EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT: COMMON UNDERSTANDINGS
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EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT: COMMON UNDERSTANDINGS

Introduction

The OECD Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Network’s Early Learning and Development: Common Understandings represents a synthesis of the policy and practice statements of participating jurisdictions, establishing shared views of children’s early learning and development. It is also presented as a document of the network to inform the work of thematic working groups of the OECD ECEC Network as well as the ongoing plan of work for the Network. Additionally, it is presented as an opportunity to shape ECEC policies and encourage research on ECEC beyond English-speaking countries. The document may also serve as a basis for designing appropriate measurements and for the reporting of ECEC quality programmes.

To develop this set of common understandings, the members of the Thematic Group on Outcomes completed a survey which was designed to help form the foundation for the present document that is now being presented to the full Network membership for its endorsement and eventual posting on the OECD ECEC Network website. Accordingly, the Early Learning and Development: Common Understandings will be proposed for ratification through the Network members at the 16th OECD ECEC Network meeting on 18-19 November 2014 in Berlin, Germany.

Why are the early years important?

Children’s experiences early in life have a profound and long-lasting impact on their future. Helping all children receive positive and nurturing support in their early childhood is highly valued by members of the OECD ECEC Network. The more positive the early childhood experiences, the greater the benefit to caring and responsible societies.

The early years (from birth through the transition to elementary school to approximately eight years of age) are a period of intense learning and development, when tremendous changes occur in the brain over a short period of time. In the first year of life, the architecture of the brain takes shape at an astounding rate – approximately 700 new neural connections are being built per second. Studies have shown that this process is not entirely genetically predetermined, but rather is significantly influenced by children’s early experiences with people and their surroundings and their access to relevant/meaningful stimulation.1

This influential period (0-8 years) is also characterised by the unprecedented physical, social, emotional and cognitive growth (e.g. language and other communication) abilities. One way to significantly decrease gaps in achievement later in life is to provide enriching learning experiences to children well before they enter school.2 3 4 5

High quality ECEC settings can have profoundly positive impacts during the most sensitive early phase of children’s development and learning. Access to high quality ECEC settings can play a part in reducing social inequities. High quality, accessible ECEC settings can enhance women's opportunities for employment, improve gender equity and reduce social risk and family poverty. It is important, when ECEC policies and programs are being developed, that concepts of affordability and access be prime considerations.
The ability to derive social, long term health and economic benefits, as well as the ability to contribute constructively to the community, hinges on the early years. Studies show that positive early experiences lead to improved determinants of health, resulting in fewer instances of depression and better health outcomes, throughout the life cycle. For this reason, the economic benefits of investments in the early years are well-documented. Economist and Nobel laureate James Heckman, for example, calculates a seven-to-one return on public investment in programmes for young children.6

Early childhood sets the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour, health and well-being. The path for lifelong learning, behaviour, health, and well-being is shaped by day-to-day experiences in early life.

Early human development thrives through experiences and interactions with responsive adults and peers. A child's ability to regulate emotions, behaviours and attention increases over time, in step with experience and responsive relationships.

The view of the child should be central to any set of common understandings that deals with the early years, enriched by the concepts of interdependence, relationships and physical, social, emotional, cultural and cognitive development. Many OECD countries share well-researched policies and strategies concerning how they view children and which aspects of their development need to be promoted. As an example the Australian early years framework states that this view of the child is best characterised by the terms belonging, being and becoming:

**Belonging:** Acknowledges children’s interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities. In early childhood, and throughout life, relationships are crucial to a sense of belonging.

**Being:** Recognizes the significance of the here and now in children’s lives. It is about the present and them knowing themselves, building and maintaining relationships with others, engaging with life’s joys and complexities, and meeting challenges in everyday life. The early childhood years are not solely preparation for the future but also about the present.

**Becoming:** Children’s identities, knowledge, understandings, capacities, skills and relationships change during childhood. They are shaped by many different events and circumstances. Becoming reflects this process of rapid and significant change that occurs in the early years as young children learn and grow. It emphasizes learning to participate fully and actively in society.7

**Thematic Group Survey**

The Thematic Working Group on child outcomes received valuable input from each of the following OECD ECEC Network members on the development of this draft document and was further refined by input from all members received at the June 2014 Network meeting. The following OECD Thematic Group members provided detailed input on the development of this resource:

- Australia
- Belgium (French Community)
- Canada
- Croatia
- Denmark
The input received from the survey of group members indicated a majority of jurisdictions view young children as:

- capable
- competent
- creative
- curious
- expressive
- inquisitive
- playful
- receptive

The jurisdictions indicated that their focus on the early childhood education and care has the following benefits:

- Children benefit from high quality programmes and services that promote children’s learning and well-being.
- Parents and families benefit from an integrated, accessible and coordinated ECEC system that is well communicated and understood.
- Communities benefit from an integrated approach that supports community partners and service providers in developing their plans to support children and their families.
Guiding questions for designing and re-thinking country-specific ECEC policy and accompanying frameworks

The OECD ECEC Network’s set of common understandings is driven by the following guiding questions that can be among the considerations in the development of country-specific ECEC policies and programmes:

**Child and family-centred ECEC settings**

- How can the ECEC settings help to promote a safe and joyful childhood?
- In what ways can learning activities be consistently related to the strengths and interests of all children in all ECEC settings?
- How can children who occasionally or on a more permanent basis need more support and personal engagement than others receive such support so that they are able to develop to their potential?
- In what ways can the transitions between programmes and services create greater continuity for the child?
- How can access to programmes and services be made easier for all children and families?
- In what ways may programmes and services be made culturally responsive and adaptable to local needs and contexts?
- How can early childhood programmes support parents to help their children learn, grow and feel valued?

**Defining the view of the child**

The view of the child is crucial to the realisation of a child- and family-centred ECEC system. When children are recognised as competent, curious, capable of complex thinking and rich in potential, then policies, programmes and services that value and build on children’s strengths and abilities are more likely to be developed. It is important that ECEC policies and programs take into account that the best interests of the child be a primary consideration and that childhood is viewed as a phase of life with intrinsic value.

Children are described by OECD ECEC Network members as active learners, creative, curious, natural explorers, playful, competent, expressive, knowledgeable, joyful, capable of complex thinking and rich in potential as contributors to society.

- How may ECEC programmes and professionals be supported to include the above attributes of young children when designing, implementing and assessing their programmes?
- How is it possible for all ECEC providers to develop inclusive strategies which recognise that all children grow up in families with diverse social, cultural and linguistic perspectives?
- How may ECEC programmes and providers recognise that all children in the programme should feel they belong and are valuable contributors to the family, the community, the peer group of children and the surroundings?
Defining the view of the family

Parents, broadly defined, are children’s first and most important persons in their lives. Parents are responsible for the physical health and the social-emotional well-being of the child. They nurture the balanced development of the child’s mind and body and they foster a spirit of independence.

Research indicates that good parenting practices and parental engagement can have a positive impact of children's cognitive skills. Since parenting practices have a positive effect there is strong potential in ECEC professionals encouraging parents to engage in play-based learning and development activities with their children. One of the important questions related to parental engagement could be:

- How may ECEC programmes and providers recognise that parents have the right to participate fully in all aspects of the care and education of their child and, without regard to language, socio-economic status or culture?

Commitment to quality programmes and services

The extraordinary and long-lasting impact of optimal development in the early years requires access to high quality programmes and services that are provided consistently across early years settings. We know that high quality ECEC is important because it can reduce and overcome social inequities.

- How may ECEC programmes and providers implement programme approaches that cater to children’s development, value children as active, capable learners and demonstrate respect for diversity, equity and inclusion?
- What methods may be used for providers, educators as well as parents to highlight the importance of interaction, inquiry and co-construction of learning with the child?

Supports for curriculum and policy development

Similarly to early years frameworks in other jurisdictions, the following shared language and understandings of children’s learning and development serve as a guide to support policy and curriculum development in ECEC programmes for children from birth to eight years old. With this Common Understandings document, the members of the OECD Network on ECEC have developed a synthesis of policy and practice statements, informed by research about ECEC. This document is designed to inspire conversations, foster communication and provide a common language about young children’s learning and development among children themselves, their families, the broader community, early childhood staff and other professionals.

The common understandings as presented should be considered part of a living document that may evolve as new research and practices are developed and shared.

An intentional, planned, regularly evaluated and revised programme (framework) supports learning and development and smooth transitions

Policies and practices in the economies of the participating ECEC network members indicate that a planned, regularly assessed and revised programme:

- should be based on a holistic view of the child and his or her needs, strengths, interests, language and culture and be designed to integrate care, socialisation and learning
- begins with an informed understanding of what children are capable of learning and how they learn
- takes into consideration the individual child’s well-being, security, development and learning
- takes account of the varying conditions and needs of children
- takes into account and develops children’s ability to take responsibility and develops their social preparedness at an early stage
- gives the same opportunities to girls and boys to develop and explore their abilities and interests without having limitations imposed by stereotyped gender roles
- is based on ongoing collaboration among the ECEC staff, the parents and the children and considers multiple perspectives and reflects the unique strengths, needs and interests of participating children
- sets specific plans to benefit all children’s enjoyment, play, learning and development, and full participation
- includes plans to support the development of identity, social inclusion, health, self-regulation, physical skills, language and thinking skills, meta-cognition and meta communication, and strategies to set the foundations for literacy and numeracy, natural science and technology
- supports learning through active engagement, observation, experimentation, and social interaction and communication
- organises the physical space, materials, time, and experiences that support the learning process

The following statements about play and inquiry inform ECEC policies and practices in several member economies:

**Play and inquiry capitalise on children’s natural curiosity and exuberance**

- Children make sense of the world through play. As children investigate and experiment with materials and interact with one another through play they establish skills in problem-solving, social competence, self-regulation, creativity and communication.
- “Imitating” and “exploring” during the infant and toddler years evolves into “pretend” play. In pretend play, children use language and thinking skills to refine their ability to plan, negotiate, resolve conflicts, regulate emotions and behaviour, initiate friendships, and understand the perspective of others.
- Through these experiences, adults can support children in their development of social-emotional skills, their language skills, early literacy and numeracy skills as well as their scientific reasoning skills allowing children to learn and then to become aware of their own abilities will also enhance children’s (socio-emotional) well-being.
- Children's learning builds on their existing understanding of ideas and concepts. Their natural curiosity inspires them to solve problems and overcome challenges.
- Children also need opportunities for contemplation, exploration and experience.
Authentic involvement and co-operation with families

- Family and community form the foundation for a child's early development.
- Families know their children best, and are the first and most powerful influence on learning and development.
- The needs of each child should be considered in the context of their family composition, values, culture, and language. This approach enriches relationships between early childhood settings, families, and their communities.
- Involving parents and other important adults in activities connects them to their children's early development, and enhances the child's learning.
- Children in early childhood settings benefit when they interact with local environments and community members are part of their daily experiences.

Respect for diversity, equity and inclusion:

- recognise each child as a citizen with equal rights to live and learn in society.
- recognise and respect the unique qualities of each child and family, including ancestry, culture, ethnicity, race, language, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic status, family environment, residency status and developmental abilities and needs.
- create strategies that value and promote children’s cultural backgrounds and first (home) language(s).
- establish programming strategies to foster an inclusive learning environment in which every child can participate.
  - provide for each child’s physical, emotional, social, intellectual/cognitive, spiritual and creative potential.

Knowledgeable, responsive, reflective and qualified (or authorised) early childhood professionals:

- Well educated, knowledgeable and responsive adults:
- recognise that responding to the unique abilities, needs, and characteristics of each child, family and community is central to supporting learning and development
- engage with children as co-learners as they explore their environments
- provoke children's thinking, create meaningful programmes, and guide interactions with children and their families
- use a warm and respectful approach to support children's developing ability to express emotions and take other perspective know when to stand back and observe and when to enter children's play to stimulate thinking
- make a commitment to build self-awareness, regularly reflect on practices and engage in new learning experiences, both individually and with colleagues
- recognise and respect the learning pace of each child
- provide culturally respectful reinforcement of positive behaviours among children
How may OECD ECEC Network members benefit from this set of common understandings?

ECEC policy and practice in several economies represented in the ECEC network are guided by the following assumptions:

**Benefits for children**

High quality programmes and services that are regularly reviewed and revised, promote children’s current and future well-being when:

- children are highly engaged in healthy and nurturing environments from the earliest stages of life, and are better equipped to navigate key life transitions successfully, more likely to excel in school, and more apt to develop into confident and capable adults
- children’s developmental progress is enhanced when programmes are adapted to meet the individual strengths and interests of each child
- they positively address and promote the wellbeing of each child in the current program as well as planning to meet the needs of children who will arrive in the future.

**Benefits for parents and families**

An integrated, accessible and co-ordinated ECEC system supports parents and families by making programmes and services more accessible when:

- parents and families know how to access programmes and services and have the tools they need to make informed decisions
- accessible and high-quality early years programmes provide valuable information to help support parents in their role as primary care giver
- programmes and services are delivered by qualified or trained staff and leaders who help to reassure parents that children are safe, they are learning and they are in trusted care

**Benefits for municipalities, schools and community partners**

An integrated approach better supports partners in their roles as system managers and programme and service providers when:

- strong local/municipal leadership ensures programmes and services are more responsive and adaptable to local needs
- greater inter-sector/agency coordination and collaboration among partners eliminates duplication and redundancy, increases integration of services and expands networks—making it easier to reach families and improve children’s outcomes
- strong and purposeful partnerships help maximise financial and human resources and reduce duplication
- knowledgeable and effective leadership in each ECEC programme is essential to continuous improvement of the programme, increasing the capacity of the professional staff and effectively assessing and updating the programme to meet the children’s strengths and development
• investments in the early years yield significant returns over time and help to ensure sustainability and growth of the economy as well as the general health and well-being of the population
• coordinated investments and planning maximise public spending
• better data collection improves accountability and ensures decision-making is informed by evidence, experience and research
NOTES


10 Sylva et al., 2011.

Early Learning and Development: Common Understandings is based on policy and statements of practice in ECEC network jurisdictions. This report identifies some of the latest research on the importance of the early years, along with specific guiding ideas and questions derived from policy experience, practice and research to increase the quality of early childhood education and care policies, programmes and curricula.

The report views the child as capable, curious, competent, playful, joyful, capable of complex thinking and rich in potential. The set of common understandings is designed to inspire conversations, foster communication and provide a common language about young children’s learning and development.

These policy and practice statements are presented as a living document that may evolve as new research and practices are developed and shared.

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