

Building a sustainable and inclusive Early Childhood Intervention system

Policy Brief



Title:

Building a sustainable and inclusive Early Childhood Intervention system - Policy brief

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Introducing Early Childhood Intervention



ECI is a composite of services for very young children and their families, provided at their request at a certain time in a child's life, covering any action undertaken when a child needs special support...



According to the European Agency for the development of special needs education, **“ECI is a composite of services for very young children and their families, provided at their request at a certain time in a child's life, covering any action undertaken when a child needs special support to:**

- **Ensure and enhance her/his personal development,**
- **Strengthen the family's own competencies, and**
- **Promote the social inclusion of the family and the child.**

These actions are to be provided in the child's natural setting, preferably at a local level, with a family-oriented and multi- dimensional teamwork approach” (European Agency for Development of Special Needs Education, 2010).

Dunst and Sherwindt propose a different definition “ECI is the different types of parenting supports provided by early childhood practitioners, and other social network members, that provide parents the time, energy, knowledge, and skills, to engage their children in everyday child learning opportunities, that promote and enhance both child and parent confidence and competence” (Dunst, 2000, 2007a, 2017; Dunst & Espe-Sherwindt, 2017).

Although they are similar in some ways and both make clear that ECI involves **parents** and **other primary caregivers**, the focus of the first is on services and the second emphasizes the support provided to families to make sure they provide appropriate learning experiences to promote development.

Over the last years, ECI evolved from **clinical services provided within a child-centered perspective** in ECI centers, to a rapidly growing field with a totally different conceptual framework, goals, outcome measures and **level of parental involvement**.

Why is Early Childhood Intervention important?

The first years of a child's life are a **period of exceptional sensitivity to environmental influences**. They are a **window of opportunity** during which, experience has a particularly strong influence on the **formation of neural circuits**.

The importance of this critical period in brain development is easily understood when we see that during the preschool years, brain volume increases 4 times, reaching 90% of the adult brain by age 6.

That's why ECI is so important, since it occurs when the environment has the biggest potential to produce changes.

The adoption of the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** in 2006 provided momentum for **ensuring that countries have policies and programmes to support children with disabilities and their families**. According to the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** in the United States (CDC), **approximately one in every six children (17%)** have one or more developmental disabilities (Global Research on Developmental Disabilities Collaborators, 2018; Black & Lawn, 2018; Zablotsky et al., 2019).

According to a well-known big longitudinal study, a considerable percentage of children who received ECI services had problems that resolved as the child grew older. Around 16% of those children left the program before they turned 36 months of age, more than one-third (37%) did not receive preschool special education services, and 42% did not receive special education in kindergarten. Those children were more likely to belong to delays or risk conditions but there were children from all categories (National Early Intervention Longitudinal Study, final report, 2007).

Research has been showing that ECI benefits not only the child with a disability or at risk, but also families, communities and societies in general, by:

- **Reducing** the effects of a disability and **preventing** the negative outcomes associated with poor environmental conditions;
- Providing the foundation and trajectory for **children's lifelong learning, development and health outcomes**;
- **Strengthening the family's and parent's self-confidence, competence, well-being, and quality of life**.

Countries and governmental agencies around the world are searching ways **to plan, develop or improve ECI services**. Each country has its own national economic, political, cultural conditions and priorities, but all of them are committed in their own way to **building their own ECI system**. Success is most likely if countries start by **building on already existing resources** and not wait for the perfect situation that might never come! The experiences in the child's first years lay the foundation for life. Children and families cannot wait.

A family-centred Early Childhood Intervention system

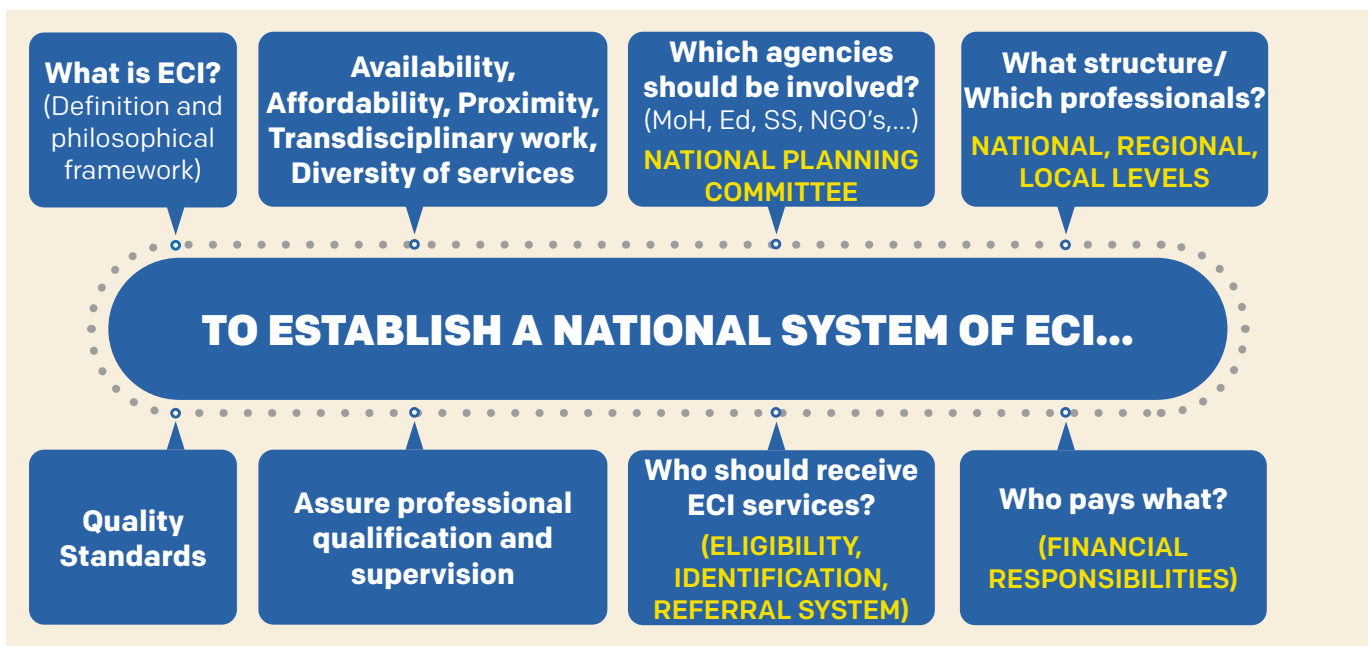
- Any ECI system should be based upon the principle that **ECI is a right for all children (0-6 yrs)** and families in need of support.
- Ideally the system should involve **health, education, and social services**, with the inclusion of **NGO's, private institutions, institutions of higher education** and the **participation of families**.

- Families should be involved at all levels: as partners in support for their child, in program development and monitoring, and in policy formation.
- The system should promote early identification of developmental difficulties or risk situations through the **implementation of preventive health care for children and developmental screening programs at key-ages**.
- Critical for the functioning of any **cross-sectoral ECI system** are:
 - Efficient **coordination**; and
 - Clear definition of **roles, professionals involved and financial responsibilities** of each sector.
- Services should be **family centered** and follow recognized **quality and professional standards**.
- ECI is just the beginning of the lifelong journey for the child and family. A systematic plan should be developed to support the transition from ECI to the next setting.

Considerations for policies and practice

1. **Define a conceptual framework, a definition, and a standard for ECI services.**
A clear theoretical and conceptual framework based on science and values of contemporary ECI shall be adopted to guide all key stakeholders.
2. Assure ECI services are **available, affordable, and accessible** for all families and children in their own community. Families should not have to search for ECI or travel long distances. Services and supports must be comprehensive in order to meet the diverse needs of children and families.
3. **Identify stakeholders**, making sure the **central is public** and includes the **ministries responsible for Health, Education and Social Services**. Create a **National Planning Committee**, with representatives from the **public and private sectors** involved, that, together with families, should start planning and designing the ECI system. Relevant **goals of this Planning Committee** will be Identifying nationally or regionally, available **human and material resources, partnerships, and training programs** with capacity for improvement and expansion, followed by the **development of a comprehensive strategy for ECI implementation** that will consolidate collaboration between these different sectoral areas, and adopt **evidence-based early intervention practices**.
4. Define a **structure** and which available professionals should be involved at **National, Regional and Local levels**. Assure coordination at all levels, which is critical for a functioning cross-sectoral system. The basis of any ECI system are carefully planned **COMMUNITY BASED TEAMS** providing support in the **natural contexts** (home, childcare, preschool).
5. Define what **professionals are involved in the local teams**, their **role and each stakeholder's financial responsibilities**.
6. Define **eligibility criteria** and ensure effective **screening, identification, and referral**, as early as possible. The ultimate task of an early childhood intervention system is to **ensure that every eligible child and family may effectively benefit from ECI services** that fully and effectively respond to their specific, unique, and sometimes complex characteristics. Early identification of children and families should be done at **primary health care services**, through a universal screening, during regular children follow-up.

7. Assure **professional qualification and supervision**. Professional training is the cornerstone of quality ECI services. The development of a Basic Professional Training Program and a system for ongoing professional development and supervision should be a relevant pillar of the development of any ECI system.
8. Define **quality standards (professional standards and program standards) that repeatedly have been shown by research to lead to positive child and family outcomes. Use those standards to (1) monitor implementation, (2) evaluate child, family and system outcomes, and (3) create a culture of ongoing quality improvement.**



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