

Early childhood development

Not a choice, but a must

In this year's budget government allocated minimal funds to make Early Childhood Development (ECD) a real possibility for South Africa's children. Recently, however, the ministers of Education and of Social Development have started to allocate more resources to this sector although it is off a low base. **Colleen Walter** explains why ECD is so critical for children and society as a whole.

As a South African, how do you want your country to look in 20 to 30 years? Who will be the media experts? Who will be strategising government policy? Who will be implementing government policy? What will the family look like? What kind of schools do you want your children to attend? How will South Africa be impacting the continent and the world? It is not fanciful to say that what happens in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector today has a direct impact on the future and how South Africa will look 20 years from now. (ECD is defined as the process of developing children from birth to nine years.)

The UNICEF annual report states that, "Child development is a succession of events for which there is seldom a second chance. Biological and intellectual growth cannot wait until a family escapes from poverty. When poverty spreads and deepens, the risks of contracting respiratory infections, diarrhoea, measles and other illnesses that commonly kill children or undermine their physical, psychosocial and cognitive capacities increase. Damage suffered due to malnutrition, ill health and inadequate care during childhood impedes future learning and often cannot be repaired later in life."

And the White Paper 5: *Early Childhood Development, May 2001* says, "Evidence from child development research indicates that the largest part of brain development happens before a child reaches three years of age. During this period children develop their abilities to think and speak, learn and reason and lay the foundation for their values and behaviour as adults..."

Yet of 1 666 980 children that enrolled for Grade 1 in South Africa in 1995, only 56% reached secondary school and only 21% passed the grade 12 exam. There are many factors impacting on these outcomes, however, if proper foundations are laid in the early years, learners will experience more success. A child who is having success at school is less likely to drop out than one who is not.

Currently in South Africa only 17% of children, birth to six years, have access to ECD programmes. Families living in poverty are stretched for time and resources to give input into their children's lives.

IMPORTANCE OF ECD FOR LIFE-LONG DEVELOPMENT

Research carried out in many countries including South Africa shows that a child who has had a quality Early Childhood

Development programme is

- more confident and able.
- more likely to get a job as an adult.
- less likely to drop out of school
- less likely to repeat a grade at school.
- less likely to need remedial education.
- less likely to fall pregnant in her teens.
- less likely to be involved in crime.

Research carried out in America has shown that there is a cost saving of \$17.07 to society for every \$1 spent on ECD.

New Zealand had a severe litter problem many years ago and so people gathered together to brainstorm ways of solving the crisis. There was talk, for example, of more modern equipment to collect waste and destroy waste and of employing more people to collect waste. The outcome of this brainstorm was that these were solutions and did not address the root cause. So they introduced a programme at the first year of community ECD Centres to teach children the value of recycling and to put in place processes to establish this as a way of life. The following year this took place in the first two years, then three years and so on. By the time the children had

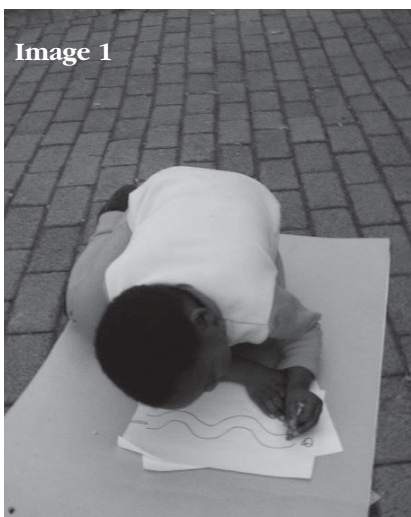


Image 1



Image 2

Image 1 shows Sihle (4 years) sitting completing a worksheet – she is merely carrying out a hand-eye co-ordination activity. Compare Image 1 to Image 2, where exactly the same activity is developed to address the learning stage Sihle is at – learning through her senses and movement. She is physically taking the cup to the saucer by balancing along the rope. This form of activity gives much more input to her senses – forward movement, balance, distance perception and preparation for writing.

finished school 15 years later recycling was a core value of the nation. This is one of many cases demonstrating the importance of ECD programmes.

HOW CHILDREN LEARN BEST

Children up to six years learn through play, through their senses and movement, and a quality ECD programme plans around these principles. This does not mean that the programme is haphazard and unplanned – quite the opposite. The programme gives the children as much opportunity as possible to do the following:

- Decision-making – choosing which activity to engage with next encourages making of decisions. Teachers plan class activities to develop various aspects of learning and the children are encouraged to make choices.
- Discovery encourages problem-solving abilities and establishes the foundations of learning. For example, plastic containers containing coloured water and mixing bowls allow children to discover that red and yellow make orange, red and blue make purple and blue and yellow make green instead of learning it by rote.
- When children work in groups at various activities, this prepares

“Investment in children today is the best guarantee of equitable and sustainable development tomorrow.” (UNICEF)

them socially and emotionally for being more constructive in the workplace one day.

- Pre-numeracy activities lay a solid foundation for maths. For example, counting objects and laying them left to right in preparation for principles of place value so that children come to understand that the digits 9, 1 and 7 read very differently left to right (917) than right to left (719). ECD teachers address adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing in a very practical manner to ensure a solid foundation for later use. Children do such exercises as “I have three friends and ten oranges, let me share them and see how many oranges each friend gets.”
- Similarly, pre-reading and writing activities ensure that children can take their place confidently in the formal education system. Children use the sound of letters, and NOT the names of letters. Teachers also encourage incidental reading such as brand names like Coca-Cola and Checkers.
- Young children in ECD Centres need to experience play-based discovery and learning. Formal

education at this stage of learning leads to gaps in perceptual training and results in poor application of knowledge.

There is much work to be done in the ECD sector and much advocacy is required to ensure that all sectors of society are doing their part in ensuring that in South Africa, a quality service is available to all in these early, very vital years.

Parents need to find out what to look for in a good ECD Centre for their child and influence their communities when services are not acceptable.

Government’s actions and finances need to reflect the words that they write and speak about when they talk of the importance of ECD.

The ECD sector needs to achieve an unquestioned professional status and deliver a service that will reverse the huge and problematic statistics around maths and literacy achievements of South African children. LB

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