

STARTING EARLY TO BUILD STRONGER AND MORE PEACEFUL SOCIETIES



Millions of children around the world are living through conflict, violence and insecurity. With emergencies and protracted crises on the rise, UNICEF is committed to safeguarding children's development and contributing to resilient and sustainable societies. Recognizing the interconnectedness of social development and peace articulated in the new Sustainable Development Goals, UNICEF is working with partners on innovative early childhood development (ECD) interventions to reduce violence, promote peace, and provide a robust foundation for children to grow into healthy, active and engaged community members.

There are a number of specific ways ECD programming can contribute to peacebuilding:

1. *Providing safe, caring and loving environments for young children.*

Recent advances in research and science indicate that care and nurturance during the first years of life build the foundation for a child's ability to trust and form relationships with others. Neurobiological evidence demonstrates that the brain's synapses (nerve cell connections) grow faster and more complex during the first few months of a child's life than at any other stage.¹

Positive relationships early in life – relationships which are responsive, caring, safe and loving – promote the brain development of a young child.² Hormones such as oxytocin, that are released during early attachment and bonding, generate “freedom from anxiety, disturbance (emotional, mental or spiritual), or inner conflict”³ and can set the stage for positive and non-aggressive interactions in later life.⁴

In contrast, inconsistent relationships with parents or caregivers, lack of attachment, bonding and interaction, neglect or exposure to violence, can severely impact a child's nervous system and negatively impact her or his ability to trust, bond and relate with others. The impact can last a lifetime.⁵ Research shows that excessive exposure to toxic stress can derail a child's healthy development, jeopardizing a child's health, learning and behavior across his or her lifetime.⁶ Providing children with caring and nurturing ECD programmes can lay the foundation for a child's healthy development.

2. *Promoting positive attitudes and skills in children.*

Quality early childhood programmes that promote positive child-to-child interaction and draw on the

Figure 1. ECD integrated programming for peacebuilding



power of play can help young children develop positive behaviour such as working cooperatively, managing conflict, regulating emotions, showing appreciation for diversity and processing complex information. Such behaviours are important for peaceful interaction and strengthen a child's ability to resolve conflicts without violence.⁷ Further, parenting programmes that focus on minimizing conflict in families have resulted in a reduction in children's physical, verbal and psychological violence. This in turn helps children's long-term well-being and social relations, mitigating the cross-generational cycle of maltreatment in families and communities.⁸

3. Improving caregiver and children well-being

Research shows that 'play and touch' interactions and responsive parenting can significantly improve a mother or caregiver's well-being, especially in cases of caregiver depression, isolation and stress.⁹ The improved well-being of the caregiver benefits the development and growth of the child as well as the child-to-caregiver interaction. This has implications for strengthening the individual child, and their families, to build harmonious and equitable relations across generations.¹⁰

4. Reducing conflict and violence

Children and society gain from good ECD programming. A longitudinal study demonstrated

that early childhood interventions have wide-ranging benefits that help a child far into adult life – improving not only their educational attainment and psychological functioning but also reducing violent behaviour – key to building more peaceful societies.¹¹ In Lebanon, ECD programmes implemented with children and families in Palestinian refugee camps resulted in reduced conflict and violence, greater family harmony and increased women's empowerment.¹² The socio-emotional benefits of ECD can also extend to young people, who are often parents or caregivers for their siblings. While youth in conflict settings are often alienated and have multiple needs, involving young people in ECD programmes, such as caregiver capacity development, can help reduce exclusion and provide an entry point for prosocial engagement, that is behaviour that benefits others or society as a whole.

5. Diminishing inequities and contributing to social justice

ECD interventions contribute to social justice by reducing inequities in society. Economist James Heckman calculated a 1:7 rate of return for ECD interventions,¹³ showing that ECD interventions provide the opportunity to mitigate developmental inequalities within society. Increasing enrolment in just one type of ECD programme (preschool) in a low- to middle-income country can result in a benefit-to-cost ratio of 6.4 to 17.6, depending on the percentage of children enrolled.¹⁴

CASE STUDY: ECD centres in Uganda

Having recognized inequity as one of the drivers of conflict in Uganda, UNICEF launched the delivery of ECD services in rural areas that have historically been deprived of social services. These ECD centres responded to a common community demand for pre-primary education and provided opportunities to nurture the cognitive and social development of children from families having lived through decades of violent conflict. In 2014, 424 ECD centres were given licenses by district officials and just over 112,000 boys and girls aged 3 to 5 years benefitted from access to ECD in community based centres in some of Uganda's most marginalized communities. The ECD centres also provide a platform for social interaction among caretakers from different community backgrounds. The initiative contributes to building greater social cohesion and peace through:

- Change in perceptions, and building trust in educational institutions in areas where trust is low.
- Safety and security, keeping children safe in care centres that also serve as a hub for information on health, sanitation, risk avoidance and safe behaviour.
- Pro-social learning, in which programmes empower children and caregivers to become agents of change.
- Household economic support through the care provided for children, which enable household members to work, thereby supporting household economies and community resilience.
- Strengthened intra- and inter-communal relationships, as regular meetings between parents, caregivers and the centre management committee strengthened community social cohesion.
- Peacebuilding messages shared with parents and the wider community through training caregivers and ECD centre trainings.

Source: UNICEF Uganda Learning for Peace

CASE STUDY: ECD, women and peacebuilding in Côte d'Ivoire

In Côte d'Ivoire's Moyen-Cavallay and Tonkpi regions, UNICEF's Learning for Peace programme supported the establishment of 17 ECD community centres, enabling more than 1,200 children to access ECD services in volatile communities that border Liberia. The centres are managed by multi-ethnic women's groups. Through activities organized at the centres and a 'package' of interventions, trust is being rebuilt between women of different ethnicities and social backgrounds, whose children are now attending preschool. Together, the women are learning how to read, write, calculate and manage income-generating activities that help sustain the ECD centres, and help improve women's positions within households and the community. The clubs also provide a platform for social interaction and dialogue about issues that affect women, children and the community at large, including inter- and intra-community tension, violence and conflict. Engaging women to peacefully resolve conflicts has also brought their husbands together and is helping to rebuilding the community's social fabric. One member of the women's group said: "The group helped me forget the war ... We're not the same people we were before. Since we're mixed, we're all together. We won't fight ... Now my kids are in safety I can work in the field and we can be at peace."

Source: UNICEF Cote d'Ivoire Learning for Peace

6. Serving as platforms for community cohesion.

ECD centers that target the most disadvantaged children and bring communities together around the shared goal of child-wellbeing can also serve as a platform through which communities manage disputes and prevent conflict from escalating into violence.¹⁵ Assisting caregivers from different cultural backgrounds in communities with histories of conflict in setting up joint institutions and social support networks that buffer against physical and psychological stressors can make significant contributions to social cohesion peacebuilding. Case studies from conflict and post-conflict environments in such countries as Chad, Northern Ireland, the State of Palestine, and high-violence neighbourhoods in the United States indicate that interventions during early childhood can "transcend existing political divides and encourage those involved in conflict to re-focus their attention and priorities and to think instead of their own children and their future."¹⁶ Community and family-based ECD programmes allow caregivers to come together to discuss and resolve the challenges they face. In doing so, they also help forge and sustain relationships across social, ethnic, religious, and political divides,¹⁷ which can outlast programme completion. In addition, ECD centres or spaces are seen as safe havens that buffer children from the turbulence and disruption around them during emergencies.

Recommendations for investing in ECD interventions in peacebuilding

Building peace and social cohesion requires starting early and expanding investments in the delivery of quality ECD services that are inclusive and conflict-sensitive. This means reaching every last child and identifying both conflict-affected communities and the drivers of conflict within and between communities. ECD interventions must be leveraged to mitigate

conflict drivers and strengthen community, family and individual resilience.

Recommendations to achieve these goals include:

- Implement ECD programmes that are safe, nurturing and inclusive - targeting the most vulnerable children and bringing different community groups together around shared goals.
- Integrate peacebuilding into parenting programmes for marginalized populations that cannot access ECD centres, and set up strategies to reach out to isolated and marginalized or isolated families.
- Integrate ECD components into peacebuilding capacity-building, curricula and training materials for workforce and caregivers.
- Advocate for the development of policies, guidance and tools that recognize and include ECD strategies as part of peacebuilding.
- Ensure investments and continued capacity building on measurement of the long-term contributions of ECD programming on social cohesion, resilience and equity goals.
- Build capacity of social, print, and online media to understand the role ECD can play in promoting peaceful societies.
- Leverage support at the national level for contributions to global efforts of the Early Childhood Peace Consortium to adopt a United Nations resolution on education and peacebuilding, inclusive of ECD.

For further information and resources on early childhood development and peacebuilding, visit: Learning for Peace, 'Early Childhood Peace Consortium, <https://eccnetwork.net/resources/learning-for-peace/> and <https://www.ecdpeace.org/>



Endnotes

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- ¹³ Heckman, James, 'The Heckman Equation', <<http://heckmanequation.org/content/resource/heckman-equation>>.
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