

Early childhood education and care: An approach to a wholistic education system.

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Meriem Marzak¹, Mehdi Belghmi²

¹ Humanities and Social Sciences,
GCAS College Dublin,
Ireland,

² English Department, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences Dhar El Mahraz, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, USMBA, 30000, Fes, Morocco

Introduction: In the concept of early childhood education and care (ECEC), certain foundational principles stand out as vital and of paramount importance for ensuring ideal child development through different stages during the age of 1 – 5 years. While rooted in extensive research and best practices, the following five principles serve as guiding lights for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders. This discourse delves into five such key principles, each of which holds significant implications for the holistic development of young learners.

Outline.

- 1. Prioritize Early Years for Holistic Development.**
- 2. Create a Nurturing Environment for Optimal Development.**
- 3. Focus on Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).**
- 4. Engage Families for Holistic Child Development.**
- 5. Continuous Professional Development for ECEC Educators.**

1. Prioritize Early Years for Holistic Development:.

The early years of a child's life, particularly the critical first five years, is a period of rapid, unparalleled and unprecedented growth. This phase is not neither about academic learning nor about formal

education, but it encompasses a broad spectrum of cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, behavioural, psychological and motor development.

- **Brain Plasticity:** The OECD document emphasizes that the brain's plasticity or elasticity is at its peak during the early years. This means that the brain is highly adaptable and can change in response to experiences and learning. Such plasticity diminishes over time, making early interventions crucial and rendering learning and acquisition harder the older the learner gets .
- **Sensitivity to External Stimuli:** During the first five years (formative years), children are especially sensitive to external stimuli, such as interactions with caregivers, friends or parents. Positive and valid interactions can foster healthy brain development and a good memory in the learner's brain and thus motivate them to repeat the same actions, while negative experiences can hinder learning .
- **Foundation for Future Learning:** The array of skills and knowledge sets children to acquire during the early years serve as a foundation for future learning and marks the beginning of a new learning process. Early positive experiences can reinforce and set a positive trajectory for success in later academic and life pursuits .
- **Social and Emotional Development:** Aside from cognitive and mental skills, early years are crucial for social and emotional development. Children learn to interact with peers, manage their emotions, carry out their behaviour in a social environment and develop empathy during this period. These skills are as dynamic as cognitive skills for future success .

For children in their early stages of learning, it has been found that the previously mentioned skills (Brain Plasticity, Sensitivity to External Stimuli, Foundation for Future Learning and Social and Emotional Development) while playing a major role in enhancing and affecting young learners, if prioritized well and given due importance, they can be very useful in paving the way for young learners having positive attitudes towards learning and experiencing knowledge in its broader senses. .

2. Create a Nurturing Environment for Optimal Development:.

A nurturing and stimulating environment is paramount for children's holistic development. It has been long debated that humans acquire naturally, but nurturing kids and providing a suitable and safe learning environment is necessary. Such an environment supports cognitive growth and fosters emotional, social, and physical well-being.

- **Significance of Context:** The OECD document underscores that a children's environment, including family, early childhood education and care services, and the broader community, plays a key role in their development. Factors such as home activities, parental background, and parenting styles significantly shape a child's learning trajectory .
- **Safe and Secure Environment:** A safe and secure environment allows children to explore, venture to take risks, and learn without fear or limits. Such environments promote confidence and resilience and instil the spirit of adventure, which are essential traits for future challenges .
- **Inclusive and Respectful Atmosphere:** An environment that respects diversity and promotes inclusivity ensures that all children feel valued and included regardless of their background. This fosters a sense of belonging, enhances self-esteem, and makes learning enjoyable .
- **Stimulating Physical Environment:** A well-designed physical environment, equipped with age-appropriate learning materials, can stimulate curiosity and promote active learning. Elements such as natural light, open spaces, interactive learning corners, colours and toys can enhance cognitive, physical and motor skills development (Derman-Sparks, L., & Edwards, J. O., 2010).
- **Emotional Support:** Emotional support at an early age from educators and caregivers is crucial. Positive relationships and experiences with adults provide children with a secure base,

enabling them to explore their environment and engage in learning activities more confidently

It has been found that there is a direct correlation between the learning environment and its effectiveness. Safety and Security of the environment is also a pillar of learning. Furthermore, an Inclusive, Respectful and stimulating atmosphere is the seed that blossoms creativity and thinking-out-of-the-box learners.

3. Focus on Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC):.

The quality of ECEC programs is paramount in determining their effectiveness. A high-quality ECEC supports cognitive development and fosters socio-emotional growth, setting the stage for lifelong learning and well-being.

- **Long-Term Benefits:** The OECD document highlights that high-quality ECEC programs provide long-term benefits for both cognitive and socio-emotional skills. Such programs lay the foundation for future academic success and positive life outcomes .
- **Teacher-Child Interactions:** One of the most critical components of quality in ECEC is the nature of teacher-child interactions. Warm, responsive, and stimulating interactions can significantly enhance children's learning and development .
- **Curriculum and Pedagogy:** A well-structured, age-appropriate, flexible, and child-centred curriculum can significantly impact children's learning outcomes. The pedagogical approaches should be evidence-based and tailored to meet the diverse needs of children .
- **Professional Development:** Continuous professional development for ECEC educators is vital. It ensures they have the latest knowledge, skills, and best practices to deliver high-quality education .

- **Inclusive Environment:** A quality ECEC program should be inclusive, catering to the diverse needs of all children, including those with special needs or from diverse cultural backgrounds. Such inclusivity ensures equitable learning opportunities for all .

Quality over quantity is not at all wrong. A warm, vibrant and filled with emotions learning experience is eternally engraved in the learners' memory. While inclusive and student-centred learning experience makes young learners feel important and grow with a deeply-rooted positive self-esteem.

4. Engage Families for Holistic Child Development:.

Family engagement is a cornerstone of successful early childhood education. Families play a pivotal role in shaping a child's early experiences, values, and attitudes towards learning. Engaging families in the educational process can amplify the benefits of ECEC programs.

- **Central Role of Families:** The OECD document underscores the profound influence of the home learning environment on a child's development. Factors such as home activities, parental background, and parenting styles significantly shape a child's learning trajectory .
- **Partnership with Educators:** When families and educators work collaboratively, it creates a consistent learning environment for children. This partnership can lead to a better understanding of a child's needs, strengths, and areas of improvement .
- **Cultural and Contextual Understanding:** Engaging with families gives educators insights into the cultural, social, and economic contexts that shape a child's experiences. This understanding can inform more culturally responsive teaching practices .
- **Empowerment and Capacity Building:** Engaging families is not just about involvement but also about empowerment. Providing families with resources, training, and support can enhance their capacity to support their child's learning at home .

- Feedback and Communication: Regular communication with families can provide valuable feedback on the ECEC program's effectiveness and areas of improvement. It fosters a sense of community and shared responsibility for a child's education .

Families are as important to the learning experience as the tutors. An understanding, mistakes accepting family empowers the young learner to make mistakes and learn valuable lessons. The trial and error method is found to be for young learners. Hence families are encouraged to let them explore and make mistakes. .

Conclusion:.

The early years of a child's life are undeniably formative, setting the trajectory for future academic and life successes. Educators and stakeholders can provide children with the best possible start in life by emphasizing the importance of the early years, creating nurturing environments, ensuring quality in ECEC, engaging families, and promoting continuous professional development. Embracing these principles is not just an investment in individual children but in the future of society.

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