

Summary report on the

# Regional consultative meeting on early childhood development with a focus on nurturing care in the early years

WHO-EM/CAH/205/E

Amman, Jordan  
13–14 March 2018



World Health  
Organization

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE Eastern Mediterranean

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## Contents

1.	Introduction.....	1
2.	Summary of discussions.....	2
3.	Conclusion and next steps.....	8

## **1. Introduction**

A regional consultative meeting on early childhood development with a focus on nurturing care in the early years was held in Amman, Jordan from 13 to 14 March 2018. The meeting was jointly organized by the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa and the Arab Network for Early Childhood Development (ANECD). It was attended by more than 70 participants from health ministries, academia, international nongovernmental organizations, civil society organizations, WHO and UNICEF, in addition to regional and global experts.

The meeting was convened with the aim to strengthen programmes for early childhood development in countries of the Region with a special focus on the most vulnerable populations. The meeting was guided by the key messages of the 2016 Lancet Early Childhood Development Series, the road map of WHO's work for the Eastern Mediterranean Region 2017–2021 and by the draft nurturing care framework developed by WHO and UNICEF to guide policy, programme and budget support for early childhood development at country level.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- review and provide feedback on the draft global framework for nurturing care for childhood development;
- share evidence on the importance of investing in early childhood development with a particular focus on nurturing care in the early years.

A message from Dr Jaouad Mahjour, Acting Regional Director of the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region, was delivered by Dr Jamela Al-Raiby, Regional Adviser, Child and Adolescent Health. Dr Mahjour

noted the meeting was a key step on the road map for WHO's work with Member States to incorporate early childhood development interventions into national plans, and to scale up interventions and services within and outside the health sector. Mr Bertrand Bainvel, Deputy Regional Director, UNICEF Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa reiterated that early childhood development is a key priority for UNICEF and reconfirmed UNICEF's commitment to work with partners to strengthen early childhood development interventions at country level. Dr Ghassan Issa, Director, ANECD, highlighted the continuous efforts of the organization to support countries of the Region.

## **2. Summary of discussions**

### *Background and evidence for early childhood development with a particular focus on nurturing care*

The presentation shared the global and regional overview of early childhood development, including burden and challenges. There are significant challenges to improving early childhood development in the Eastern Mediterranean Region including: unstable political conditions and escalating conflict, which have triggered humanitarian crises; inequities that are deeply rooted in poverty, gender status and poor educational opportunities; and national policies that do not support rights-based child services.

Participants were briefed on the basic neurobiological processes of brain development and the profound effects of early experiences on the developing brain. Four important processes are the growth of nerve cells (neurogenesis), the formation of synapses/pathways between the neural cells (synaptogenesis), the elimination of little-used synapses to increase the efficiency of functioning pathways

(pruning), and the strengthening of pathways through repeated stimulation (long-term potentiation, or learning).

Key messages from the 2016 Lancet Early Childhood Development Series were highlighted. The Lancet's Series brings together the science of early childhood development and actions to implement greater support for early development. The concept of "nurturing care" emerged from the Series to describe what a child needs for healthy development, from pregnancy through the first 3 years of life.

Participants were exposed to key technical areas relating to nurturing care for early childhood development. A workshop introduced the Care for Child Development approach, with evidence of its effectiveness even in low-resource and challenging settings. The objective was to identify how Care for Child Development might contribute to implementation of the nurturing care framework.

Looking after the mental health of caregivers has a huge positive effect on their ability to provide responsive and nurturing child care. Extending mental health services to caregivers is essential for their well-being and for a child's healthy growth and development. WHO's Thinking Healthy intervention is designed to reach mothers needing mental health services by building capacities of non-specialists to assess and counsel them. In addition, community-based interventions have significantly reduced levels of maternal depression at 6 months, compared to mothers who have not received this assistance. Evidence for its impact on the child include a reduction in cases of diarrhoea, higher rates of immunization and exclusive breastfeeding at 6 months, and an increase in frequency of play by the adult caregiver.

*Experiences of countries and partners*

Participants from UNICEF, ANECD, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic shared experiences and lessons learned. Discussions focused on the Health, Early Learning and Protection Parenting Programme for refugees, the Care for Child Development approach in refugee settings, and maternal, child and newborn health programmes. It was recognized as good practice to strengthen health systems for early childhood development and introduce integrated early intervention services into overall child health services.

Key lessons learned include: a multisectoral approach is crucial to success; integration of early childhood development interventions in existing child health platforms is feasible; and that early childhood development (and particularly nurturing care) is applicable among refugee and internally displaced persons in humanitarian emergency settings.

*Feedback on the nurturing care framework*

Following a presentation on the draft global nurturing care framework, participants were divided into groups to discuss the framework and give feedback based on guiding questions.

It was suggested that the framework should expand on social, economic and environmental factors that affect early childhood development. An action plan should be provided, identifying minimum requirements for implementing the framework and guidance/examples of how countries can set priorities for their own implementation plans. Guidance on assessing needs for national planning should also be included.



The framework should provide tools for implementing nurturing care in the health system and relevant sectors; in addition, user-friendly documentation to introduce nurturing care to other stakeholders could be included. The role of the private sector needs to be addressed, and guidance on how to integrate nurturing care into medical and paramedical curricula should be provided.

The need to ground all graphic representations in scientific evidence was highlighted; there was concern, for example, that the pyramid of services is not evidence-based. It was noted that there was a need to be realistic about the availability and quality of data and measurements.

It was suggested to include child development needs in humanitarian settings to the five components of the nurturing care framework. The framework should also address the need to engage fathers in nurturing care, and have greater focus on adolescents and their need to be prepared to provide nurturing care in the future.

*Identification of key action areas to scale up nurturing care at country level*

Participants identified key actions to be implemented at country level, and needed support from United Nations agencies and other partners.

Key actions for countries:

- Adopt nurturing care as a guiding principle in the health system, and integrate the concepts within national health policies and plans.
- Map all programmes and projects working in early childhood development, and identify gaps.
- Translate the nurturing care framework into an integrated action plan.

- Update existing guidelines and service packages, and update national registries to integrate the indicators related to nurturing care services.
- Identify and recruit visible champions in public life, sports and entertainment.
- Highlight the science and business case for implementing nurturing care.
- Build the capacity of communities and relevant institutions at all levels to deliver nurturing care.
- Introduce innovative methods and delivery platforms to reach health providers and the community.
- Use public health centres to promote child development and improve parenting skills, and monitor their services.
- Seek feedback from families and communities on how the framework can be implemented within the community.
- Strengthen the health information system by developing a surveillance system for early childhood development, including data disaggregation (by gender, socioeconomic status and other relevant categories).
- Engage local committees to monitor and review data in their communities.
- Improve the referral system for developmental and behavioural services.
- Adapt and standardize intervention protocols developed by international agencies and other organizations, such as Care for Child Development.

United Nations agencies, development partners and donors were requested to:

- Coordinate efforts to advocate for early childhood development and support advocacy by distributing reports, evidence, briefing guidelines and so on.

- Provide evidence-based information on the importance of early childhood development to support policy-makers and programme officers for advocacy and to build their capacity in monitoring the implementation of interventions.
- Provide guidance to support operationalization of nurturing care at the country level.
- Establish sub-working groups for action areas in early childhood development.
- Provide guidelines for implementing nurturing care, such as job tools and training.
- Provide guidance to health providers on using new technologies (smartphones, tablets) for orienting families and the community to nurturing care through educational messages.
- Identify key indicators to monitor progress of global and national implementation of nurturing care and status of early childhood development.
- Identify a mechanism for sharing experiences, success stories and best practices among countries.
- Organize a forum to periodically review implementation and identify next steps.
- Expose national leaders to global experiences, and facilitate exchange visits among countries.
- Promote nurturing care in humanitarian settings and among implementing agencies.
- Review national policies and laws needed to support nurturing care.
- Build capacities for managers and providers.
- Provide financial support to implement action plans and generate evidence on the cost-effectiveness and feasibility of various interventions.

### **3. Conclusion and next steps**

Participants noted that the draft global nurturing care framework identifies an essential, complex set of contributions for families and other caregivers to a child's early development. All caregivers – some more than others – need help to provide this care through direct services, protective national policies and the mobilization of national and international resources to complement local efforts. It was emphasized that the need is even greater in the context of increasing levels of inequity and concurrent humanitarian emergencies in the Region.

The next steps were identified for United Nations agencies, governments, academia and national/international nongovernmental organizations, as follows.

- Share the outcomes of the regional consultative meeting with senior health ministry officials in preparation for the launch of the nurturing care framework at the World Health Assembly in May 2018.
- Ensure that support for early childhood development is included in the package of essential health services, and integrate nurturing care into existing health and social care platforms.
- Develop guidance on the implementation of nurturing care specifically within the health sector, while promoting policies and seeking entry points in services to support all five components of nurturing care.
- Develop a pool of experts to support the development of policies, guidelines, research and implementation in nurturing care and early childhood development.
- Build regional and national capacities to support positive parenting skills through, for example, the Care for Child Development package and the Health, Early Learning and Protection Parenting Programme, and by addressing maternal depression.

- Mobilize resources to promote nurturing care and early childhood development.
- Provide countries in humanitarian emergencies with urgent financial and technical resources to strengthen nurturing care and early childhood development.
- Coordinate and strengthen joint partnerships between WHO and other agencies, including UNICEF and ANECD, in supporting countries to promote nurturing care and early childhood development.



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