

# Operationalizing Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development

The role of the health sector alongside  
other sectors and actors





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Operationalizing nurturing care for early childhood development: the role of the health sector alongside other sectors and actors  
ISBN 978-92-4-151647-1

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Printed in Switzerland.

This document, prepared by staff of WHO, UNICEF, the World Bank Group, the ECD Action Network and the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, serves for consultation during the technical meeting *Innovating for early childhood development: what have we learnt to strengthen programming for nurturing care*, Geneva, Switzerland, 13 – 14 June 2019.

**Design and layout:** Annovi Design.

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# Introduction

A unique convergence of evidence and commitment for the right of all children to be healthy and develop their full potential has led to early childhood development gaining traction as an important issue, shared across sectors through the promotion of nurturing care. This convergence is relevant for all settings, but especially in development and humanitarian crisis contexts. The health sector should play a central role in promoting nurturing care through actions within its mandate and through advocacy and engagement with other sectors.

Early childhood development refers to the cognitive, physical, language, motor, social and emotional development of children from conception to 8 years of age. Evidence shows that the early years of life are critical for children's healthy growth and development. During this period essential neural pathways are formed that lay the foundation for health, learning, productivity and social well-being throughout the life course.

Children need nurturing care to achieve their full potential. It encompasses the conditions for good health, nutrition, security and safety as well as opportunities for early learning for the young child, and is underpinned by responsive caregiving across all these domains (Figure 1). The home environment is an important place for the provision of nurturing care to young children given first and foremost by primary caregivers.<sup>1</sup> But others also can contribute nurturing care in the lives of young children, such as people working in organized child care. All caregivers need to be empowered and supported to provide nurturing care, and this can be done through supportive systems, policies, standards and information.

WHO, UNICEF and the World Bank Group, in collaboration with the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, the Early Childhood Development Action Network and many other partners developed the [Nurturing Care Framework](#) as a roadmap for action (1). The Framework summarizes the evidence on why nurturing care is essential for young children and what caregivers need in order to provide it. It focuses specifically on the period from conception to year 3, as this is the time when brain development is extremely sensitive to external influences; yet, this is also the period often given least attention when investments are made towards early childhood development.

**FIGURE 1**



1. In this document the word 'caregivers' refers to people who are very closely attached to the child and provide daily care and support. Primary caregivers include parents, families and other people who are directly responsible for the child at home.

## Purpose

This guidance note specifically targets the health sector and aims to catalyse country-level dialogue and action focusing on health service delivery and systems strengthening while also outlining complementary actions by other sectors. It is relevant for national governments, specifically ministries of health, and for national and global development partners and other stakeholders. This guidance note is the first in a series of resources for all relevant sectors that will become available to facilitate the operationalization of the Framework. Key sectors that should engage in this operationalization include health, nutrition, education and protection.

## Alignment of the Nurturing Care Framework with global strategies, goals and initiatives

The Sustainable Development Goals provide the overarching blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. This blueprint and its derivative, the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health 2016-30, include multiple targets that relate to nurturing care and create the conditions for children to survive and thrive to transform their health and human potential.

The overall vision of the Framework is to align all key actors to work towards relevant Sustainable Development Goals and targets for children, which include but are not limited to:

- ensuring that children under 5 years of age are developmentally on track;
- ending preventable deaths;

Within the health sector, universal health coverage provides a critical avenue for operationalizing effective policies, interventions and services for optimizing children's development. The most effective, efficient and equitable approach to reach all people and meet priority needs is primary health care. The [2018 Astana Declaration on Primary Health Care](#) offers an immediate opportunity to address nurturing care in actions that governments take to meet their commitment to improve the health and well-being of populations, through quality health services and essential public health functions that empower people and communities and facilitate multisectoral action (2).

The [Human Capital Project](#), launched by the World Bank Group, provides another incentive to governments to invest in nurturing care (3). The human capital index measures the amount of human capital that children born today can expect to attain by age 18, given the risks of poor health and poor education that prevail in the country where they live. The initiative calls for investment in the early years to unlock human potential and reduce inequities. This guidance note can assist in dialogues on large-scale investments in health and nutrition between governments and international development banks as well as through the Global Financing Facility.

## Nurturing care and the health sector

Early childhood development calls for leadership across different sectors, including health, nutrition, education, child and social protection, and community leadership beyond the sectors. This guidance note specifically focuses on the role of the health sector as important in helping to galvanize a range of stakeholders around children's holistic health and well-being and where actions to support key

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