

Family-centred Early Childhood Intervention: How to make it work

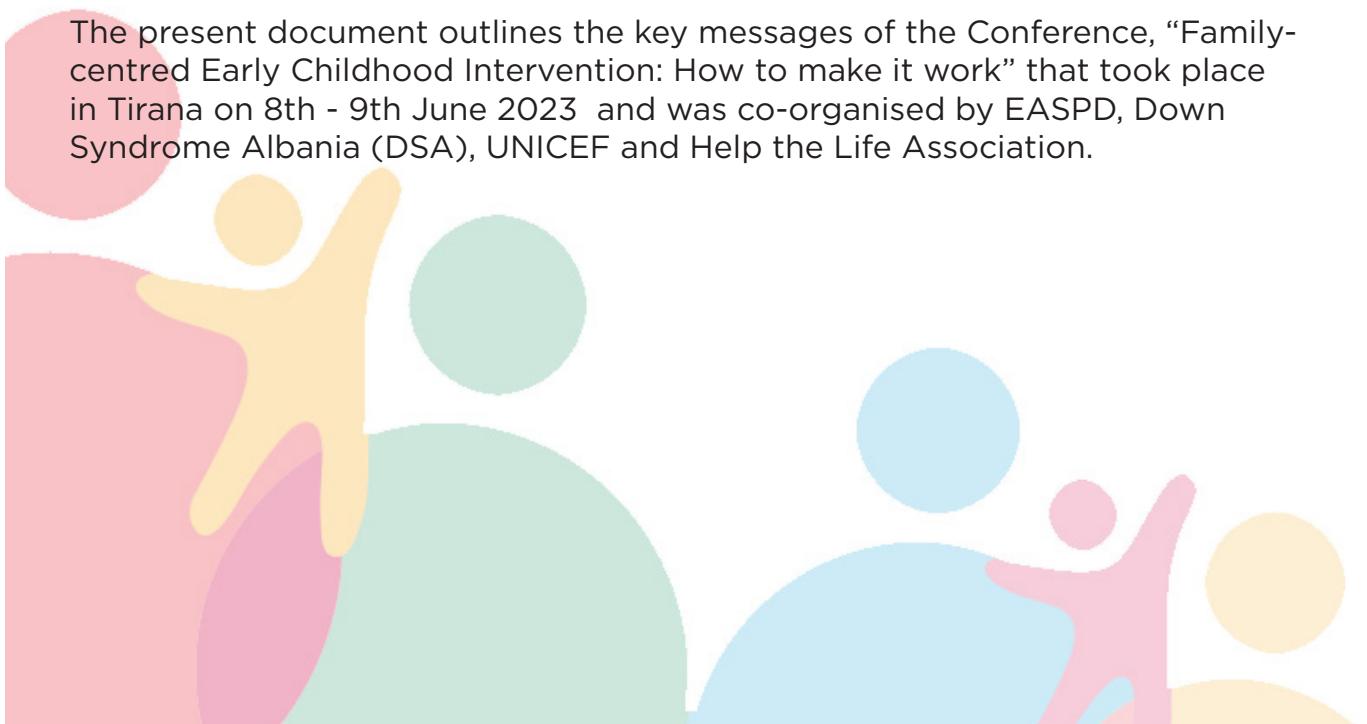
EASPD and UNICEF Conference Conclusions and Recommendations

Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) is a crucial element in shaping children's development, requiring a shift towards a family-centered approach that involves parents and strengthens support networks. Quality ECI services deliver essential support to caregivers helping them strengthen their coping abilities and support their child's development. ECI services are thus particularly vital and should be made available in the challenging contexts of war and displacement.

However, today access to quality ECI services is insufficient in many countries, leaving many vulnerable children underserved and at risk of not developing to their full potential. To address this, public authorities must establish policies and systems to ensure affordable, accessible, and high-quality ECI services for all families in need.

The European Union (EU) has a significant role to play in advancing ECI. In particular, the EU can facilitate the transition to family-centered approach, support the establishment of national ECI systems, through funding opportunities, technical assistance, data collection, mutual learning, and support the development of guidelines for governments and practitioners to follow.

The present document outlines the key messages of the Conference, "Family-centred Early Childhood Intervention: How to make it work" that took place in Tirana on 8th - 9th June 2023 and was co-organised by EASPD, Down Syndrome Albania (DSA), UNICEF and Help the Life Association.



The conference focused on Early Childhood Intervention (ECI), the services for families with young children that need special support to enhance their development, best practices and steps in building functioning ECI systems. The event also highlighted the results of the EASPD-UNICEF cooperation to develop emergency Early Childhood Development (ECD) actions to support young children at risk of or with developmental difficulties affected by the Ukraine war. The Conference was organised within the project “Emergency Early Childhood Development Support for Ukrainian Refugees” implemented by EASPD in partnership with UNICEF and with support from the U. S. Government.

Around 300 experts joined the conference, including service providers for persons with disabilities, UNICEF country offices, government representatives, academic institutions and civil society organisations, providing support to families with young children with developmental delays and disabilities from Albania and other European and Central Asian countries.

The objectives of the conference were:

1. Raising public awareness around the benefits of family-centred ECI highlighting good practices and lessons learnt.
2. Discussing the creation of national ECI systems and encouraging greater commitment for prioritising ECI in policies across Europe.
3. Sharing the experience related to providing ECI services and emergency support for early childhood development to young children and families in Ukraine and the neighbouring countries.
4. Discussing the role of the EU in innovating support to children and families towards contemporary ECI practice and national ECI systems.



Conference conclusions:

Based on the keynote speeches, panel discussions and workshops, the following key findings and takeaways have emerged as conclusive conference outcomes.

Early childhood presents a “critical window of opportunity” to positively influence the development and well-being of young children at risk of or with developmental delays and disabilities.

- Early childhood presents a crucial juncture for shaping a child’s comprehensive development and establishing a solid foundation for their future. Positive early childhood experiences are the basis of optimal brain development. Child development is influenced by the child’s genetics, the interaction with their environment, and the relationships with primary caregivers.
- Estimates suggest that one out of every six children has a developmental disability.¹ More children may be at increased risk of developmental delays and disabilities, particularly socially excluded families, those living in poverty, or children with limited access to essential services and quality early childhood education and care. When a child’s brain fails to receive the expected and necessary stimuli during early years, rectifying the consequences later in life necessitates significant effort and attaining optimal outcomes becomes more difficult.

Building on the opportunities for shaping the architecture of the developing brain and the importance of relationships, family-centred Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services are highly effective in supporting child development and strengthening family competencies and confidence.

- Family-centred Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) is a highly effective approach that focuses on the strengths of both the child and the family and promotes the optimal development and inclusion of children in society. It emphasises the importance of involving parents to enhance child development as part of the daily family routines in the natural environment of the child.
- By recognising and building on the capacities of the family, ECI aims to meet the needs of the child while strengthening family competencies and support networks. The shift towards a family-centred approach requires a transition from a medical to a social model, with leadership and decision-making shared between professionals and families.

Evidence-based, family-centred services shall be accessible and available to all young children in need and their families across the region.

- In many countries ECI services are provided with a medical, therapy-centred approach and are often not sufficient to meet the needs of children and families. Also, there are significant geographical disparities in their availability with gaps in rural and isolated areas which often make minorities and low-income families underserved and underrepresented. Many services also fail to reach children under 3 years of age when the potential to enhance child development is greatest due to the high plasticity of the human brain.
- It is crucial that all families with young children requiring extra support are able to access ECI services that are affordable, easy to reach, and focused on the needs of the entire family. These services should be available in their community and delivered by teams of professionals who collaborate across disciplines and fields of expertise.

Quality ECI services are holistic in nature, encompassing cognitive, social, emotional, and physical aspects of development, and are tailored to meet the unique needs of each child.

- Quality ECI services are family-centred, individualised, build on human rights and the social model of disability and support the child within the context of the family.
- Quality ECI services are routine-based and can effectively address diverse and complex scenarios, including war and humanitarian crises. The effectiveness of the routine-based approach builds on three key principles: recognising that intervention occurs between the visits of professionals, providing essential support to natural caregivers, and prioritising children's functional development through enhanced engagement and meaningful participation in family daily routines, ultimately driving their overall progress and well-being.
- Technology can enhance and facilitate support to children and families, as well as their inclusion, by providing means for Alternative and Augmentative Communication, apps for parents, as well as offering remote online modalities of support.

Enhancing family competencies, confidence and well-being, together with investing in the professional expertise and well-being of ECI practitioners are critical for effective and quality family-centred ECI services.

- The well-being of parents and professionals is critical for the provision of quality support to children and their families. Primary caregivers need to

receive emotional, material and informational support, be empowered to codesign services and be involved in all the phases of ECI system building.

- Professionals are at risk of experiencing high levels of stress and burnout. To effectively support families, professionals should be granted good working conditions, fair compensation, and the necessary skills and support, including for their own well-being, to effectively collaborate with parents and other professionals.

Systematic monitoring of early child development, particularly within the routine health care services for children, is key for ensuring early identification of risks, developmental delays, and disabilities.

- Available ECI services in many countries fail to reach children under 3 years of age when the potential to enhance child development is greatest due to the high plasticity of the human brain. The lack of systematic monitoring of child development is a major contributing factor to this.
- Regular monitoring of child development and screening can help identify and support children with developmental delays and disabilities early. Early identification can be organised in different ways, with routine primary healthcare services playing a unique and irreplaceable role. Healthcare professionals should have knowledge of Early Childhood Development (ECD), developmental difficulties, and skills to build quality relationships with the family.

Countries shall build family-centred ECI systems, grounded on human rights and the social model of disability, and ensure a coherent and coordinated approach across sectors and relevant professionals.

- To ensure high-quality services for all children in need it is essential to establish policies and systems that promote a true paradigm shift in Early Childhood Intervention with a coherent and coordinated approach across sectors and professionals from relevant disciplines.
- Each country may be at a different stage with unique entry points for reform. An important first step is an in-depth analysis of existing legislative frameworks, practices, needs and available resources in terms of physical and human capacities.
- Roadmap for EC system building shall be developed in each country, reflecting challenges and opportunities, national values and culture, resources, political realities, and economic conditions. The roadmap can begin with a conceptual framework, and national standards for ECI service, and lay down a path for progressive improvements.
- The system-building efforts shall define roles and responsibilities across key sectors (health, education, social welfare), eligibility criteria and service quality standards, sustainable financing, continuous training and supervision for professionals, and accountability mechanisms based on effective data collection and management systems.

Early Childhood Intervention services need to be prioritised in the humanitarian response to the situation of children and families affected by the war in Ukraine.

- War and displacement, like the ones affecting millions of families and children from Ukraine, place additional risks to child healthy development, and more so for the children that already have a disability or developmental delay. In this context, quality ECI services deliver essential support to caregivers for strengthening their capacities to cope, reduce stress and support their child’s development.
- Lack of infrastructure and personnel, as well as the ongoing armed attacks pose serious challenges for ensuring access to quality ECI services in Ukraine. Qualified and dedicated staff, as well as distant modalities of service delivery, ensure continuation in the support to families but sustained political effort is also needed to expand ECI services in the country. Building transnational networks of professionals in the area of ECI would facilitate support to families, as well as strengthen the capacities for quality ECI services across Europe.
- In the context of displacement, additional challenges may be posed by language barriers, and by the limited availability of ECI services in the hosting countries. The support to young children with developmental delays and disabilities needs to be prioritised in the humanitarian response across Europe. Allocation of additional resources, training of professionals and engaging qualified human resources from the Ukrainian community, as well as an increased focus on reforms for strengthening national ECI systems, are essential elements to ensure the quality and resilience of the support available to families with young children with developmental delays and disabilities.



The European Union shall take the leadership to support ECI system building in the member states but also in the countries aspiring to join the European community.

- The EU has a significant influence on policy development and modelling of good practices for Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) and a crucial role in shaping and strengthening ECI policies and services through its financial instruments. To maximise impact, Member States should proactively link and define ECI-related policies in alignment with broader agendas like deinstitutionalisation, independent living, and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).
- EU financial instruments including the European Social Fund Plus and the Technical Support Instrument are already supporting the shaping and strengthening of ECI policies and services; Member States should proactively use these opportunities to advance the provision of quality ECI services.
- The EU Child Guarantee is a major opportunity for developing research, services and systems on ECI, as demonstrated in the pilot phase in Croatia and Bulgaria, in cooperation with UNICEF.
- Other areas where the EU can play a key role include data collection on ECI policies and practices, mutual learning of good practices and methodologies, and developing EU guidelines to guide the creation of ECI services and national systems.
- ECI is contributing to the successful inclusion and participation of children in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). While ECEC is strongly present in the EU agenda and discourse, the link with ECI needs to be further articulated and addressed. ECEC and ECI shall be considered as a continuity of services supporting the inclusion of children at risk of or with developmental delays and disabilities.
- The role of ECI needs to be further highlighted as a key element to foster healthy development, prevent institutionalisation of children, facilitate participation in ECEC, education and enable them to reach their full potential later in life. The European Union has the potential to speed up the transition to family-centred ECI and the creation of national ECI systems and offers opportunities for funding.

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