



## Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

### HIGHLIGHTS FROM “RESEARCH BRIEF: CURRICULUM MATTERS”

#### Why does curriculum matter?

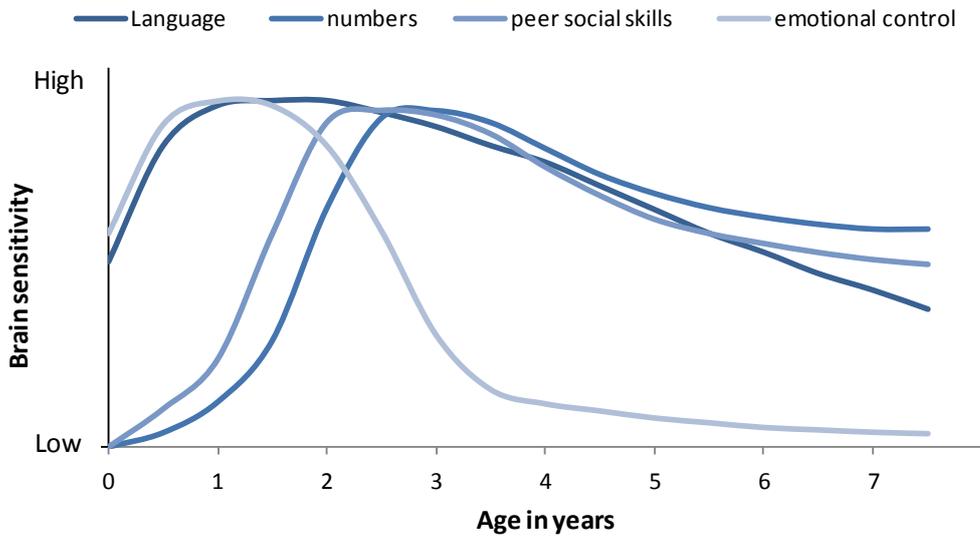
A common framework, such as curriculum or learning standards, can:

- Help ensure an even level of quality across different forms of provision and for different groups of children.
- Help ensure continuity between ECEC and primary schooling, ensuring that children are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed for primary school and further learning.
- Help staff to clarify their pedagogical aims, keep progression in mind, provide a structure for the child’s day, focus on the most important aspects of child development, and respond adequately to children’s needs. With a weak curriculum framework, children may miss out on stimulating environments that are of high importance during the early years.
- When stakeholders are involved in the design process, contribute to balancing different expectations of early childhood development in the curriculum and ensure that expectations and needs of different stakeholders are met.
- Help parents learn about child development and encourage them to ensure a good home learning environment.
- Act as a bridge between staff and parents for information sharing about what children do in centres and facilitating needs-based interventions.

#### Which aspects of the contents and activities matter most?

- Designing curricula based on cognitive and neurological science can contribute to the age-appropriateness of activities and ensure that children do not miss out on relevant development elements. Research indicates that the brain sensitivity to language, numeracy, social skills and emotional control all peak before the age of four, which suggests that ECEC matters greatly for children’s development of key skills and abilities (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Sensitive periods in early brain development**



Source: Council Early Child Development (2010) from the World Bank, Investing in Young Children, an Early Childhood Development Guide for Policy Dialogue and Project Preparation, 2011.

- There is a need to think beyond curriculum dichotomies (such as academic-oriented vs. comprehensive approaches, and staff-initiated instruction vs. child-initiated activities) and consolidate the “added value” of individual approaches.
  - High-quality curriculum frameworks are related to practice in which cognitive and social development are viewed as complementary and of equal importance.
  - Combining child-initiated and staff-initiated contents and activities maximises cognitive learning and social outcomes: child-initiated activities can have long-term benefits, including an increased level of community service and motivation to pursue higher education; while staff-initiated learning has positive (short-term) effects on IQ scores, literacy and math.
- A focus on critical learning areas can facilitate customised curricula.
  - Literacy is the means through which all other subject areas are acquired. It has been linked to language development, reading outcomes, improved school performance and achievement.
  - Early math and numeracy contribute to the development of a child’s understanding of space, time, quantities, size, logical reasoning and representation, and problem solving.
  - The use of ICT in ECEC settings can tap into a child’s creativity and motivate curiosity, eliminate boundaries between written and oral language, and allow the visualisation of abstract concepts and relationships.
  - Science-related courses contribute to understanding the principles of logic and methods of reasoning, which encourages children to become better problem solvers and can increase children’s IQ.
  - Arts and music boost children’s attention, help children learn to envision, and can help train children for geometry and map reading.

- The physical development of children, such as early motor skills, is related to children’s development of social skills and an understanding of social rules. Health education and hygiene practices can contribute to improved hygiene and eating habits of young children.
- Integrating play into the curriculum can lead to better co-operation (between children and between adults and children), and improved self-regulation and inter-personal skills.
- Local adaptations of curricula in partnership with staff, families, children and communities can reinforce the relevance of ECEC services to local children and communities.
  - Children are more competent, motivated and determined to learn when they are given the choice to engage in different age-appropriate activities. Curricula can trigger children’s curiosity by including cross-disciplinary activities in their curriculum.
  - Taking into account children’s perspectives, for example, through consultation with children, can increase their self-esteem and foster social competences.

### Policy implications

- Ensuring that curricula are well-aligned for children from ages zero to six years and beyond ensures a more holistic and continuous child development.
- Recognising the virtues of complimentary curricula models, which include cognitive and social elements of development and staff- and child-initiated activities, better facilitates a child-centred environment where learning builds on existing knowledge from the child perspective while stimulating the academic and socio-emotional development of children.
- Considering national characteristics and centre-level factors provides insight into the appropriateness of a curriculum: when, for example, staff education is low, a more concrete curriculum with added guidance might be useful.
- Sufficient and appropriate staff training and education in curriculum implementation and in current emerging elements, such as ICT and multi-cultural child development, is highly relevant in ensuring equitable and high-quality ECEC environments.
- Adapting curricula to local circumstances can reinforce the relevance of ECEC services and enhance the appropriateness of curriculum aims and objectives.

### Research gaps

- The comparative advantage of different curriculum models, such as the academic or comprehensive approaches, regarding their larger long-term benefits on, for example, health or future earnings remains unclear.
- There is little information on the different developmental purposes of different types of play, for example, social, pretend or object play.
- There is a need to research and diffuse alternative, less common, curriculum models that are locally adapted and implemented.