Early Childhood Development in Emergencies (ECDiE) Coordinator Learning Cohort Initiative

Quick Tips and Good Practice: Strengthening Coordination of Early Childhood Development in Crisis Context

Introduction

Children are increasingly exposed to conflict and crisis around the world. The youngest children are experiencing these crises during an especially consequential period of their lives. Early childhood, from birth to age 8, is when a child's brain undergoes its most rapid phase of development, laying the foundation for lifelong learning, health, and productivity. Neuroscience shows that exposure to adversity during these critical early years can disrupt a child's brain development, with devastating lifelong consequences. But holistic early childhood development (ECD) support can counter these negative impacts, enabling children to overcome adversity and thrive.

ECD is defined in the [Nurturing Care Framework for Early Childhood Development](#) (NCF) as good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, early learning, and responsive caregiving. Coordinated efforts, both within and across sectors, are essential to delivering holistic ECD services for young children in crisis settings. Coordination can ensure that these services are delivered in a timely and efficient manner, minimizing duplication and maximizing impact while making life easier for the families who make use of ECD services. Furthermore, coordination facilitates the pooling of resources, expertise, and good practice. This ultimately contributes to greater effectiveness, sustainability, and scalability of ECD interventions in humanitarian crises.

This guidance note offers practical tips on coordinating ECD in emergencies (ECDiE) and good practice examples provided by the ECDiE Coordinator Learning Cohort, facilitated by Sesame Workshop and the Humanitarian Collaborative at the University of Virginia (UVA). These examples and tips are intended to be applicable across a variety of crisis contexts globally. For ease of reference, they are grouped into five categories:

1. Establishing and maintaining an ECDiE coordination mechanism

2. Integrating ECD into needs assessments and response plans

3. Supporting implementation of integrated ECD services

4. Strengthening monitoring and evaluation of ECD services

5. Advocating for integrated ECD support for children and families

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See [Annex 1](#) for more detail about the ECDiE Coordinator Learning Cohort initiative.

1. Establishing and maintaining an ECDiE coordination mechanism

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Humanitarian actors invest heavily in coordination mechanisms, recognizing that without a coordinated approach, a response operation can very quickly lose traction, coherence, and focus on the most vulnerable. Early childhood development is no different, with crisis-affected children in need of coordinated services to meet their unique needs and those of their caregivers. ECDiE coordination mechanisms vary and must be tailored to the contexts in which they operate. Some may be led by the formal humanitarian cluster system, while others are led by host governments and embedded in national systems.

A key step is to identify an individual (or multiple people) who will take up responsibility for coordinating ECD services within and across clusters and/or sectors. Please see this ECDiE Coordinator Profiles resource for examples of the roles and responsibilities of such individuals and the coordination mechanisms which they support. These profiles may serve as template scopes of work for establishing and managing an ECDiE coordination structure (such as a working group) or as terms of reference for ECDiE coordinators that can be replicated in other contexts.

QUICK TIPS AND GOOD PRACTICE:

- ✅ **An ECDiE coordination structure should engage stakeholders from all relevant clusters, sectors, and cross-cutting topics,** including education, nutrition, health, child protection, WASH, MHPSS, gender, disability inclusion, and other service-provision programs. The establishment of coordination mechanisms across all six contexts represented in the ECDiE Coordinator Learning Cohort demonstrates that while this is a complex and challenging undertaking, it is central to getting ECDiE, as a programmatic approach to provision of services to children, onto the humanitarian map.

- ✅ **Where possible, engage with the host government and national systems and build on existing policies and/or approaches to ECD coordination.** For example, in Uganda, the National ECD Technical Committee brings together relevant government ministries as well as humanitarian and development partners to oversee implementation of all ECD services, including targeted interventions for the most at-risk communities. Leveraging these national coordination mechanisms makes ECD services more coherent and sustainable.

- ✅ **At the working level, engage with national influencers on coordination, policy, and data issues.** In Jordan, the National Early Childhood Development Team is a core component of the [National Council for Family Affairs](#) (NCFA), which provides an inclusive cross-sector platform for coordination, policy, advocacy and data management for ECDiE across the country. The National ECD Team, which is composed of experts representing governmental and non-governmental organizations, has worked on developing an inclusive coordination architecture, leading on policy development on ECD issues[1], ensuring availability of a robust data platform to support program implementation and management, convening regular stakeholder meetings, circulating news and information to ECDiE stakeholders, and working with the [Arab Network on ECD](#) on guideline development for ECDiE.

- ✅ **In acute emergencies, aim to establish an ECD-specific forum where ECD issues and strategies can be discussed, while concurrently aiming to connect ECDiE coordination with the established humanitarian coordination structure to ensure that ECD priorities are voiced and mainstreamed in existing structures.** For example, in response to the war in Ukraine, the ECDiE Coordinator successfully supported the establishment of the [Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Working Group](#). The first step was to connect with [Education Cluster](#) coordinators to identify gaps in ECCD coordination and connect with other relevant agencies to gather secondary data on the impact of the crisis on young children and caregivers. Working Group [terms of reference](#)[2] were developed, which may serve as a template for working groups in other contexts. Regular meetings now engage 25-30 participants from local and international partner organizations.

- ✅ **Where possible, immediately seek to ensure local leadership of coordination efforts, particularly by engaging local organizations and affected communities.** If you are establishing an ECDiE Working Group under the humanitarian cluster system, consider identifying two co-chairs for the working group, ideally one representative from a local organization (governmental where possible) and one from an INGO or UN agency. For example, in Ukraine, the ECCD Working Group is led by the Education Cluster and the [Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science](#) (MoES) ECCD department. It is co-facilitated with support from one international organization and one local organization. The engagement and leadership from the government and local organizations ensures local ownership and thus enhances sustainability. The MoES is also able to provide data, situation updates (particularly related to preschools), and guidance on the wider ECCD strategic direction of the Ukraine response.

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1   This includes (i) operational development of a Quality Management System for Nurseries; (ii) working on licensing for nurseries with technical and financial support from World University Service Canada (WUSC) through supporting access to a 700-hour course for development of nursery experts; (iii) easing licencing requirements for nurseries without compromising quality standards; and (iv) providing the Ministerial Committee with advice on optimizing coordination arrangements across nursery and kindergarten services.

2   The ECCD Working Group modeled its TOR after the TOR of the MHPSS sub-group.

2. Integrating ECD into needs assessments and response plans
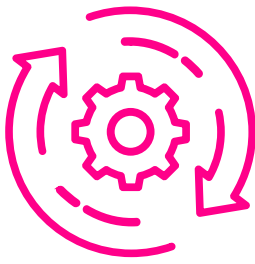
WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Ensuring that the specific needs of young children and their caregivers are explicitly assessed and reflected in response plans is critical since it will help to ensure that appropriate levels of funding are requested to meet these needs. While a growing number of countries and humanitarian organizations have prioritized ECDiE, globally only two percent of humanitarian funding goes to ECD. Thus more explicit inclusion of ECDiE in mainstream humanitarian assessment and funding documents such as country-level UN Needs Assessment and Humanitarian Response Plans (HRP) is needed.

HRPs articulate a shared vision and the related funding requirements to respond to the assessed and expressed needs of the affected population. These plans are the go-to documents for donors and policymakers. If there is no mention of ECD in the HRP, funding decisions and related action on the specific needs of young children and their caregivers are likely to be piecemeal and poorly joined up. Inclusion of ECDiE priorities in HRPs also helps generate discussions with government which, in turn, increases the likelihood of the state taking up and sustaining ECD initiatives beyond the emergency phase/context, and the integration of ECD in recovery and development planning processes and documents.

QUICK TIPS AND GOOD PRACTICE:

- ✅ **Identify assessment, appeals, and planning processes relevant to ECDiE and begin to engage.** In response to the Türkiye/Syria earthquake in February 2023, the International Rescue Committee, Sesame Workshop, and UVA issued a [Syria and Türkiye Earthquake Needs Assessment and Appeals Advocacy Guidance Note](#) with tips for identifying entry points for engagement in needs assessments, appeals, and planning processes, including:

- ✅ **Determine if your organization has the ability to provide direct feedback internally or externally on assessments and appeals and supply suggested language and evidence** (see guidance note above for example suggested language)**.**

- ✅ **Find out who you can connect with who oversees inputs into these plans or influences these processes, and discuss the importance of ECDiE with them.** Likely partners include your organization's emergency planning team or representatives to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).

- **Determine if the regional and national ECD advisors/focal points within your organization are engaged in related planning reviews and if they have the ability to weigh in.** If not, it's important to identify the emergency focal points in your organization and ask that you or another ECD focal point input into the review process.

- **Identify the timelines and internal and external mechanisms for review**—this should include not just education plans, but also those of other NCF-impacted sectors such as health, nutrition, psycho-social support, and protection. These reviews can include assessing cluster priorities to ensure the needs of young children and caregivers are reflected, identifying that minimum care or educational packages are definitely appropriate for young children, etc.

- **Follow up and take a proactive role in the review, including tracking opportunities for input and providing thoughtful and comprehensive comments.** Try to track which inputs and comments were accepted (and which were not) to inform future inputs.

- **Ensure that needs assessments include explicit references to the five components of holistic ECD: adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving, and opportunities for early learning.** For example, the ECDiE Coordinator in Colombia worked with partners to include a set of targeted questions on ECD in the needs assessment questionnaire for development of the humanitarian response plan. These questions were an essential step in gathering data to check whether migrant children were able to access services and to improve targeting of ECDiE interventions to a broad range of cross-cutting humanitarian issues including food security, health (i.e. vaccination efforts), and early education.

- **Ensuring inclusion of ECDiE priorities in needs assessments should also extend to any sector-specific assessment where ECDiE-related service provision should be considered.** For example, Uganda's 2022-2023 Education Response Plan (ERP) includes a focus on ECDiE. With the age range including children ages 0-8 in this second iteration of the plan (the first was issued in 2018), a projected 186,600 additional children are now targeted for ECD integration.

- **Where possible, identify opportunities to align with or build upon the national government's approach to ECD needs assessments and service planning.** For example, while developing the targeted list of ECD questions for the needs assessment questionnaire in Colombia, the ECD Working Group leveraged the government's "whole child approach" in which 13 interventions are mandated for all children ages 0-5. The Working Group cross-analyzed these 13 mandated interventions and the needs assessment questionnaire, resulting in the development of an additional question to identify access to early education and other areas. Close collaboration with the government was essential during this process. The Colombian Government has an open perspective and a well-organised set of policy interventions to integrate Venezuelan migrants in the country and a good track record in supporting this population.

3. Supporting implementation of integrated ECD services

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

The multi-sectoral nature of ECD requires coordination and integrated services to meet the holistic needs of young children and their caregivers. Coordinated and integrated efforts maximize efficiency, minimize duplication, and address gaps in ECD provision, ultimately promoting optimal development outcomes for children in emergencies. Investment in integrated ECD programming is cost-effective and has a multiplier effect, generating returns across sectors, including improved education, health, and economic outcomes. In addition, integrated ECD programming can stretch limited resources further by providing enabling progress on issues such as gender equity, mental health, and livelihoods, in addition to direct returns for children and their families. A holistic, multi-sectoral approach to ECD nurtures resilience, empowers caregivers, and builds a foundation for children to thrive amid adversity.

QUICK TIPS AND GOOD PRACTICE:

- ✅ **Create opportunities for connection and collaboration among the diverse range of practitioners that are involved in the provision of ECDiE services.** Ideally this takes the form of events and meetings, combined with access to online services and tools aimed to enhance coordination. For example, the ECDiE Working Group in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh routinely provides space and time for its Education Sector partners to share programmatic successes (and failures) through convening regular seminars and discussions. These discussions enable partners to learn from and build upon each other's work.

- ✅ **Identify opportunities to promote collaboration between sectors related to ECD and any services reaching young children and families.** For example, in Cox's Bazar, BRAC is operating Humanitarian Play Labs (HPLs) under the child protection sector, which also promotes playful learning and psychosocial support. In addition, with support from the ECDiE Working Group in Cox's Bazar, the child protection subsector has established an ECD center, and the nutrition sub-sector has included an "ECD corner" at its counseling centers and works with the ECD sub-sector on the provision of materials for the corner.

4. Strengthening monitoring and evaluation of ECD services

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Coordinated monitoring and evaluation (M&E) efforts are essential to evidence-based decision-making and improving outcomes for children and families. These efforts can include joined-up data collection, analysis, and information sharing among stakeholders to promote a holistic understanding of the impact and efficacy of ECD interventions. Coordinated M&E efforts can also enable timely identification of gaps, successes, and areas for improvement. In addition, effective M&E enhances accountability and transparency, as multiple actors collaborate to ensure that ECD initiatives are delivering desired outcomes and maximizing the well-being and development of young children in crisis contexts.

QUICK TIPS AND GOOD PRACTICE:

- ✔ **Establish a systematic approach to M&E through the development of a joined-up system or framework across implementers and services.** In Bangladesh, for example, the ECD Working Group developed a [monitoring and evaluation framework](#) that supports local-level implementation by focusing on indicators around parental knowledge of ECD, competency of facilitators/staff, results from capacity development training, and quality of learning outputs for children. This framework may be replicable/adaptable in other contexts.

- ✔ **Leverage emerging M&E data to inform future-focused decision-making and prioritization.** For example, in Uganda, the government's coordination team, working closely with UNICEF, identified that large-scale M&E focused mapping efforts can be helpful in supporting intervention and advocacy work, provide better data on the delivery of ECD services, and facilitate learnings to understand how stakeholder intervention can be shifted to include geographic areas that are not typically prioritized. This included development of an advocacy strategy for introducing ECD prioritization in the West Nile region's refugee population response where it had previously been absent.

- ✔ **Collect and analyze data in age-disaggregated formats, especially breaking down the under-18 population in recognition of their distinct needs.** For example, the ECDiE Working Group in Colombia succeeded in incorporating questions focusing on children ages 0 to 5 into the needs assessment questionnaire to inform the HRP in Colombia. As a further step, in data collection and use discussions, it is critical to advocate for greater visibility for young children (ages 0 to 8) and a developmental or life-cycle (rather than sector-based) approach to information gathering.

5. Advocating for integrated ECD support for children and families

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Coordination is crucial for effective advocacy to strengthen ECD support for children and families in crisis contexts. By bringing together diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, practitioners, and advocates, a coordinated approach creates a unified voice and strengthens advocacy efforts. Coordinated advocacy ensures that the needs of young children in crises are prioritized and communicated effectively to decision-makers and the public.

Where significant investment is made in coordination, it can facilitate the exchange of best practices, research, and evidence, bolstering the credibility of advocacy messages. Through collaboration, coordinated advocacy campaigns can raise awareness, mobilize resources, and influence policies and programs that support ECD in emergencies. The power of coordination lies in its ability to amplify voices, drive systemic change, and secure the necessary support and investments for the holistic development of children in crisis settings.

QUICK TIPS AND GOOD PRACTICE:

- ✅ **Ensure that ECDiE needs and program impacts are visible, well documented, and presented in ways that are easily understandable to donors, cluster partners, and the humanitarian leadership, especially host governments.** For example, the ECD Working Group in Cox's Bazar proactively gathers real-time evidence and research from cluster partners and others and uses the information and analysis to demonstrate the high-quality implementation of ECDiE programs in Cox's Bazaar to humanitarian partners and potential donors.

- ✅ **Look for strategic opportunities and entry points to influence policy and practice, especially in broader national-level policy development processes that have implications for ECD.** For example, as the Government of Colombia was developing its National Development Plan 2022-2026, the ECD Working Group participated in a National Conference on Early Childhood and advocated for the inclusion of ECDiE in the outcome document, which offered policy recommendations to inform the National Development Plan. Meanwhile, in Jordan, the National Early Childhood

Development Team advocated to ensure inclusion of ECD in the recently finalized Jordanian Economic Modernization Vision (2022) after long and deep consultations with national and international bodies. The inclusion of ECD as an economic priority from nursery age upwards is considered a significant win.

- ✅ **Make use of established frameworks to define ECD and tools to strengthen ECD advocacy—such as those compiled in the Early Childhood Development Action Network's online resource centre.** For example, the ECCD Working Group in Ukraine found success in leveraging the Nurturing Care Framework to define the multi-sectoral scope of ECCD in their terms of reference and conversations with the Education Cluster and the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science.

- ✅ **Aim to understand the host government's existing priorities and consider whether/how ECD advocacy can align with those priorities.** For example, the Ukrainian government identified mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) as a priority and set up an MHPSS Task Force with a dedicated secretariat that engaged with the World Health Organization (WHO). The ECCD Working Group leveraged this prioritization of MHPSS as an opportunity to engage with the task team and sub-group to advocate for increased focus on MHPSS for young children and their caregivers.

- ✅ **Collaborate with existing networks of local and/or national organizations to gain insights on ECDiE needs in real-time and reinforce advocacy messages to elevate ECDiE in donor meetings and funding documents.** This requires regular and sustained engagement with these networks and groups. For example, in response to the February 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria, the ECD Syria Network was able to understand what was happening in real time because the members of this network are primarily local civil society organizations working in the earthquake affected area. This enabled the network to draw from their on-the-ground presence and insights to inform advocacy messages for donor meetings and funding documents.

ANNEX:
What is the ECDiE coordinator Learning Cohort?

The ECDiE Coordinator Learning Cohort initiative is intended to advance the advocacy objectives of the Play to Learn program, a collaboration between Sesame Workshop, the LEGO Foundation, BRAC, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and independent evaluator NYU Global TIES for Children. The overarching advocacy objective of Play to Learn is to see local, national, and international humanitarian stakeholders prioritize and invest in high-quality ECD programs that utilize learning through play approaches in crisis and conflict response. Multi-sectoral coordination at the crisis- or country-level is essential to the provision of comprehensive ECD services, and it is a prerequisite to promote increased prioritization of and investment in ECD in humanitarian response. Therefore, it is critical to the success of Play to Learn's advocacy goal to contribute to strengthening ECD coordination in crisis settings.

When the first phase[3] of the cohort initiative launched in October 2021, it included three individuals already funded through the Play to Learn project to support coordination efforts in Bangladesh, Colombia, and parts of the Middle East (Jordan and Lebanon). During the first phase, cohort members exchanged learnings from their work, including insights about the coordination structures in their contexts.

Building on these insights, the cohort and key stakeholders in the ECDiE community expressed interest in a deeper focus on the specific role played by individual ECDiE coordinators at the country or crisis level. As a result, Sesame Workshop and UVA launched a second phase of the cohort project in October 2022 focusing on better understanding the different roles that individual ECDiE coordinators[4] can play at the country or crisis level.

During phase two, this initiative worked to:

- Create a small cohort of ECDiE coordinators working at the country or crisis level to exchange learnings in a small community of practice.

- Better understand the different roles ECDiE coordinators can play at the country or crisis level.

- Gather lessons learned from the coordinators' work to share with key humanitarian stakeholders and inform similar work in other contexts.

- Generate learnings on why and how humanitarian actors, donors, and host governments should invest in deploying ECDiE coordinators in other contexts.

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3   For further information please read the ECDiE Coordinator Phase 1 Summary Report (Sept 2022)

4   Please note that in the context of this report, the term "ECDiE coordinator" refers to individuals supporting ECD coordination within and/or across clusters/sectors at the country or crisis level. This is not necessarily a formal "coordinator" position within the cluster system. The coordinator role will vary by context. For example, the role could be leading a cross-cluster ECD Working Group, or representing ECD in a coordination body focusing on other cross-cutting themes such as disability inclusion, coordinating ECD services within a cluster, or working on ECD as a member of a national civil service, etc.

Resources developed with the cohort include:

Introductory Brief: Real-Time Learning Cohort with Country-Level ECD Coordination Advisors: This brief introduces the first phase of the learning cohort initiative by Sesame Workshop and the University of Virginia's Humanitarian Collaborative to better understand what works for coordinating ECD interventions at the country or crisis level.

Summary Report: Learnings from ECDiE Coordinator Cohort Phase 1: This report summarizes learnings from the first phase of the cohort which brought together individuals supporting ECD coordination in Bangladesh, Colombia, Jordan, and Lebanon to exchange lessons learned from their work.

Learnings Brief: Needs Assessments and Response Plans: This brief offers lessons learned for strengthening inclusion of ECD in mainstream humanitarian needs assessments and response plans at the country or crisis level. It also includes a case study on the efforts of the ECD Working Group in Colombia.

ECD in Emergencies Coordinator Profiles: These profiles describe the roles and responsibilities of the coordinators participating in the ECDiE Coordinator Learning Cohort, offering examples of the different roles that coordinators can play at the country or crisis level to strengthen coordination of ECD within and across sectors.

Recommendations for Developing an ECDiE Coordinator Toolbox: This report offers recommendations for the development of a toolbox that would provide resources for individuals supporting ECD coordination within and/or across sectors at the country or crisis level and strengthen collective efforts to ensure that ECDiE is more fully mainstreamed in crisis response.

For more information, please contact:

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what-we-do/crisis-response