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EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION: MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE

Early childhood refers to the early years of life starting from birth to six years. These years are called the formative years as the foundation for physical, cognitive, socio-emotional and language development is laid during this period. Researches in the field of neuroscience have established the importance of these years as growth and development of the brain takes place at a very fast pace. Early care, stimulating environment and optimum learning opportunities have a lasting impact on the lives of young children. This can be done by ensuring quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for all children during their formative years. Any kind of deprivation may have an adverse impact on the development of children. Thus, it becomes imperative to understand the meaning and significance of ECCE.



LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this lesson, you will be able to:

- describe the meaning and significance of ECCE;
- discuss the objectives of ECCE;
- explain the components of ECCE;
- highlight the importance of early intervention; and
- describe ECCE in the Indian and global context.

1.1 MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ECCE

1.1.1 Meaning of ECCE

The term ECCE comprises of three key terms:- ‘*Early Childhood*’, ‘*Care*’, and



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'Education'. *Early childhood* is the period from birth to six years. According to the National Policy on ECCE, 2013, there are three sub-stages of early years, each with its own age-specific developmental priorities. These sub-stages are: (a) conception to birth (b) birth to three years and (c) three to six years. This is the most important period of life characterized by rapid growth and development. By *'Care'* we mean providing love and affection and ensuring a healthy, hygienic, protective and stimulating environment for all children. *'Education'* is a process of acquiring knowledge, skills, attitudes and values through exploration, experimentation, observation, participation and interaction. All such experiences help children learn more about themselves and the world around them.

Thus, ECCE refers to providing care including health and nutrition as well as early learning opportunities to all young children. A protective and stimulating environment consisting of play-based and developmentally appropriate activities are vital for children's physical-motor, cognitive, socio-emotional and language development.

Hence, ECCE forms the basis for overall development, later learning and wellbeing of children.

1.1.2 Significance of ECCE

Compared to the other periods of life, the first six years of children's life are very important due to fast growth and development in all domains. Researches in the field of neuroscience confirm the importance of early years in children's life. According to these researches, development of brain takes place at a rapid rate during these years. By the time a child is six years old, 90% of brain development has taken place. As a result, this stage is considered crucial for the holistic development of children especially for the development of the brain. Any disruption in the developmental processes due to heredity or environment may affect adversely. Lack of a healthy home and school environment, paucity of stimulation, inadequate nutrition and poor health care are some of the common factors that lead to developmental delays among children. During these years, children acquire various physical-motor, cognitive, socio-emotional and language competencies. Hence, they should be provided opportunities to grow in a stimulating and engaging environment with positive experiences. Quality early care and education provided to young children through ECCE programmes enables them to acquire age-appropriate knowledge and skills which further help them adjust better in a formal school environment.

Thus, it is necessary to accord prime importance to ECCE for children to develop in an integrated, holistic and healthy manner. Different ECCE service providers must ensure access to equitable and quality ECCE for all children, especially for children who are disadvantaged.



1.2 OBJECTIVES OF ECCE

The aim of ECCE is to provide quality care and learning opportunities to all children during their formative years for their overall development. National ECCE Curriculum Framework, 2013 has defined the objectives of ECCE. In the light of this document, let us understand its key objectives.

ECCE aims to:

- ensure that children feel safe, secure, accepted and respected
- ensure children have good and balanced nutrition
- inculcate healthy habits, hygiene practices and self-help skills among children
- enable sound language development, skills of communication and expression
- ensure optimum physical and motor development of children as per their potential
- foster sensory and cognitive abilities of children by providing engaging, participative and stimulating activities
- promote development of pro-social skills and social competence along with children's emotional wellbeing
- prepare children for formal learning in schools.



ACTIVITY 1.1

Discuss with parents in your community to find out how aware they are about the significance of ECCE.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.1

1. State whether the following statements are true or false.
 - (a) Early years of children's life are very important due to fast growth and development in all domains.
 - (b) ECCE means ensuring care including health and nutrition as well as early learning opportunities to all young children during their early years.
 - (c) Home and school environment do not affect children's development.
 - (d) Disruption in the developmental process due to heredity or environmental factors may affect overall development of children.
 - (e) A protective and stimulating environment is vital for holistic development of children.



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1.3 COMPONENTS OF ECCE

ECCE is an integrated programme consisting of various components which together contribute to the development and wellbeing of children. Let us study its key components in detail.

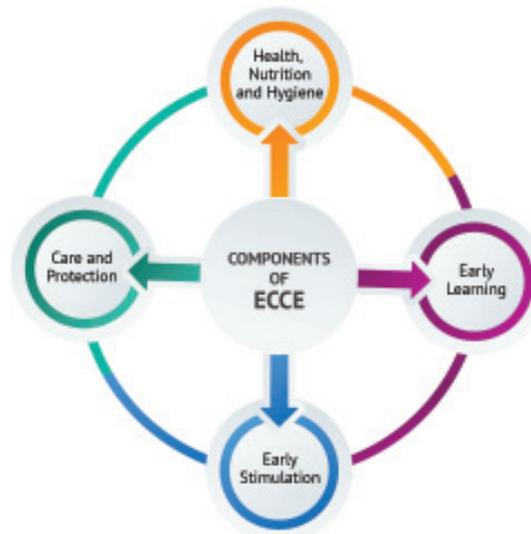


Fig 1.1 Components of ECCE

1.3.1 Health, Nutrition and Hygiene

This component consists of providing regular health interventions to both the mother and the child. It encompasses providing prenatal and postnatal care to the mother in terms of provision of healthy nutritious food, timely immunization of the pregnant mother, regular health checkups, stress-free environment and safe child birth at a hospital or a health centre.

Similarly, all children need to be provided with a healthy and hygienic environment comprising of well-balanced and nutritious food, protection from infections, timely immunization and provision for medical care.

1.3.2 Care and Protection

A physically and emotionally safe, secure and protective environment is essential for all children for their optimum growth and healthy development. Providing a caring and protective environment is an integral component of ECCE. It is essential for caregivers to ensure psychological and socio-emotional needs of children. It can be done by responding to their needs through appropriate stimulation, supportive and warm interaction and ensuring a healthy and safe environment.

1.3.3 Early Stimulation

As you have read, development takes place in physical-motor, social-emotional, cognitive and language domains, all of which are interdependent. During the first few years of life, rapid growth and development occur in all domains of development.



Early stimulation refers to providing appropriate stimulating inputs through seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting to children especially during their first three years of life. The goal of the stimulation is to promote children’s potential by enhancing positive interactions with parents or caregivers, and opportunities for exploring the environment. Research supports that stimulation helps in brain development by creating neural pathways which further support learning in later years. Hence, it is important that during their early years, children are provided with a stimulating environment which is rich in a variety of age-appropriate materials, experiences and opportunities for development.

1.3.4 Early Learning

Providing opportunities of early learning is yet another important component of ECCE. Children in the age group of three to six years must be provided age- and developmentally appropriate learning experiences. It is impreative to ensure access to quality education comprising of play, concrete experiences, observation, manipulation and experimentation. This helps them learn about themselves, others and the world around them.

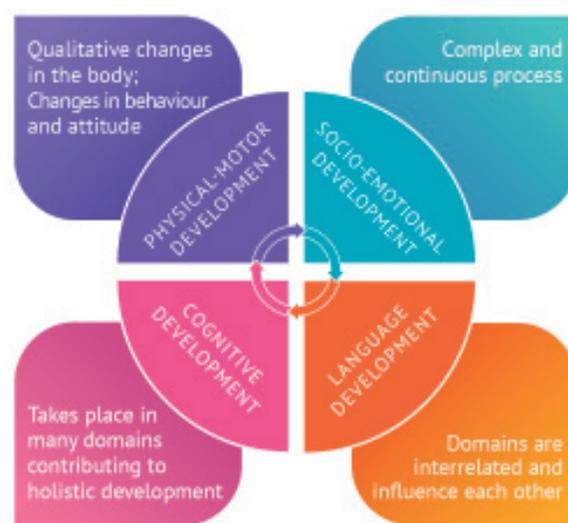


Fig 1.2 The Process of Development

Physical - Motor Development

Physical growth and development include increase in height, weight and changes in the proportions of the body structure. It includes the development of bones. The entire structure of the body depends on the bones, i.e. on their size, proportion and density. They give an overall configuration and look to the body. Physical and motor development also involves the process of development of gross and fine muscles and eye-hand coordination. Development of gross muscles helps children in activities like, crawling, walking, running, cycling, climbing, jumping etc. Fine muscular development helps them in activities such as holding a crayon, scribbling, drawing, colouring, threading, cutting and writing.



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Socio-emotional Development

Social development is a process of acquiring social norms and cultural values. Healthy social development enables children to form positive relations with family, friends and other people in life. Emotional development refers to the development of emotions and feelings in children. Children are born with basic emotions such as love, fear, anger and happiness etc. They develop complex emotions and their ability to recognize, express, and manage feelings over time.

Cognitive Development

It refers to development of mental or cognitive abilities such as ability to think, remember, recognize, categorize, imagine, reason and take decisions.

Language Development

It is a process of acquiring, understanding and using language. It involves the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. These skills help children to communicate with others and to express their feelings.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.2

1. Fill in the blanks:
 - (a) ECCE is helpful in _____ development of children.
 - (b) Language Development refers to acquiring..... and
 - (c) Physical-motor development involves the process of development of, muscles andcoordination.
 - (d)are the examples of development of fine motor skills.

1.4 EARLY INTERVENTION

Before we discuss the meaning and significance of early intervention, it is important to know the meaning of developmental milestones and developmental delays.

Developmental milestones are the age-specific acquisition of skills and competencies in each domain. Children under normal circumstances are expected to achieve the milestones in their respective domain i.e. it is expected that certain competencies would appear at particular age ranges. If children lag behind the normal pattern of growth, they may have developmental delay. That means that children do not achieve the developmental milestones at the expected times. They fail to progress at the same pace and reach the milestones as expected of them at that particular age. There can be various reasons for developmental delays in children such as heredity, complications during pregnancy or child birth, illnesses, and accidents after birth.



It is important to observe the signs of developmental delay in children to provide them appropriate and timely intervention. Early intervention means taking necessary actions as early as possible to work on children's developmental and learning needs, thus reducing the effects of any developmental delay. It means introducing the right kind of interventions in children's life as early as possible when their mind is most receptive to learning new things.

Therefore, regular health check-ups of children should be undertaken and a health record should be maintained. Health examination should include general appearance, body structure, recording of pulse, breathing rate, temperature, measurement of height, weight, chest and abdomen. Examination of neck, eyes, ears, nose, throat, teeth, skin, hair, nails, vision, hearing, mental responsiveness, movement of limbs, urine and stool examinations should also be done. This helps in early detection of defects. If any problem is diagnosed or reported early, it can then be immediately attended to.

Physical and sensory impairments especially impede children's development. For example, if any child has sensory impairment, that child might find it difficult to interact well with the environment. This may have ripple effects and the child's language and socio-emotional development may also slow down. If a child is called repeatedly and the child does not respond, it may be that the child has difficulty in hearing. Similarly, if a child does not speak even after a certain age, then he may need support to acquire the skill of speaking as per age. Thus, timely identification helps to provide early intervention to children. If a child's developmental delays are not addressed on time, then these temporary delays may become permanent. Any intervention given at a later stage will not be sufficient to catch up. Large numbers of children in our country are susceptible to multiple risk factors in the early years of life including poor health, malnutrition and low levels of stimulation in the home environment. So, it is even more important to detect early developmental lags and provide corrective inputs for it.

1.5 ECCE IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

There has been a growing awareness about the importance of early years and the need for providing quality early care and learning opportunities to young children. Many educational thinkers have contributed to the field of ECCE, expressing their thoughts about the way children grow, think and develop. In India, the early pioneers of early childhood education include Gijubhai Badheka, Tarabai Modak, and Maria Montessori.

Gijubhai Badheka believed that good education is very important for the proper development of children. For this, he founded 'BalMandir', a preschool in Bhavnagar, Gujarat in 1920.

Tarabai Modak also made significant contributions in the field of preschool education in India. In 1926, she founded the Nutan Bal Shikshan Sangh in



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erstwhile Bombay, now Mumbai. Here, children from different backgrounds learnt through activities and real-life experiences.

The Montessori Method founded by Maria Montessori is an approach to preschool education. It has had a profound influence on the lives of young children all over the world. It is intended to support the natural development of children in a well-prepared environment.

The writings of great Indian educational thinkers such as Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Zakir Hussain have also drawn attention to the care and education of children during the formative years of life. They opined that education to children must be imparted in their mother tongue and should be closely connected to their social and cultural environment and the community in which children and their family live.

At present, ECCE services in India are made available through public, private and non-governmental organizations. The Government of India has made significant contributions to improve the accessibility and quality of education provided to young children. In 1975, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme was launched by Government of India to address health, nutrition and the development needs of children under six years. It is a unique and an integrated programme for early childhood care and development. It also encompasses the care of pregnant women and lactating mothers.

In recent years, the focus on ECCE in the Five Year Plans and formulation of the National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy, 2013 in India has further opened opportunities of access to quality care and early education by young children.

Private un-aided ECCE centres such as nurseries, kindergartens and pre-primary sections in private schools also deliver preschool education in the country, especially in urban areas. In addition, several NGOs have also been conducting the ECCE programmes.

1.6 ECCE IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

The importance of ECCE has been recognized globally as well. It started in 1989 with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which is an international agreement for child rights. It intended to protect and promote the wellbeing of children in terms of their survival, health, education and protection.

The World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 emphasized that 'learning begins at birth' and promoted early care and education as a must that needs to be provided through the involvement of families and communities.

In addition, the World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal in April 2000 also reiterated the importance of ECCE. It reaffirmed that education is a

fundamental human right, and set objectives for achieving Education For All (EFA) goals to ensure basic education for all children.

Recently, World Education Forum held in 2015 at Incheon, Republic of Korea, set up the goal for sustainable development recognizing the important role of education as a main driver of development by 2030. The Sustainable Development Goal 4 targets that, “by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education, so that they are ready for primary education”.

In line with these global commitments, India is striving to ensure access to quality ECCE to all children of the country.



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INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.3

1. Tick Yes or No:

- (a) The ECCE services in India are made available through public, private and Non-Governmental organizations. (Yes/No)
- (b) Developmental delay means that children achieve the developmental milestones at the expected age. (Yes/No)
- (c) ICDS is an integrated programme for children in primary classes. (Yes/No)
- (d) Early intervention refers to taking necessary actions as early as possible to support children’s developmental and learning needs. (Yes/No)
- (e) Sustainable Development Goal 4 is related to education of young children. (Yes/No)



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

In this lesson, you have learnt that:

- Early years mean the first eight years of life.
- ECCE refers to the care and learning opportunities provided to children from birth to six years for their holistic development.
- ECCE comprises of health, nutrition, care, protection, early stimulation and early learning as its components.
- Development is a complex and a continuous process. It takes place in the physical-motor, socio-emotional, language and cognitive domains. These domains are interrelated and influence children’s holistic development.
- There can be several reasons for developmental delays in children such as hereditary, complications during pregnancy or child birth, illnesses or



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accidents after birth etc. Early identification is essential to identify any developmental delays in children. Timely intervention must be provided to children with developmental delays to address to their developmental and learning needs.

- ECCE in the Indian context includes the thoughts of educational thinkers and Government initiatives towards promoting ECCE in the country including ICDS, 1975 and National ECCE Policy, 2013.
- The emphasis accorded to ECCE at the global level including Sustainable Development Goal 4 targets ensure access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education to all young children so that they become ready for primary education by 2030.



TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. Explain the meaning and significance of ECCE.
2. Write briefly the key objectives of ECCE.
3. Discuss the key components of ECCE.
4. Why is ECCE important for holistic development of children?
5. Briefly describe ECCE in the Indian context.
6. Discuss ECCE in the global context.



ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

1.1

- (a) Yes
- (b) Yes
- (c) No
- (d) Yes
- (e) Yes

1.2

- (a) holistic
- (b) communication, expression

- (c) gross, fine, eye-hand
- (d) writing, colouring, drawing

1.3

- (a) Yes
- (b) No
- (c) No
- (d) Yes
- (e) Yes

GLOSSARY

- **Competencies:** Abilities or skills required to do any work.
- **Holistic:** Development of the physical-motor, socio-emotional, cognitive and language competencies of children in an integrated manner.
- **Neuroscience:** The study of nervous system and the brain.

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