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ECE SPOTLIGHT SERIES

BUILD TO LAST: PARENTING

**Engaging parents and caregivers
to support child development
and early learning**



Every day, parents and caregivers make decisions about children's education, health, nutrition and well-being – all of which influence child development. Governments can support this process by acknowledging parents as critical stakeholders in early learning, and empowering them to make informed decisions. Early childhood education programmes form effective platforms to mobilize parents and communities and provide comprehensive, evidence-based support to enhance child development and parental well-being.

Young children spend most of their time in their home environment, engaging with parents¹, siblings, extended family and neighbours. Through these interactions, they learn about the world around them and about their place in it. When these experiences are **nurturing**, children are supported to **develop to their full potential**, with the positive impact on well-being lasting into adulthood. In fact, the quality of the home learning environment is the strongest predictor of academic attainment **at age 18**. Together, the interactions, behaviours, emotions, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and practices associated with the provision of nurturing care that shape the home environment are known as **parenting**.

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the critical role parents play in child development, particularly during school closures. In some contexts, governments used this period to build on existing parenting programmes to engage parents more fully as partners in early learning and development. In the **Dominican Republic**, a programme was launched to provide accessible home learning kits to the parents of pre-primary children with disabilities to support holistic development. In North Macedonia, EDUINO, a **digital early learning platform** established to support parents of young children to facilitate social emotional learning at home was scaled up to become a national digital learning platform for children from pre-primary education through to secondary education.

Yet globally, governments often lack mechanisms to engage parents meaningfully, effectively and systematically. Despite recognition of the importance of parents in the child's learning journey, effective strategies and targeted resources are seldom deployed to support parents to play this role effectively.

Early childhood education (ECE) settings are one of the most strategic and effective platforms to reach young children in the 3–5 age range with a continuum of holistic early child development (ECD) services. ECE centres often form a multi-service community hub where young children, parents and community members gather, presenting a unique opportunity to move beyond just the provision of early learning to also consider all aspects of the **Nurturing Care Framework for Early Childhood Development**.

Building on the critical ECD services delivered by health workers and others to the under 3s, ECE centres serve as complementary entry points to reach parents with support services as children continue their learning journey outside the home. As global enrolment in ECE **continues to increase** through private and public provision, governments can leverage the platform of ECE services to strengthen support to parents, and parental support to children.

To realize the potential of parents and caregivers as partners in early learning, governments should work towards three core goals.

1. Throughout this document, the term 'parents' is not limited to biological and adoptive parents but extends to any guardian or caregiver providing consistent care to children and adolescents. It includes both adults and adolescents who may be parents themselves.



1. Support parents and caregivers to foster positive home learning environments.

The interactions and relationships that young children experience in their home environment have a significant influence on how children understand and experience themselves and the world around them, and shape the way children learn and develop. For example, when caregivers communicate responsively with children using a serve and return conversational approach, children are better supported to develop social and communication skills. When children are encouraged to play with others powerful learning opportunities are created, and the well-being of all those engaged in play increases, regardless of age.

Yet access to positive home learning environments is not evenly distributed: in most countries, children in wealthier households are more likely to benefit from early stimulation and responsive care in the home than children in families with lower household incomes.

Evidence demonstrates that effective parenting programmes can positively impact the home environment by enhancing parent–child relationships.

A review of 13 programme evaluations found that when delivered weekly for one year or more, psychosocial interventions positively alter both parental behaviours and the child’s mental, social and emotional development outcomes.

Experiencing or witnessing violence in the home negatively impacts child development and makes children more likely to engage in violence in adulthood.

When adults and children are at high risk of violence within the home, early childhood education offers an entry point for parenting programmes to address norms and behaviours linked with violence and can provide parents with effective means of communicating with each other and their children, as well as strengthening emotional self-regulation.

Programmes which focus on positive discipline reduce violent, harsh punishments and support child protection goals. In **Jamaica**, the IRIE Homes Toolbox supports child safety and well-being by improving positive parenting for children aged 2–6 years.² Use of the tool by parents led to reduced harsh punishment, increased parental involvement and decreased behavioural difficulties among higher-risk children. Messaging around violence-prevention is reinforced by teachers in early years classrooms through the **IRIE Classroom Toolbox** teacher training programme.

Parents can play a key role in promoting positive social norms relating to issues such as disability, gender, and more. For example, as young children form their own gender identity, parents may consciously or unconsciously transfer gendered norms or behaviours, aspirations and expectations to their children. By accessing **gender-transformative parenting** programmes, parents of all genders can be supported to address discriminatory gender dynamics and to create households which are gender responsive.

Engaging fathers and male caregivers in responsive caregiving programmes is an increasing priority in many contexts. Documented benefits of increased involvement of men in caregiving include positive impacts on the development of school readiness skills in children, as well as improved child mental health. A pilot in the Gambia³ found that the parenting programme increased engagement between male caregivers and children, improved communication between male and female caregivers, and challenged gendered social norms around fatherhood in some communities.

Providing parents with knowledge and skills to support positive parenting approaches, play, and early learning parenting is a key strategy to enhance child development.

2 Francis, T., & Baker-Henningham, H., ‘The IRIE Homes Toolbox: A Cluster Randomized Controlled Trial of an Early Childhood Parenting Program to Prevent Violence Against Children in Jamaica’, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 126, 2021, [106060]. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106060>

3 Parenting Practices for Early Childhood Development (ECD) in the Gambia: Stocktaking Review, February 2020.

In Cambodia, the Ministry of Education leads the multisectoral Nurturing Care Parenting programme. The programme has been developed by drawing on best practices from a range of parenting programmes in multiple sectors, including programmes implemented through ECE centres. The face-to-face sessions are facilitated by a trained commune focal point who provides parenting education in local languages.

Reaching parents through digital media can substantially expand the number of parents accessing critical messaging.

In Viet Nam, the **One Sky platform** includes interactive and visual content to demonstrate good practices in caregiver and child interactions, as well as resources from early development experts on topics such as how to make toys at home. The content is accessible to caregivers of all educational levels via app or website. The platform also offers a community of practice for caregivers to access support from trainers and peers to share experiences and seek advice.

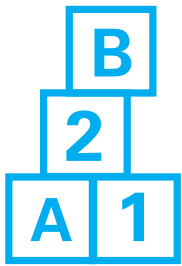
In **Europe and Central Asia**, UNICEF has launched a mobile parenting application called **Bebbo**. This supports parents and caregivers of children aged 0 to 6 years by

providing them with evidence-based advice and interactive tools to promote children's development and well-being. The app encourages parents to engage in daily practices that support early learning, including cognitive, motor, socio-emotional and language skills. **Bebbo** is available in 14 countries across the region in 14 different languages (with 23 language variations). Since its launch the app has been downloaded by over half a million users.

Parents and caregivers should be given opportunities to build digital literacy to support their children's learning and safety online.

In the meantime, simple platforms can be used effectively. During COVID-19, Jordan arranged for existing, trained parenting facilitators to create and manage small WhatsApp communities for parents of children under six. Parents received daily information about nutrition, **positive parenting** and more, and facilitators suggested activities to support development at home. Through the WhatsApp groups facilitators posed questions to encourage discussion between the 10-15 parents in the group, fostering a community of peer-support in which parents could share their experiences.





2. Support parents and caregivers to facilitate more structured learning opportunities within the home, focusing on marginalized communities and individuals.

Engaging parents in home-based ECE activities can enhance the inclusivity of ECE for children who may otherwise be unable to access services.

In remote areas, training parents as first educators can overcome the shortage of ECE services. In [Mongolia](#), a **home-based, parent-facilitated learning programme** complements the seasonal ‘ger’ kindergartens that only operate during the summer. Parents receive training to support learning at home and are given resources, including a guidance book for caregivers and a workbook for children supplemented by digital tools. Evidence shows positive outcomes for the children.

Children are more likely to develop core foundational skills when their mother-tongue is used as language of instruction in their early years. In the [Plurinational State of Bolivia](#), the **Bilingual Nests** linguistic revitalization programme supports caregivers and community leaders from 29 indigenous communities to enhance language development in young children by increasing verbal communication at home, and facilitating intergenerational language learning through community groups which engage grandparents and elders. In [Myanmar](#), **UNICEF supported** ethnic languages and cultural committees (LCCs) to develop resources in ethnic languages which reflect the culture, traditions, customs and costumes of different communities. Due to these efforts, the availability of resources in local languages to stimulate mother-tongue language development, including storybooks, poems and other materials, has improved significantly.

Through flexible approaches, parents can be supported to facilitate learning at home during

temporary or permanent school closures due to emergencies or other factors. In [Nepal](#), a formative assessment package⁴ for use at home has been developed as a complement to face-to-face ECE services, and as a way of reaching young learners during times of preschool closures. Piloted in 2022, the package engages families in the assessment of child skills at home through a combination of observation and activity-based tasks. Parents use the results to support home-based learning using simple activities. Through home visits, SMS and other strategies preschool teachers support parents to understand and use the assessment approaches.

Parents and caregivers of children with disabilities should be supported through online and offline platforms so that they understand how to support their child’s holistic development from birth, through the early years and beyond. In [Bhutan](#) the government developed guidelines for parents of children with disabilities to support learning in the home. Resources included suggested activities to support self-esteem and independence, as well as activities to assist with cognitive development, all based on materials and tasks which were likely to be available in the home.

The World Health Organization’s **Caregiver Skills Training** for Parents of Children with Developmental Delays and Disabilities e-learning programme, supported by UNICEF and implemented in Serbia and Bulgaria, is an open access course for the caregivers of children aged 2–9. It enhances caregivers’ capacity to use everyday play and home routines as opportunities to build their children’s communication, engagement in activities, positive behaviour and daily living skills, while improving caregivers’ overall well-being.

4 UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia and Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood, ECE Formative Assessment Package (forthcoming 2023).



3. Include families and communities as strategic partners in early learning programmes outside the home.

UNICEF recognizes that parents are crucial actors in their child's learning and development journey.

Parents generate the demand for services required across sectors for holistic early development. Through their engagement, parents influence the curricular content, value systems and teaching-learning processes, as well as follow-through of critical interventions and financing approaches reflected in early childhood programmes. Early learning systems must engage with families strategically and systematically, involving parents and caregivers as active participants in child development.

In Montenegro, an integral component in expanding access to ECE was stimulating demand for services, especially in areas affected by poverty and low enrolment.

The 'Preschool for All' campaign increased enrolment by raising awareness about the importance of preschool education. The campaign included performances and demonstrations of early childhood education services in cities and open spaces, so that families could experience preschool. In five municipalities targeted by the campaign, preschool enrolment increased by an average 20 per cent in 2015, and by a further 22 per cent in 2016.

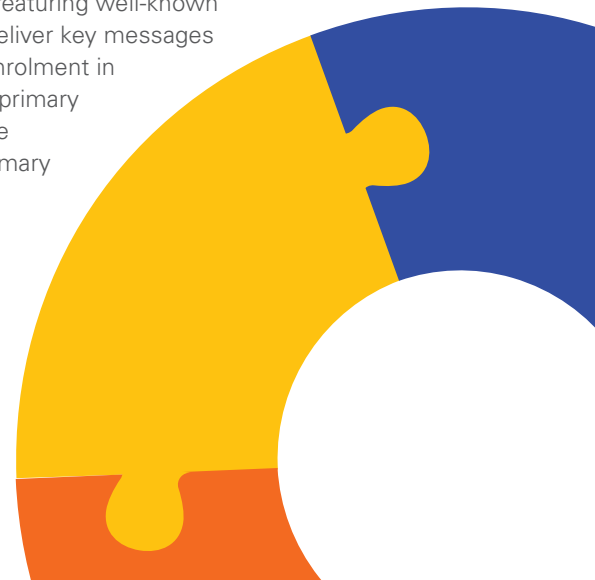
To support enrolment and participation of children with disabilities in preschool, Bulgaria sensitized parents of all children and developed the capacity of teachers and local officials to support inclusive education. The initiative improved communication between parents and pre-primary teachers about special educational needs and other topics and increased parental confidence that mainstream pre-primary centres could support children with disabilities effectively. Regularly consulting and communicating with families of children with disabilities is an important step to understand the needs and priorities of individual children, as well as the barriers to participation.

Household contributions to ECE through fees, provision of materials or other in-kind support remain critical to service provision. Governments can facilitate access to contextually relevant ECE by engaging in partnerships with diverse providers, regulated by government agencies through robust quality assurance mechanisms. In **Rwanda**,

the government partnered with faith-based organizations, NGOs and communities to open **347 ECE centres** in 2019. The centres are required to meet the national minimum standards as per national quality assurance processes. Teachers receive mentoring, supportive supervision, and teacher training with support from UNICEF.

Parents and caregivers influence the curricular content, value systems and teaching-learning processes by participating in formal and informal accountability structures. In the Gambia, mothers' committees in 33 communities served as entry points for service improvement and safe re-opening of ECE settings following the COVID-19 closures. Through Ghana's Guidelines for Implementation of the ECE policy, school management committees are mandated to support play-based learning and other measures such as recruitment. During the process of operationalizing the European ECCE Quality Framework, **Bulgaria** engaged parents and caregivers in the development and piloting of Bulgaria's new Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) quality framework indicators.

As children complete pre-primary, parents and caregivers play a critical role in supporting a smooth transition to primary. By ensuring that children are enrolled in primary school at the right age, and by continuing to engage in learning as children grow and develop, parents can support children to stay in school and successfully complete their education. In **Ghana**, the Ministry of Education, with support from UNICEF, launched a media campaign featuring well-known personalities to deliver key messages about right-age enrolment in kindergarten and primary one. Following the campaign, pre-primary net enrolment increased from 73.8 per cent (2018/19) to 89.3 per cent (2020/21).





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“Engaging with families as partners is a vital element of increasing demand for universal access and quality of services as well as for ensuring a continuum of learning between home and school over time.”

A World Ready to Learn, UNICEF, 2019



4. Build capacity of key stakeholders to engage with and support families and communities effectively.

Governments often lack mechanisms to engage parents meaningfully and effectively. Although the importance of parents in the child's learning journey is recognized, effective strategies and targeted resources are seldom deployed to support parents to play this role effectively. Through global advocacy UNICEF enables countries to leverage the agency of parents, families and communities to strengthen ECE systems and achieve tangible gains in children's development.

Governments must create a clear and shared understanding of family engagement goals within the broader framework of family friendly policies to ensure that parents and caregivers can become active stakeholders in early learning. Family support and outreach policies, strategies and activities should be part of national and subnational planning and budgeting cycles. Family and community engagement practices must be continuously evaluated and improved to ensure they remain relevant and effective. Evaluation should consider relevance and uptake of parenting programmes, relevance for all parents considering gender, and other factors of marginalization.

In Jamaica, the Early Childhood Commission (ECC), established in 2003, recommended the development of a **national parenting support policy and strategy** to advance ECD goals for children aged 0–8 as part of its own national strategic plan. The National Parent Support Policy (NPSP) evolved over time and was developed and eventually tabled in Parliament in 2012 – it supports parents of children of all ages. The policy development process mapped existing parenting provision, identified gaps, and outlined strategies to advance parenting by building on effective models, and innovated to address challenges. A multisectoral National Parent Support Commission (NPSC) was then created to serve as an institutional anchor linking home and school, providing high-level technical assistance, coordination and support for parenting activities. The NPSC also monitors the implementation of the NPSP and national parenting programming standards.

Stakeholders at different levels of the system should

be sensitized to understand their role in supporting parenting engagement goals. ECE teachers and other personnel may require training and support to engage families and communities effectively. In **Bhutan** the **National Parenting Education Manual** was developed in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders including practitioners, implementers, policymakers and programmers, and special education needs specialists. By engaging stakeholders with a diverse mix of expertise and perspectives, governments can strengthen the quality of their strategies and products, and can foster ownership among the workforce. In Bhutan, stakeholder engagement will continue during implementation and monitoring: the parenting programme will be reviewed and updated regularly based on user feedback to ensure continued quality and relevance.

Caregiver health and emotional well-being is key to optimal child development. In **Bhutan**, UNICEF's Caring for the Caregiver (CFC) package is delivered in conjunction with the National Parenting Education Programme to provide the knowledge and skills to parents with little or no education to support their child's development in the home. An evaluation of the CFC activity found that parents who participated reported higher self-esteem, and lower levels of depression and anxiety.

Programmes which engage parents in ECE should consider how to leverage the engagement to support caregivers with their own life goals and wellbeing.

In Eritrea, adult literacy support and parenting education are delivered through the same community platform. The Parenting Enrichment programme aims to build on existing strengths to enhance the knowledge, skills and attitudes of parents, families and communities to promote the quality of care for children under six years. The programme was initiated as a strategy to reach children and parents in remote areas in partnership with the adult literacy programme and to date 1,500 parents have participated.⁵ In **Liberia**, community-based ECE centres are piloting

5 Government of Eritrea Ministry of Education, Early Childhood Care and Education Four Year Strategic Plan, 2019.

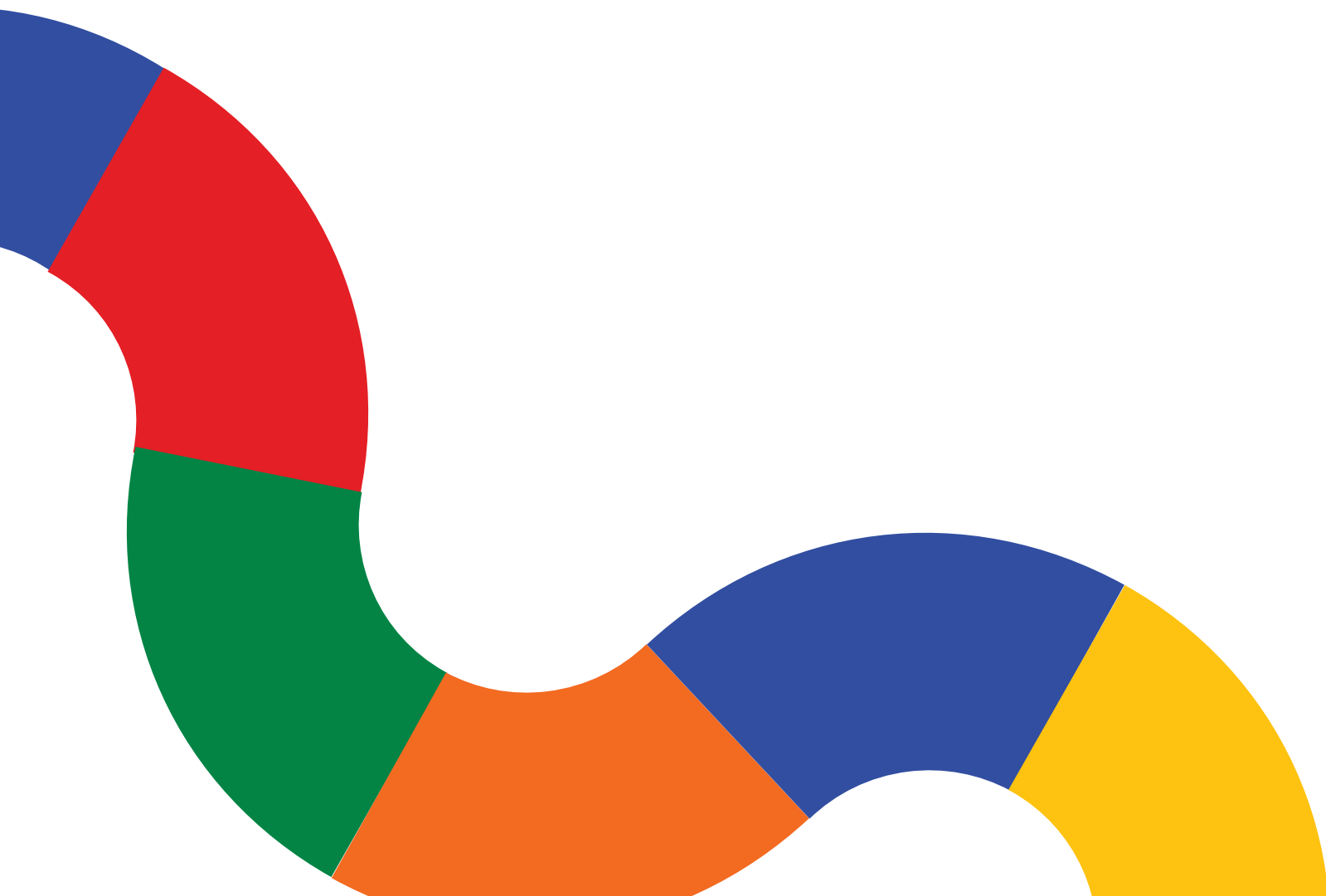
a model to reach adolescent mothers with information about parenting and family planning as well as providing counselling and guidance while their children access ECE.

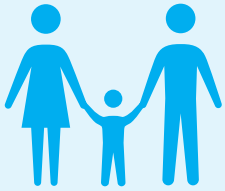
Children benefit from effective management of household finances thanks to parents' ability to cover basic costs, buy healthy food, and invest in activities for children. In Indonesia, UNICEF partnered with the Human Safety Net to provide financial literacy programming to parents, as part of the responsive caregiving pillar of the Nurturing Care Framework. Over 90 per cent of parents who participated in the programme, the majority of whom were female, reported that they felt more confident in managing their finances.⁶ Based on the success of this pilot, the government has engaged the NGO Aflatoun to digitize the materials to reach a wider audience.

Appropriate mental health and psychosocial support strategies can benefit children and parents globally.

Parents and children impacted by emergencies and protracted crises may require specialized support. The Arab Network for Early Childhood conducted research into early childhood programming in six countries. Among the recommendations are the provision of psychosocial support for both parents and children, and the provision of resources and spaces to support play for families with refugee status. Ahlan **Simsim** is an Arabic-language children's television programme designed to support Syrian children. Four out of five parents who watched the show with their children reported that the **emotional vocabulary lessons** helped them recognize and label their own emotions and over **85%** reported that the show's lessons had helped them manage their own emotions in difficult moments.

⁶ Findings presented in webinar Early Moments Matter: Including Financial Education In Parenting Programs, 29 March 2023, co-hosted by The Human Safety Net, UNICEF, and Aflatoun.











5. Elevating parenting in ECE: Next steps

Parents engage with professionals across a range of sectors including health, nutrition, social protection and education. This creates multiple opportunities and pathways for government to engage with and support parents on their caregiving journey.

UNICEF's Vision for Elevating Parenting outlines 5 key approaches to support parents through integrated, multilevel programming: strengthening enabling environments; supporting strengthened workforce capacities; raising levels of awareness among communities; promoting positive norms around gender and disability; and empowering parents and communities and encouraging participation.

Education stakeholders can support this multisectoral work through some key steps:

-  **Advocate for and support** the establishment or development of cross-sectoral approaches to develop, implement, and monitor an integrated parenting policy, strategy and standards in support of holistic child development.
-  **Include a clear focus on parents and communities during education planning activities** including sector analysis, plan and strategy development, costing and budgeting, and monitoring and evaluation. Parenting programmes should be reflected in all core planning documents and tools including education sector analysis reports, education sector plans, costed actions plans, annual reviews and budgets.
-  **Capture lessons learned from existing parenting programmes** and consider how diverse programmes can be integrated under a consistent framework, aligned with national goals for parenting.
-  **Ensure that new ECE programming includes clear goals and indicators** to build parental knowledge, skills, competencies and well-being through the promotion of holistic child development, positive parenting and caring for the caregiver. Sufficient funding should be available to achieve these goals, and monitoring and evaluation systems should make it possible to track progress towards goals, using disaggregated data to monitor priority groups.
-  **Ensure that parenting programmes support the parents and caregivers of all children,** including those parents and children who are at risk of marginalization due to factors such as disability-status, gender, ethnic or linguistic minority status, or displacement, among others.
-  **Ensure that programming reflects best practices** using tools such as UNICEF's 9 step guide to designing and implementing a parenting programme to support reflections before scaling.

UNICEF **advocates** for inclusive access to quality ECE for all children. For further details, please see programme briefs on gender, disability inclusion, and ECE in emergencies.

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