Early Childhood Development and Its Promise for Peace

Policy Briefing Note

Suna Hanoz-Penney

On behalf of the ECPC Programmatic, and Policy and Advocacy Working Groups

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This policy briefing note is prepared by Suna Hanoz-Penney on behalf of the ECPC Programmatic, and Policy and Advocacy Working Groups for the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly High-level Session "Early Childhood Development: Pathways to Peace".

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About the author

Suna Hanöz-Penney works as the Director of Strategy, International Programs and Partnerships at ACEV— Mother Child Education Foundation in Istanbul. Turkey. Her work involves building collaborative partnerships, while she manages the transfer and implementation of ACEV's educational programs to local organizations in numerous countries including Cambodia, Tanzania, Lao PDR, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Brazil. She designs and supervises the early intervention programs for children and families implemented at both the national and international fields. Suna is a Fulbright Scholar, received her dual M.A. degree in Early Childhood Education from Teachers College, Columbia University, and a master's in public administration from John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. She also holds dual B.A. degrees in Early Childhood Education and Psychological Guidance & Counseling from Boğazici University, Istanbul.

About the ECPC

The ECPC is a global consortium of United Nations agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations, academia, practitioners, and the private sector focused on sharing scientific and practice-based evidence on how investment in early childhood development (ECD) can contribute to sustainable peace, social cohesion, and social justice. We recognize that investing in ECD is a powerful and cost-effective strategy for reducing violence, poverty, and exclusion and for building peaceful societies.

For further information please visit the ECPC website at ecdpeace.org or write info@ecdpeace.org.

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The Early Childhood Peace Consortium (ECPC)

The ECPC was founded on the unreserved commitment that the global community must address root causes of violence and conflict, and that children and families can be agents of change for peace. ECPC's mission is to create a movement for peace, social cohesion, and social justice, by using early childhood development strategies to enable the global community to advance peace, security, and development.

What the ECPC is Asking For

To accelerate achievement of the UNSDG 4 (Quality Education) and UNSDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), we are asking for:

1. **Recognition:** An UNGA Resolution on Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Peacebuilding which recognizes ECPC as the leading organization in promoting peace, social cohesion, and social justice via ECD

2. **Support for Policy and Advocacy:** Robust public and private sector partnerships, coordination to promote and operationalize public policy reforms that contribute to peacebuilding and reduction of violence through ECD.

3. **Support for Research:** Support for new research on the impact of ECD services on children, families, and communities in ways that advance peacebuilding outcomes such as increased social cohesion, especially in countries experiencing crisis and conflict. Increased investments and advocacy for the research and development of local ECD services.

4. **Support for ECD services Promoting Peacebuilding:** Support for ECPC's local and global peacebuilding efforts (utilizing the infrastructure of the International Peacebuilding) to focus on the implementation and scaling up comprehensive ECD services that foster a culture of respect for difference and promote social cohesion so we can reach at least 200 million children.

5. **Partnerships and Collaborations:** Support from key civil society, private sector, institutional, and governmental actors to forge partnerships to expand ECD services and interventions and disseminate knowledge about ECD and peacebuilding internationally.

The Challenge

Inequality is on the rise globally. International conflict is also increasing. Conflicts impact people of all ages but **children** are particularly vulnerable to violence and neglect. That impact is magnified by the increased stress children and parents experience when adapting to the realities of war and displacement that substantially disrupt their daily lives. Exposure to these adversities at an early age can cause children to experience "toxic stress", which is associated with a broad range of negative life outcomes, including major emotional and behavioral problems. Hundreds of millions of children are now at great risk of not reaching their full developmental potential and perpetuating cycles of violence and marginalization, affecting not just this generation but those to come.

How ECD can make a difference

In such periods of disparity and unrest, it is vital to invest in solutions that will disrupt cycles of violence, build strong foundations for sustainable development and social cohesion, and promote a "culture of peace".

ECD services do just that. Early childhood is the most formative period of human life—who the child will become in adulthood is deeply influenced by the child's environment during this time. This is why the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have considered early childhood development specifically, for the first time, through target 4.2 - "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and preprimary education so that they are ready for primary education." By intervening early and engaging with children's families, ECD services offer a unique opportunity to make a cost-effective and sustainable impact, promoting protection and resilience to toxic stress and disrupting intergenerational cycles of poverty and violence.

But ECD services cannot succeed in a silo. Their implementation must be strategic, multi-level, and focused not just on the child alone, but on the whole ecosystem which surrounds young children. Adequate funding, integrated support, and public/private sector coordination is necessary for families, caregivers, their communities, and broader institutions to provide a nurturing care framework - good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving, and opportunities for learning.

Key Highlights:

- 250 million children under age 5, presently living in low- and middle-income countries, are at great risk of not reaching their full developmental potential.[1]

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[1] Black MM, Walker SP, Fernald LC, Andersen CT, DiGirolamo AM, Lu C, et al. (2017). Early childhood development coming of age: science through the life course. *Lancet*., 389:77–90

- In 2022, approximately 468 million children (more than 1 out of 6) were living in a conflict zone.[2] This constitutes a 2.8% increase from 2021. 1.7 billion children (68%, or more than two out of three children) were living in a country affected by conflict and 250 million children lived in high intensity conflict countries.[3]

- Children are disproportionately impacted by poverty and war, exposing them to toxic stress that limits their potential and perpetuates intergenerational cycles of poverty and violence.

- ECD services offer a unique opportunity to make a cost-effective and sustainable impact that disrupts these cycles of violence, builds strong foundations for sustainable development and social cohesion, and promotes a "culture of peace".

- To succeed, ECD services must be strategic, integrated, and multi-level and adequately funded, supported, and focused on all the child's contexts, including caregivers, family, community, and institutions.

The ECPC UNGA-78 High-level Event

This event will **underscore** and **demonstrate** the importance and effectiveness of accessible ECD services in promoting peace, reconciliation, and social cohesion across the world (supporting UNSDG 4 and 16); and **identify** opportunities for ECD research, collaboration, and services for countries in need.

Key Messages:

- ECD is critical to promoting peaceful societies.[4] ECD services have been shown to lead to lower rates of violence in the home and greater social cohesion in communities; promote healthy neurobiology; foster resilience in children; and instill values and behaviors that can reduce violence and promote peace over the long term.

- Comprehensive ECD services strengthen competencies in caregivers, address stressors and conflict drivers in the community, and build institutional capacities to reduce structural violence.

- Children who have a strong early bond with their caregivers are more likely to have improved social functioning and self-regulation and will enable these individuals to flourish and contribute positively to economic stability within their own families and communities.

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[2] Thierry, M., Brydon, A., and Pearson, M. (2023). Unprotected Special Edition: Analysis of funding for child protection in armed conflict in 2021 and 2022. London, United Kingdom: Save the Children.

[3] *Id*.

[4] Britto, P. (2015). Why early childhood development is the foundation for sustainable development. UNICEF (Article). https://www. unicef. cn/stories/why-early-childhood-development-foundation-sustainable-development.

- ECD services contribute to social cohesion by intentionally instilling norms of respect for differences and intergroup cooperation skills in children and caregivers at the individual level, and by creating community oriented ECD services that bring together children and families from different diverse backgrounds.

- Numerous longitudinal studies have shown that participation in quality ECD services is associated with improved health, well-being, education, employment, and income, as well as reduced violence and criminal behaviors in adulthood.

- There remains a need for additional operational and interventional research and implementation services, especially in regions experiencing conflict or crisis or those that are emerging from it.

ECPC and Our Global Strategy, 2023-2023

Our **Global Strategy, 2023-2026** is designed to expedite progress towards UNSDG 4 (Quality Education) and UNSDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by implementing fidelity tested intervention services and raising awareness about ECD's essential role in promoting peace. As envisioned by the UN Secretary General's newly launched ambitious Agenda for Peace, our central goal is to reach at least 200 million children living in regions affected by conflict and crisis each year. **We will do this by:**

1. **Advocacy and Policy:** Advocate for expanded ECD services and public policies ensuring long-term effectiveness; disseminate knowledge on successful case studies promoting peace/social cohesion via ECD.

2. **Research:** Initiate new research projects to document the positive impact of ECD service interventions on peace and social cohesion.

3. **Partnerships:** Work with public and private sector actors on new ECD service interventions in challenging contexts and expanding child access to existing ECD services.

4. **Capacity Building:** Strengthen theoretical, methodological, and technical capacity of ECPC members to undertake research on armed conflict and peacebuilding with young children, families, and communities.