



POLICY BRIEF

The Essential Package for Early Childhood Development

March 2024



Summary ●●●

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is one of the most powerful levers to unlock South Africa's potential and is recognised by government as a national priority. However, access to the full "Essential Package" of ECD services remains inadequate and unequal in both coverage and quality. If we want to stop failing our children, we can't continue in the same vein. We need to change tack to close the glaring gaps in ECD delivery.

● Introduction

Steps to close the gap in Early Childhood Development delivery

South Africa's first nationally representative survey of preschool children found that an alarming 57% of children attending an early learning programme (ELP) are not on track for cognitive and/or physical development.¹ This is an indication that both families and ECD facilities lack adequate resources.

ECD builds the intellectual, physical and emotional scaffolding for all future investments in human capital and largely determines the rate of return to schooling, technical and vocational training and university education.² For every rand invested in quality early childhood development, South Africa will get at least R10 back.³

“The first five years of a child's life are a period of rapid brain development. Providing children with a safe and stimulating environment during this time has huge returns and makes subsequent education investments much more effective.”⁴

Jaime Saavedra, former World Bank Director for Education

In South Africa 300 000 learners drop out of school annually,⁵ most because they missed out on effective teaching and learning when they were younger. This perpetuates South Africa's intergenerational cycles of social and economic exclusion of children from poorer communities. Investment in young children and the Essential Package may be the greatest opportunity to escape the inequality trap (*see Figure 1 on the next page*).

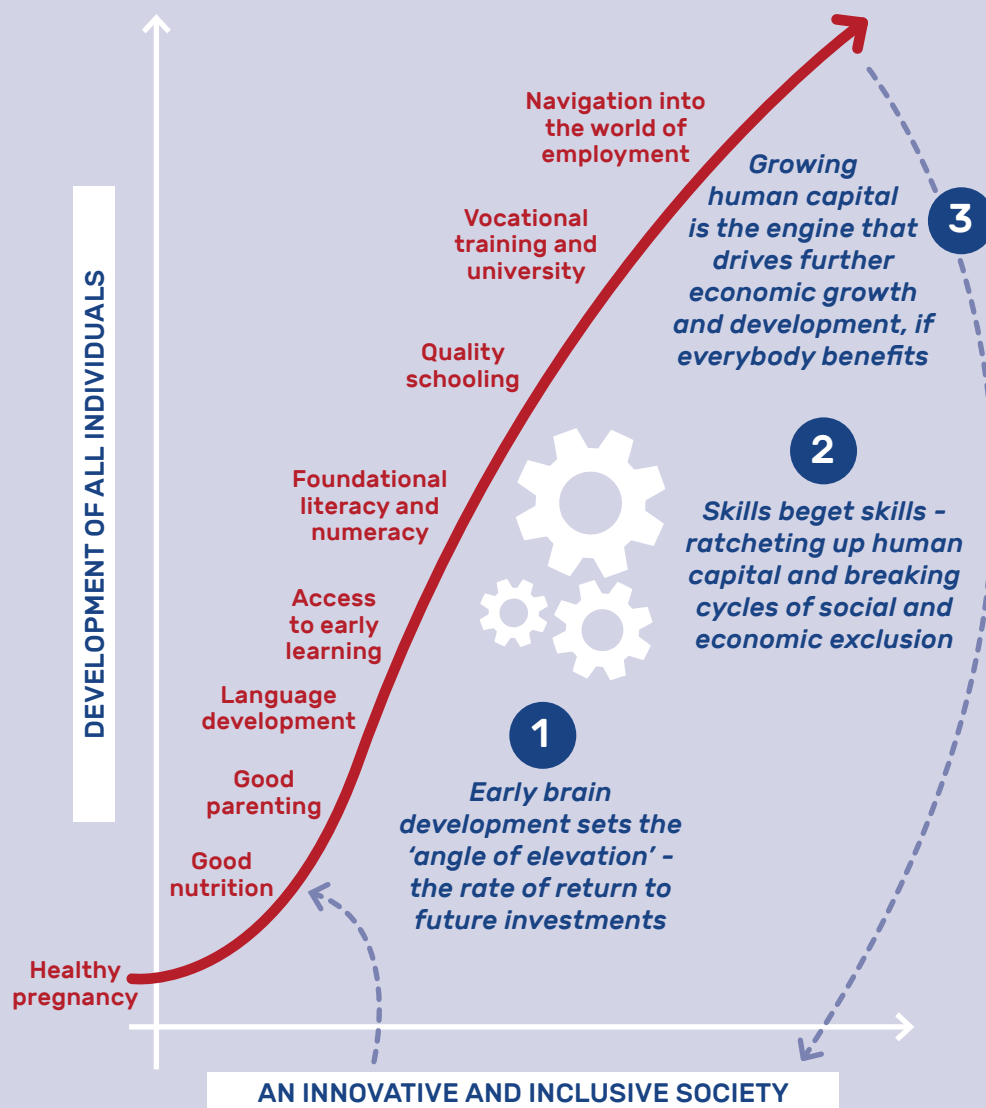


Figure 1:
**Human capital
 development pathway**

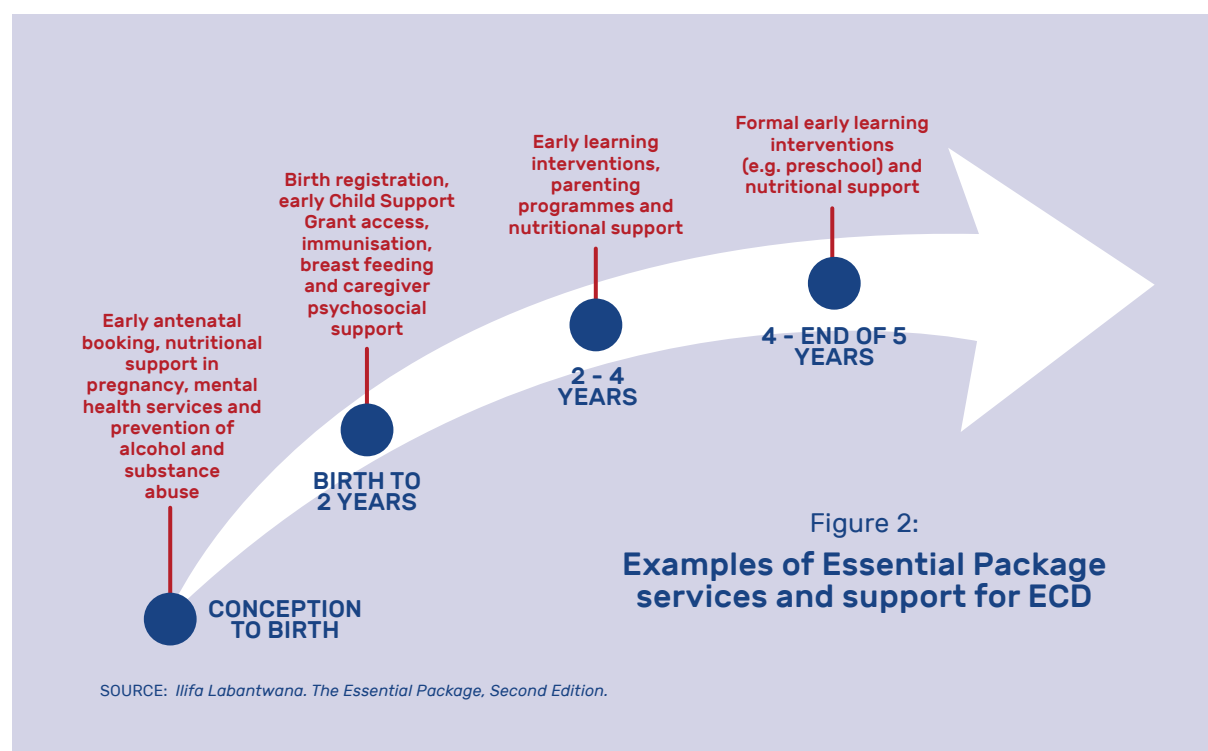
SOURCE: Ilifa Labantwana and Kago Ya Bana. A plan to achieve universal coverage of Early Childhood Development Services by 2030.

What is the Essential Package?

The Essential Package (EP) is in line with the globally recognised Nurturing Care Framework, developed by Ilifa Labantwana⁶ and ECD collaborators in 2013/2014 to accelerate the provision of quality ECD services. In line with the National Integrated ECD Policy, the EP views ECD services as a continuum of interventions, with the immediate family offering primary-level care and support. The EP has five components considered essential for all children:

- **NUTRITIONAL SUPPORT**
- **PRIMARY LEVEL MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH INTERVENTIONS**
- **SOCIAL SERVICES**
- **SUPPORT FOR PRIMARY CAREGIVERS**
- **STIMULATION FOR EARLY LEARNING**

The EP covers the period from conception to age of five. As illustrated in Figure 2, it embraces a broad view of early childhood services, including education, health and welfare. It considers existing and new policies and protocols in these sectors. It is informed by evidence of effectiveness in reducing the risks of poor child development outcomes and promoting child rights and wellbeing.⁷



The only component of the Essential Package where South Africa is performing well as a country is in primary and maternal health. Over 90% of women attend antenatal clinics, while infant and child death rates have more than halved with antiretroviral treatment.⁸

South Africa is performing poorly in other areas:

- As of October 2023, the basic Child Support Grant (CSG) has been R510 per child per month⁹, well below the food poverty line of R663, adjusted for inflation in 2023 to R760 (The grant has increased by R20 in the 2024 Budget.).¹⁰
- Just over a quarter (27%) of children under five are nutritionally stunted – wiping off at least 1% of GDP growth per year.¹¹
- Only half of 3- to 4-year-olds participate in any early learning programme, and only half of these children attend programmes of sufficient quality.¹²
- In 2021, 81% of Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning in any language, up from 78% in 2016.¹³



Reasons behind poor ECD provision

- **SIGNIFICANT UNDER-RESOURCING:** Roughly 5% of South Africa's national expenditure (1.5% of GDP) is spent on the full essential package of ECD – R75 billion.¹⁴ Most resources are spent on maternal and child healthcare, delivered in primary healthcare clinics. Over a quarter of the government's ECD budget goes to child support grants. This is a significant contributor to why coverage and outcomes associated with maternal and child healthcare programmes far exceed other services within the ECD package. Only 6.5% is spent on early learning, nutrition support and responsive parenting interventions.¹⁵
- **LIMITED PLATFORMS TO SCALE:** Many programmes for young children need to be provided in the home and/or community facilities – the obvious exception being clinic-based healthcare.¹⁶ Often, they are provided by local non-profit organisations. While this appropriate and affordable format for localised delivery enhances social capital and local employment, it is not scalable unless organised and supported. Due to a lack of organisational mechanisms for scale, there has been limited capacity to increase supply, absorb and use new funding efficiently, or enable quality delivery.¹⁷ SmartStart¹⁸ and Flourish¹⁹ are examples of early learning and ante/postnatal programmes that are expanding components of ECD services in South Africa. More of these platforms for scale now need to be built.
- **NO CENTRAL AGENCY TO COORDINATE AND DRIVE PROGRAMMES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN:** The capacity to manage and deliver ECD services within government and the non-profit sector is limited and fragmented, with multiple levels of decision-making and execution retarding both policy and programme implementation.²⁰ While South Africa has several important policy commitments to children in the early childhood period²¹, many of the enabling mechanisms for integrated service provision are not in place.

To date, no single agency has been designated to integrate, implement, and provide ECD support and services, making service provision difficult.





Lessons from other countries

Countries that have made good progress with programmes for children have almost all had a central coordinating agency driving the main national programmes that fall across the responsibilities of different government departments and social sectors.²² For example, Sure Start is a UK-wide programme that was introduced to support children under four and their families in disadvantaged areas.²³ It gives help and advice on child and family health, parenting, money, training and employment.

In Mexico, the famous Prospera (previously Oportunidades) conditional cash transfer programme benefitted nearly six million families and has been replicated in 52 countries.²⁴

It was designed to target poverty by providing cash payments to mothers in exchange for regular school attendance, clinic visits, and nutrition support. Prospera was centrally managed, relying on the horizontal integration of other government services, which required a body with enough power to coordinate the participants and monitor the budget.²⁵ This initiative improved school enrolment and nutrition rates.²⁶

In the Caribbean, a two-pronged approach was followed. An early childhood stimulation programme is offered during routine primary health visits. During these visits, healthcare workers evaluated children's development while training their parents regarding the stimulation their children needed.²⁷ This synergy led to cognitive and health benefits for children and improved parents' knowledge.

• How do we begin to change the trajectory?

As the Department of Basic Education (DBE) takes over the responsibility for ECD and a range of legislation and regulations for ECD is being reconsidered, we are presented with a rare opportunity to centre ECD in South Africa's development trajectory and position it as fundamental to the growth of human capital.

However, one of the biggest challenges is the current institutional arrangement – with essential services for young children spread across several departments. Notably, the departments of Social Development, Health, Basic Education, and Home Affairs are not designed to deal with the necessary cross-cutting services (such as early language, child nutrition, and disability) necessary to spark change.

South Africa needs to create engines that will disable the chokes on childcare and accelerate service delivery.

• Key actions required

- **EXPLORE INNOVATIVE INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS** founded in Public-Private Partnerships to build synergy and close the access, quality and funding gaps preventing delivery of the full EP.
- **CREATE AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR CRITICAL SERVICES** that do not squarely fit within a specific departmental mandate such as child nutrition, early language and maths development, disability and parent and caregiver support. This may require a central agency to coordinate and drive large-scale cross-cutting programmes for children.
- **INTRODUCE MORE LARGE-SCALE PROGRAMMES** that mobilise parents and support early learning and language development, nutrition, and children with disabilities.
- **INCREASE THE BUDGET ALLOCATION FOR EARLY LEARNING.** The overall budget allocation for early learning should increase from R5.1 billion to R7.4 billion over the next three years (2022 prices).²⁸ About 70% of this budget should be allocated to supporting and delivering early learning programmes and the remainder to home-visiting programmes for pregnant women and young children. This will require an additional R764 million in 2023/24 for the early learning component, with the year-on-year increase reaching R825 million in 2025/26 and averaging 13% over the period.²⁹ These increases are feasible within the overall budget framework, considering they target multiple government budgets.



●● Conclusion

If South Africa continues its current ECD trajectory, the future of our children and their children remains precarious. The ECD function shift presents a unique opportunity to change tack and ensure universal access to quality ECD as envisioned in the full Essential Package, disrupting entrenched cycles of inequity and underdevelopment in ECD. The proposed actions are the first steps of an alternative trajectory towards a brighter future.

Endnotes

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16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. SmartStart was founded in 2015. SmartStart is South Africa's first ECD social franchise with a bold ambition to expand access to quality early learning for all children through community-based early learning sites. <https://smartstart.org.za/>
19. Flourish, a pillar of the Grow Great Campaign, is a national network of antenatal and postnatal classes that support, celebrate and empower mothers through the critical first 1000 days of a child's life. It was launched in 2018. <https://flourishnetwork.org.za/>
20. Ilifa Labantwana and Kago Ya Bana. 2018. A plan to achieve universal coverage of Early Childhood Development Services by 2030. P.4.
21. The National Development Plan (NDP) and the National ECD policy of 2015 commit to ensuring that every child in South Africa has access to the full range of ECD. DBE Action Plan to 2024: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2030 sets out 27 goals. Goal 11 is "Improve the access of children to quality ECD below grade 1".
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PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

Front cover: Courtesy of SmartStart - www.smartstart.co.za

Pg 4: GrowGreat - www.growgreat.co.za

Pg 6: GrowGreat - www.growgreat.co.za

Pg 10: Courtesy of SmartStart - www.smartstart.co.za

Back cover: Courtesy of Flourish - www.flourishnetwork.org.za

What is Change Ideas?

DGMT's Change Ideas is a new initiative that makes cost-effective and scalable policies accessible to the public and politicians. These policies, drawn from years of implementation experience, research, and embeddedness in South African civil society, offer opportunities to get South Africa out of the inequality trap. Change Ideas aims to empower you with comprehensive policy briefs, research findings, and expert perspectives on 10 key opportunities identified as pivotal for fostering sustainable change.



Making change possible

This policy brief was written by Daniella Horwitz with contributions from other pivotal projects within DGMT. We want to thank Ilifa Labantwana for laying the groundwork for the policy proposals contained in this brief.



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