

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

In order to improve early childhood development, WHO recommends:

RESPONSIVE CAREGIVING

All infants and children should receive responsive care during the first 3 years of life; parents and other caregivers should be supported to provide responsive care.

PROMOTE EARLY LEARNING

All infants and children should have early learning activities with their parents and other caregivers during the first 3 years of life; parents and other caregivers should be supported to engage in early learning with their infants and children.

INTEGRATE CAREGIVING AND NUTRITION INTERVENTIONS

Support for responsive care and early learning should be included as part of interventions for optimal nutrition of infants and young children.

SUPPORT MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH

Psychosocial interventions to support maternal mental health should be integrated into early childhood health and development services.

1. Why has WHO developed this new guideline?

New scientific evidence of the importance of early childhood development for future health and human capital necessitated the development of an empirically-based guideline to improve early childhood development. Existing WHO guidelines, such as those related to children's health and nutrition, do not address specific interventions to promote childhood development. This new guideline provides global, evidence-informed recommendations on improving early childhood development through interventions that support responsive caregiving and early learning. It focuses on the needs of both caregivers and young children because early childhood development is an outcome of healthy, nurturing interactions between caregivers and children.

2. What is meant by responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning?

Responsive caregiving refers to the ability of the caregiver to notice, understand, and respond to the child's signals in a timely and appropriate manner. Responsive caregiving is essential for ensuring children's health, nutrition, safety and security. It also creates opportunities for early learning which occurs through the interaction of an infant or young child with a person, place or object in their environment.

3. Why must early childhood development be improved?

250 million children (43%) younger than 5 years in low- and middle-income countries are at risk of not achieving their developmental potential due to only two of many risk factors: extreme poverty and stunting. Maternal depression is an additional risk factor that affects 1 in 6 women during the perinatal period and can be addressed with interventions that are feasible for implementation at the primary care level. Enabling children to achieve their full potential is a human right and an essential requisite for sustainable development. Implementing the recommendations of this new guideline, alongside relevant existing guidelines, will help accelerate progress in many developmental goals.

4. Who is this guideline for?

This guideline focuses on interventions for parents and other caregivers and their infants and children younger than 3 years of age. It is primarily the family who provides responsive care and early learning activities, but many parents and other caregivers need support to put them into practice. Thus, the recommendations in the guideline are intended for a wide audience, including policy-makers, development agencies and implementing partners, district and sub-national health managers, health workers and nongovernmental organizations who may provide support to families.

5. How can parents incorporate responsive care and early learning into their day-to-day life?

Responsive caregiving and the provision of opportunities for young children to learn come naturally to many parents, and are often incorporated into everyday activities like feeding, bathing and playing. The capacity to be responsive and enabling with their young child can be inhibited among parents and caregivers subjected to severe personal or social stresses, such as interpersonal violence, depression and displacement. In these cases, supportive guidance, demonstration and encouragement can motivate parents to interact with their young child. *Care for Child Development* is an example of a WHO/UNICEF intervention package that equips health workers and others who are in contact with parents of young children to do just that. This type of guidance is not very time-consuming and supporting parents in the way they interact with their children can be incorporated into health visits and other contacts.

6. Do early childhood development and nurturing care mean the same thing?

Nurturing care refers to what a child needs to survive, thrive, and achieve his/her full potential. This includes good health, adequate nutrition, security and safety, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning. Nurturing care is especially important in the early years, from pregnancy to age 3, as this is a period of rapid physical and psychological development when the foundations for later health and well-being are laid. Early childhood development refers to the physical, social, emotional and cognitive abilities a child acquires during his/her childhood, and it generally covers the period 0 – 8 years of age. Nurturing care may be considered as the input (what is done) and early childhood development as the outcome (what is measured).

7. Why should early childhood development interventions be integrated with nutrition?

The review carried out in the guideline development process found that nutrition interventions do not have an impact on early childhood development when implemented alone, but they are associated with improved childhood development when combined with support for responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning. Responsive feeding and early learning are particularly important components of rehabilitation care for malnourished children and impacts are greater. Support for their caregivers to be responsive and to encourage their child's learning should be emphasized.

8. Why is there a recommendation on maternal mental health?

Maternal mental health problems are not only detrimental to a woman's physical health, but also associated with higher rates of emotional, behavioural and physical problems among their young children. Interventions aimed at improving maternal mental health also report an improvement in early childhood development.

9. Does this guideline apply to children with disabilities or illness, or living in humanitarian situations?

This guideline is relevant for all infants and young children including those with a disability or medical condition. It is also very relevant for caregivers and children living in humanitarian settings as responsive caregiving, opportunities for early learning and attention to maternal mental health can help to protect mothers and young children from the negative consequences of adversity and help them to develop resilience. A process of adapting this guidance for humanitarian situations is in progress.

10. Is the guideline only applicable to the health sector?

No. The health sector has an important role and responsibility to support early childhood development given the contacts between health services and pregnant women and families with young children. Many interventions for reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health (including for nutrition, mental health and HIV prevention and care) already have a direct impact on child development and the integration of responsive care and early learning will increase their effect on children's development. But no single sector or stakeholder can provide all that is needed for every caregiver and for every child. Everyone has an important role to play, including social policies that support families and young children. This is laid out in the *Nurturing Care Framework*, launched in 2018, which provides a multi-sectoral, multi-level roadmap for action, recommending a whole-of government and whole-of society approach.

Resources:

📄 *Improving early childhood development: WHO guideline*
www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/child/guidelines_improving_early_childhood_development/en

📄 *Summary: Improving early childhood development: WHO guideline*
www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/child/summary_guideline_improving_early_childhood_development.pdf

📄 *WHO, UNICEF, World Bank Group. Nurturing care for early childhood development: a framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential. Geneva: WHO; 2018.*
<https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/272603/9789241514064-eng.pdf>

Useful links:

- www.who.int/publications-detail/improving-early-childhood-development-who-guideline
- www.nurturing-care.org
- www.ecdan.org