



Early Childhood Education: Towards a Practical Approach

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The importance of early childhood education

Millions of children in India need access to quality early childhood education. This phase is crucial for physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development and shapes the foundation for lifelong learning and success. Early childhood (ages 0-6) is a period of extraordinary brain growth, with over 85% of a child's cumulative brain development occurring during this time. Various research highlights the importance of providing young children with nurturing care and stimulating environments, which are essential for healthy brain development and long-term wellbeing.

India has multiple programmes catering to early childhood education. In some states, government schools have introduced lower and upper kindergarten (LKG and UKG) and Balvatikas for this age group. Additionally, various privately-run nurseries, kindergartens, and playschools—predominantly in urban areas—serve young children. However, most children under six from low-income households continue to rely on the Integrated Child Development

Services (ICDS), a flagship government programme launched in 1975. Over the decades, ICDS has expanded into a vast network of nearly 1.4 million Anganwadis across the country, providing essential early childhood care and education.

A holistic approach—one that recognises the interconnected roles of health, nutrition, and socio-emotional development in a child's early years—is essential to systematically improving the quality of early childhood education across diverse settings.

Infrastructure and safety: The foundation

Whatever the programme, the first and non-negotiable requirement is to ensure a safe and hygienic environment for the children. This means investing in infrastructure: not only the classroom or playroom, but also a small kitchen, toilet, play area, and compound wall or enclosure. In rural areas, MGNREGS provides potential for convergence to build anganwadis. Where possible, and only if within walking distance for the child and parent, the anganwadi can

be co-located in the government school premises. This enables sharing of the school kitchen and toilet facilities. In urban settings, urban local bodies should take the lead to fill gaps using their grants, health cess, and own resources.

The role of educators: Recruitment and training

To improve the quality of early childhood educators, a transparent process should be introduced to select candidates. They should be from within the community, because of the key role they play in guiding parents and family members about the health, nutrition, and other needs of children in the early years. If an online application process is introduced to make the selection transparent, candidates should have access to fill their applications from convenient local centres.

Training is one of the most important but also the most neglected aspects of early childhood education. Shifting to completely online modes of training cannot replace the crucial in-person relationship-building skills needed by early educators. Residential induction training of sufficient duration, including practical sessions on health, nutrition, and child development along with early childhood education, should be followed by regular refresher training and knowledge-sharing at regular intervals and at least every year. Not only early educators but their supervisors and managerial cadres should also be given training in basic concepts of early childhood education.

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Improving working conditions

The working conditions of early childhood educators deserves attention. This is another neglected area, especially as they are typically not permanent government employees. The conditions in which early educators work are the conditions in which children learn. Early childhood educators need decent remuneration and other benefits including medical coverage; accident and life insurance; charge allowance for additional work; and adequate leave.

Anganwadi / other early educators should not be assigned other administrative work such as surveys. Further, they should be able to report and locally resolve small maintenance issues such as water stoppage or cooking gas replenishment, without having to miss classroom time to follow up.



Anganwadi teachers participating in a professional development session

Supervision is an important way to monitor quality, and supervisors need mobility support to visit centres regularly: for

example, two-wheeler loans with a fixed fuel allowance could ensure active supervision.

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Nutrition and health convergence

Nutrition and health convergences are of fundamental importance. Children in this phase of their development need quality nutrition and effective health services according to the recommended schedule, including immunisation, growth monitoring, etc. Early childhood education cannot be effective in the absence of quality nutrition and health convergence.

The existing system of early childhood education serves children between the age of 3 and 6 years. Anganwadis and under-3 childcare centres also need to focus on the first 1000 days of a child's life. They must guide pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers about antenatal and postnatal health visits, immunisation, nutrition, and other related information. Early educators need to orient parents and family members about how the child's early learning can be enhanced from birth, through stimulation, play, interactions, non-verbal and verbal communication, and then gradually through observation and cues from the immediate environment and more structured activities.

Parent and community engagement

Parent / community engagement is recently being recognised for its vital importance in the development of young children. This is a welcome development. However, this cannot replace the role of the early childhood educator or the early education setting. Acknowledging parental aspirations,

early educators should proactively orient them about responsive parenting, the role of play-based and activity-based learning, developmentally appropriate activities, and assessment through child observation and group activities.

Innovations and best practices: Lessons from Karnataka

The state of Karnataka has taken up an initiative in under-3-year childcare by setting up 4000 childcare centres at gram panchayat level. Invoking the relevant provisions in the Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act and the MGNREGA Act, these crèches have been set up in gram panchayats with higher generation of person days in MGNREGS. Gram panchayats provide the space; creche workers' wages are covered under MGNREGS for 100 days each; the state provides a starting grant, two months' wages, and nutrition. Mobile Creches is the training and technical partner for the project. This provisioning of rural childcare makes it possible for young children to get valuable nutrition (in the form of hot cooked meals) and early stimulation.



Children in a creche, receiving care, nutrition, and early stimulation while their mothers engage in work.

It also becomes possible for their mothers to seek paid work under MGNREGS.

Not least of all is the role of rural and urban local bodies, who should be given local oversight of these early education centres. They can provide support, fill gaps, enrich the early learning environment, and ensure that there is no exclusion of eligible children.

Avoiding the pitfalls of ‘schoolification’ and strengthening existing frameworks

In recent years, with the growing recognition that early childhood education is of crucial importance for later education and life outcomes, there has been interest in improving the quality of early childhood education programmes. Education policy statements have highlighted the importance of early child care and education for the young child’s early cognitive, social, and emotional development. This gap cannot be covered later in the school education phase. However, to prevent the risk of “schoolification” or the downward extension of school into early childhood education, a systematic and nuanced approach is needed.



A read-aloud session in an Anganwadi, encouraging early literacy and curiosity

A meaningful activity-based early childhood education framework should recognise ground realities and have the flexibility to adapt to local contexts. It should be play-based, allowing children to learn with autonomy and at their own pace. Play and learning materials need to be thoughtfully designed, age-appropriate, covering all domains of early learning. Most importantly, they should be supplied in adequate measure and used liberally within the early education setting. Further, to maintain quality across all settings and keep the curriculum framework updated, states must invest in a research and training system for early childhood education.

School readiness is a term that needs to be unpacked to fully understand what it can mean in the Indian context. It should not mean children need to be “moulded” in some way to fit into primary school.

It should not mean that children should sit at tables, hunched over worksheets. And it certainly should not mean outdated and developmentally flawed, rote-based teaching techniques that cannot build cognitive, language, and socio-emotional learning. If anything, school readiness should begin with the affirmation that schools must be ready to welcome all children

Coordination between the School Education and Women & Child Welfare Departments is essential for effective policy implementation.

In various states, some efforts have been made to introduce LKG and UKG sections in government schools. Regardless of whether in government schools or Anganwadis, the

focus must remain on delivering quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Care should also be recognised as a central element of ECCE. This requires trained early educators, adequate resources, proper infrastructure, and a well-structured curriculum.

Anganwadis already have an established framework and curriculum, which may need updates or enrichment. Instead of creating entirely new initiatives—often accompanied by risks and challenges, the emphasis should be on optimising and strengthening existing structures.



Children in an early learning setting

If states find that there is a need to expand ECCE in government kindergartens and also Anganwadis, effective coordination between the two departments is essential. Key areas to address include location selection, curriculum development, teacher recruitment, and consistent management. Before scaling up, it is crucial to ensure uniform standards in classroom availability, early educator eligibility, curriculum design, and training programmes.

Priority should be given to high-population, low-income areas, particularly those serving socially and economically disadvantaged groups. Regardless of whether ECCE is delivered in the Anganwadis or government kindergartens, the ultimate goal should be to ensure equitable access to high-quality early education for all children.

Investing in early childhood education is not just a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for India's future. Policymakers, educators, and communities must collaborate to provide every child with a safe, nurturing, and stimulating environment. By strengthening existing systems, and ensuring inclusivity, India can ensure that every child has the foundation to thrive. The time to act is now—because every child deserves the best start in life.

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