychosocial support and

10 Yoshikawa, H., Wuermli, A. J., Britto, P., Dreyer, B., Leckman, J., Lye, S. J., Ponguta, A., Richter, L., & Stein, A. (2020). Effects of the Global COVID-19 Pandemic on Early Childhood Development: Short and Long-Term Risks and Mitigating Program and Policy Actions. *The Journal of Pediatrics*, January. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2020.05.020>

the ability to identify and manage stress, is a prerequisite for positive parenting. Families can be enrolled in a program as members of a small, supportive network (virtual or phone-based), with a group facilitator. Through these networks, families can learn essential skills to recognize their own stress and how this can affect young children's behaviour (more crying, more defiance, regression, etc.). Messages and prompts can encourage caregivers to manage stress, practice self-care and respond appropriately and equally to girls' and boys' behaviour and needs. The messages can cover psychosocial education, socio-emotional learning activities that can be done at home, self-care, connecting with existing family violence services and referral pathways, how children experience stress and positive parenting. This program can be coordinated with a MHPSS program to provide phone consultations with professional counsellors as needed and support referrals of identified cases. The group facilitators can be trained in psychosocial first aid and basic emotional support. The Dissemination Strategy section describes how the program can be delivered. Through this component, caregivers can receive the support they need to unlock their potential to engage their children in experiences.

Objective 2. Provide caregiver-based learning opportunities (0-8 years)

Save the Children can empower both male and female caregivers with the capability, knowhow and confidence to integrate early stimulation and responsive care into everyday activities, promoting all developmental domains, and help to provide children with a safe, loving and nurturing home environment. These learning activities can be disseminated through a parents' audio and SMS program, the radio¹¹, mobile phones and any other available communication channels. The program can convey both caregiver wellbeing and positive parenting practices, as well as simple ways to turn routine tasks into enjoyable learning activities. Household materials can stimulate joyful interactions that promote brain development, parental self-confidence, the bond between

11 In Nepal, capsule radio shows of five minutes in duration can be strategically placed between local news.

caregivers and children, and the child's sense of security. They can also address gender stereotypes that restrict young girls' and boys' ability to play with materials of their choice. Specific adjustments can be made for more disadvantaged communities and families, including children with disabilities and caregivers with disabilities (see Dissemination Strategy section for details).

Objective 3. Provide semi-independent learning opportunities (3–8 years)

In addition to strengthening parenting practices at home, early learning programs can offer a learning program that children can engage in semi-independently. This children's program can be delivered through mass media, mobile phones, videos, radio, television and social media. Gender-transformative role models can be highlighted and encourage thinking, exploration and learning outside of stereotypical social norms. Programming can include songs and stories, and the distribution of a home learning kit for the most disadvantaged communities and families, following government safety guidelines. The home learning kit may include construction toys, playing cards, counters, self-learning materials, story books, doll, ball, paper and drawing materials, a calendar of activities portraying girls and boys engaging in non-stereotypical activities, and a guide for parents to create their own home play area with safe materials for semi-independent learning (e.g. unbreakable plates, cups, spoons, cloths, shakers). The children's program can include games, songs and stories appropriate for children under five years (see Dissemination Strategy section for details).

Objective 4. Work with the government to redesign early learning models and education systems for young children to ensure continuity of learning for all (0–8 years)

Save the Children will need to redesign early learning models and education systems for young children, including children with disabilities, by devising

creative and effective solutions to address disparities. We can ensure continuity of learning by offering flexible in person and remote options that can be administered individually and in small groups (see figure). We can strengthen the culture of innovation within country offices by encouraging the design of creative non-center-based early learning programs, drawing on our many years of programming experience in this area. We can also introduce platforms for collaborative reflection that encourage country offices to study issues, apply creative and relevant solutions, use rapid assessments to evaluate their effectiveness, and then either refine promising approaches, or try out new ones. Monitoring and documenting our experiences will be pivotal to inform the government on good practices for implementing ECCD during COVID-19. Participating in an inter-departmental early learning task force could be a forum to share field experiences and support scale up by the government. Closely working with the government to review ECCD COVID response action plans, back-to-school strategies, coordinating the delivery of training and sharing best practices are examples of ways to engage with the government to ensure delivery of quality early learning.

Objective 5. Advocate to national and local governments and donors to include early learning and wellbeing of young children and their families in the COVID-19 response (0-8 years)

The final objective of the roadmap focuses on advocacy to include early learning and development from birth within the COVID-19 response, especially for the most disadvantaged girls and boys. The early years are much more formative than many realize and the impact of the pandemic on young children's lifelong learning and success could be very serious without intervention. Caregivers from more disadvantaged groups are less likely to have the skills and confidence to engage their children at home, and require more intensive, practical and coordinated programs. Save the Children's impact evaluations have shown that simple and low-cost home learning programs can significantly improve early learning and development scores and reduce inequity. Save the Children can work in partnership with the government. We can support the creation and

implementation of policies that plan for, fund, pilot and scale up effective early learning and wellbeing programs, especially for the most vulnerable communities. These home-based programs must be delivered not only to children who are not able to access ECCD centers due to the pandemic, but also children who were never enrolled in the first place.

COVID has forced us to rethink ECCD programs for the future, and it has become clear to us: We have a choice to make. If we invest only in older children, young children facing adversity, whose parents cannot engage them and cannot meet their basic needs for safety, food, shelter and wellbeing, will be at a significant disadvantage that will continue to deepen. But if we work with government systems to design flexible, innovative and effective early learning programs that extend beyond the school walls, with home-engagement and cross-sectoral caregiver wellbeing components, we have the potential to mitigate this learning loss and ensure that even more children have the early learning foundations they need to succeed in life.

