

**Orientation and planning meeting on  
the Nurturing care framework for improving early childhood development**

hosted by

The Ministry of Health and Prevention of the United Arab Emirates

supported by

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**Background**

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) have developed the National plan for reproductive, maternal, new born and child health 2022-2026 in collaboration with WHO-EMRO region and concerned stakeholder aiming to improve the maternal and child health. Early childhood activities are part of this plan under the rubric *“Institutionalize nurturing care for early childhood development including all relevant sectors”*. WHO and partners support countries to advance support for nurturing care as part of the *“Thrive”* agenda, particularly in countries that have made remarkable progress in maternal, newborn and child mortality reduction. Recognizing that early childhood development covers children from 0 – 8 years of age, the meeting focused on the earliest years and the support that caregivers and families need to enable young children to make a best start in life. Within the UAE, there are multiple actors and partners working to improve early childhood development. The meeting served as a starting point towards coordination of these activities and development of a national plan.

**Purpose**

The Ministry of Health and Prevention (MOHAP) in collaboration with WHO and partners convened a national workshop with the aim to strengthen and harmonize programs for early childhood development in the country with a special focus on intersectoral collaboration.

**Objectives**

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- Share evidence of why it is important to invest in early childhood development with a particular focus on nurturing care from conception to 3 years of age;
- Introduce the Nurturing Care Framework and its key components and build awareness and understanding among stakeholders about the importance of nurturing care for children's development; and

- Initiate the development of a multisectoral roadmap for implementation of the Nurturing Care Framework in the country.

### **Expected outcomes**

The expected outcomes of the meeting were:

- Increased awareness and understanding of the Nurturing Care Framework among stakeholders involved in early childhood development;
- Identification of opportunities and challenges for the implementation of the Nurturing Care Framework in UAE;
- Improved coordination and collaboration among stakeholders involved in early childhood development; and
- Initiation of the development of a roadmap that outlines implementation of the Nurturing Care Framework in UAE.

### **Agenda and participants**

The agenda was organized around technical presentations, updates on ongoing activities, group work to identify opportunities, challenges and priority activities, and plenary discussions. On day 1, the meeting was opened by Dr. Salem Al Darmaki, Assistant Under-Secretary – MOHAP and participants were addressed by Mr. Eltayeb Adam, Area Representative, UNICEF Gulf; the WHO Desk Office to UAE, Dr Hala el Sakr; and the WHO regional advisor for child and adolescent health, Dr Khalid Siddeeg. On day 2, participants were addressed by Dr Nada Hasan Al Marzouqi, Director of Public Health and Prevention Department. Over the 3 days, participants received overview presentations on global, regional and scientific background, discussed the current situation in UAE and developed recommendations for next steps that MOHAP can take forward in coordination with other Ministries and with national authorities.

Participants represented MOHAP, Ministry of Community Development, Ministry of Education, The Supreme Council for Motherhood and Childhood, Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah Health Authorities, Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority, the Emirates Health Service (EHS, responsible for health in the 4 other emirates), universities, clinical services, , foundations, and the UNICEF office for the Gulf countries. The workshop was coordinated by UAE MOHAP and facilitated by WHO experts.

### **Summary of proceedings**

#### **1. Presentations**

*Science of ECD:* The overview presentation made by Sheila Manji illustrated the science that underpins early childhood development. The brain develops in utero and by age 3, more than 80% of the neural connections that are needed for a lifetime are formed. The development of the brain is in part informed by genetic endowment. However, childhood experiences, starting in utero, are the other most critical determinants of early childhood development. Nurturing care is what infants and young children need, and their caregivers need to be supported to provide it. Nurturing care is defined as a stable

environment that is sensitive to children's health and nutritional needs, with protection from threats, opportunities for early learning, and interactions that are responsive, emotionally supportive, and developmentally stimulating. As an overarching concept, nurturing care is supported by an ecosystem of social contexts, from home to parental work, childcare, schooling, the wider community, and policy influences.

*Responsive caregiving and early learning opportunities:* These are two components of nurturing care that have not yet been fully integrated in services in many settings. Caregivers need to be sensitive and responsive to a child's cues and respond contingently. There is an intrinsic capacity in most parents to provide responsive care, but this is easily jeopardized by constraints such as poverty, food insecurity, violence in the home or community; when infants and young children need extra care such as due to preterm birth, conditions of neurodiversity or disability; and when caregivers suffer from mental health and psychosocial problems themselves. The [WHO guideline on early childhood development](#) stipulates that all children need to receive responsive care and early learning activities, and that all caregivers need to be supported to provide it.

*Caregiver mental health:* Globally mental health is being recognized as an important public health area said Bernadette Daelmans. Women in the perinatal period are especially vulnerable to suffer from perinatal depression, and it is estimated that 1 in every 5 women are affected globally. Interventions to prevent, detect and manage mental health conditions can be well integrated in health services, and increasingly countries are strengthening systems to provide stepped care, ranging from community support groups and individual counselling by non-specialist staff for milder conditions, to referral level care by specialists for mental illnesses. The WHO guideline on early childhood development recommends that all pregnant and lactating women receive psychosocial support for their mental health. An [operational guide](#) to support planning and implementation is available. Saji Tomas commented that 25% of mental health disorders in adulthood can be attributed to adverse experiences in childhood, enforcing the importance of investing in early childhood development.

*Multisectoral engagement:* The importance of engaging multiple sectors and adopting a whole of government approach to improve early childhood development was presented by Tatjana Colin. Health, nutrition, child protection, social welfare, education, and community development are among the key sectors that contribute to advancing ECD, alongside a wide range of stakeholders, such as health professionals, academic institutions, civil society partners and foundations. Experiences to date illustrate that a high-level coordinating mechanism that has authority to facilitate multi-sectoral planning and support the implementation by sector is an effective way of moving programming forward. National government has an important role in coordinating the development and monitoring of a national plan and facilitating its implementation with the various actors involved.

## **2. Updates from government entities and stakeholders in UAE**

*UAE Ministry of Health and Prevention:* United Arab Emirates has made an impressive progress in improving maternal and child health outcomes and MCH programs are considered the cornerstone to enhance the health and well-being of the mothers and children. The reproductive, maternal, newborn and child strategic plan 2022 – 2026 provides the roadmap for action and includes an action item on

ECD. The plan calls for multisectoral collaboration and for institutionalization of the Nurturing Care Framework and the parent support initiative, amongst others. Dr Latifa Abdulla AlAwadhi presented the core components of the plan which is comprehensive and focuses on promotive, preventive, and curative care. It gives attention to areas such as caregiver mental health, substance use, monitoring of children's development, screening for selected conditions and counselling. In collaboration with the Supreme Council of Motherhood and Childhood, and with support from UNICEF, the Ministry is launching the *Shape their future 1000 days* initiative.

*Dubai Academic Health Cooperation:* Provides preventive and promotive health services to children 0-6 years that include baby-friendly hospital initiative, screening, immunization, dental hygiene, parental counselling on well childcare, and referral. DAHC is involved in the training of health care providers. Screening covers newborn screening, vision and hearing, and developmental screening using MCHAT and BARAEM tools.

*Emirates Health Services:* Provides preconception care, antenatal care, postnatal care, well childcare and vaccination, and well child services for children 0 – 5 years. Services are free of charge, but for children 2 – 5 years, they are not adequately used. Therefore, efforts will be made to better market these services to increase the attendance for the 2, 3, and 4-5 years well child visits in primary health care centers. Attention will also be given to child abuse policy. For effective support for children's development and prevention of abuse, partnerships need to be redesigned including Ministry of Community Development and the Emirates School Establishment.

*Ras Al Khaima University:* A scoping of the literature review on evidence-based programming for ECD in the UAE generated limited papers, 23 on early childhood development of which 12 focused on early education. The focus of current studies was found to be on autism spectrum disorder, hyperactive disorder (ADHD), learning problem or disability, policy & procedures, urban environment, cognitive development, and social and environmental factors. Professor Shukri Adam shared definitions of and risks to early childhood development, examples of tools and initiatives, and highlighted the Ages and Stages Tool as one that she found particularly valuable. In the conclusions, attention was given to the potential of universities to generate and analyze data relevant for ECD, the need for multi-sectoral collaboration, the importance of linking primary health care services with schools, and the potential of home visits to support child development.

*Sharjah Health Authority:* Sharjah was recognized as the first baby-friendly city in 2015, the first child-friendly city in 2018 and won the Child-friendly Social Services award in 2019 and 2021. Its award as Healthy City was issued in 2015 and renewed in 2022. In 2023, Sharjah Baby Friendly project was upscaled to Sharjah Baby & Family Friendly project to include all aspects of child development with a renewed focus including parents, families, and other caregivers of young children. There are 28 public nurseries, with steady increase in enrolment till 2021, and 137 private nurseries. The ratio of skilled personnel to children ranges from 1:4 for infants to 1: 10 for preschool children. Work is overseen by the Early development department – Sharjah Private Education Authority.

*Abu Dhabi Public Health Centre:* Services cover newborn screening, well child screening, school screening, eat right & get active, healthy food programs in school, and health promotion and school

health. Well-child visits are regular scheduled checkups by ambulatory health services centers for your child's health and development and begin shortly after birth until 6 years. A school health program is also in place and covers screening and health promotion services. Child safety including in traffic is an area of concern. A proposed Women and Child Health strategy is based on a life course approach to cover essential interventions. A child help line has been established. The Abu Dhabi Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (AD-PRAMS) is a population-based surveillance system that provides information on women that have recently given birth and their newborn. The goal is to provide information needed to improve the health of mothers and babies, and to reduce the number of infant deaths in Abu Dhabi.

*Community Development Authority Dubai:* The aim is to influence Early Childhood Development through Child Protection and Safeguarding. Concerns are physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and neglect. To mitigate the impact of adverse experiences on early childhood development early interventions starting at, or even before birth, are essential to promote mental and physical wellbeing.

*Early Childhood Authority Abu Dhabi:* The Authority oversees the Early Childhood Development sector in Abu Dhabi. It develops coordinated and aligned policies and laws; informs decision-making through research, data, and evidence; and broadens the capabilities of our partners to support holistic child development. The Focus is on health and nutrition, family support, child protection, and early care and education. Examples of concrete activities in each of these areas were presented. The operationalization of the Integrated Early Childhood Intervention System framework will continue in 2024 and 2025 with the implementation of additional strategic initiatives. The Childhood Development Diploma offered by the National Academy for Childhood Development, under the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority, is likely to be a comprehensive program designed to equip future professionals with the knowledge and skills needed to support child development, safety, and mental health.

### **3. Presentations and group work to inform planning of strategic actions to implement the nurturing care framework**

Participants worked in small groups on day 2 and day 3 of the workshop to examine the implications of the information that was shared for programming at federal and decentralized levels. A hand-out with proposed outputs by strategic action served as a guide. In this section, each of the strategic actions is briefly introduced and the feedback from the groups summarized. Many of the actions are for the medium term. In the concluding section hereafter, the groupwork recommendations have been consolidated in a short list of actions that can be followed-up by the federal government immediately.

#### *Strategic action 1 :*

Governance, planning, and financing are key themes under this area. To facilitate multisectoral collaboration, a governance mechanism that is above the relevant sectors and able to coordinate their actions has proven to be effective. The development of a national multi-sectoral strategy for early childhood development will give direction to all relevant stakeholders; its implementation is sector specific, while the monitoring of results is best conducted across sectors. Participants recognized that

there are multiple valuable initiatives in the UAE, many of which are specific to an emirate, especially Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah. A situation assessment will enable strengths and weaknesses to be identified and inform areas for federal government action, as well as exchange of experience, tools and good practices between the emirates and stakeholders within them. The Federal Agency of Early Childhood Education has a mandate for early childhood development and suggestions were made to expand its responsibilities and governance beyond education.

Participants recommended to:

- Establish a lead authority at federal level and at decentralized level that can coordinate the different sectors and stakeholders. The lead authority could build on existing efforts such as the Supreme Council for Motherhood and Childhood (Framework under development) and/or the Federal Authority for Early Childhood Education (responsible for birth to grade 4).
- Establish baseline data on the risk and protective factors that affect early childhood development and the availability and implementation of the policies and services that aim to promote and support children’s development.
- Conduct a mapping of policies, interventions, stakeholders, and initiatives that are driving the ECD agenda with the aim to inform the development of a national multisectoral strategic plan.
- Engage all relevant sectors and stakeholders including in health, education, and community development sectors.
- Examine the policy environment and its implementation and consider statutory rights to access services of the entire population including residents who came from abroad.
- Develop a national multisectoral plan for supporting early childhood development that provides overarching guidance, is based on the principles of the nurturing care framework and aims to inform the actions in the different emirates.

### *Strategic actions 2 and 3:*

Interventions for responsive caregiving and early learning activities can be integrated in antenatal, childbirth and postnatal care, immunization, nutrition, sick child and well child services. Home visits and group sessions can complement routine health services and are especially important for vulnerable families and communities. Services to support nurturing care need to start during pregnancy and even before, as preconception care is aimed at optimizing health of future parents. While all families and children need some support, some need more support or referral to a specialist. Families where children are at risk of sub-optimal development include those who experience poverty, food insecurity, displacement, harsh discipline or violence in the home, substance use or caregiver mental health problems. Children with developmental disabilities and their families may require multi-disciplinary specialist support but it is important for families to have a trusted health care professional who can coordinate the care. The issue of private sector that is not strongly regulated but increasingly used was brought forward as a serious concern, and strategies need to be purposefully designed to engage private providers and facilities into the programming for child development. Services need to be supported by community interventions and attuned to culture and context. The diverse and dynamic population in the UAE poses a particular challenge in this respect.

Participants recommended to:

- Define core services that should be available across all emirates and set standards for these services. Communicate clearly what services are available and where, to families and within the workforce. An online portal idea can be helpful in this respect.
- Build a pool of master trainers who can support rolling out of strategies and engage with experts to develop one or two centers of excellence where neurodevelopmental specialists and affiliated cadres can show best practices, including through outreach in the community.
- Build national, sub-national and capacities of frontline providers in health and other sectors to implement Care for Child Development interventions and integrate these in maternal, newborn and child health services that are routinely provided. Explore the opportunities for strengthening pre-service education of professionals and allied workers in the health sector and other sectors.
- Strengthen collaboration of different cadres of frontline workers and sectors, through common trainings, common skills development, sharing of knowledge, raising awareness of each other's roles and services so they can provide more coordinated support to families. Create clear referral pathways for families and children that need specialized support.
- Compile and develop packages of educational materials that are culturally sensitive and evidence-based, and make these available on an open access platform, for managers, health professionals, childcare providers, and other cadres to use. Ensure that services are culturally responsive and inclusive of families of all backgrounds.
- Invest in promotion and support for early childhood development to prevent developmental difficulties. Avoid overmedicalization of early childhood development services, with the risk of overidentification of children with developmental delays or disabilities. Collaborate with national and international developmental pediatricians to develop standards for monitoring children's development and strengthen capacities for quality services including in the private sector.
- Compile and develop health education materials. Use multimedia approaches including digital outreach to disseminate information. Optimize the use of digital platforms to serve as helplines. And make educational materials available for the public in health and other services.

*Strategic action 4:* The logic model of inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impact that is part of the nurturing care framework was introduced, as well as the ECD country profiles that are available for 197 countries and are updated regularly by UNICEF. The next set will be available in quarter four of 2023. To assess early childhood development, the UNICEF [ECD Index 2030](#) is available for children 24 -59 months of age. This index has been adopted as the measure to assess progress towards SDG target 4.2 *Ensure that all boys and girls have access to quality childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.* To cover younger children, WHO is developing the [Global](#)

[Scales for Early Development](#), covering children 0 – 36 months of age. Version 1 of the GSED is available for use at population level and is currently being translated into Arabic. Further research is ongoing to develop norms and standards, establish predictive validity and develop a tool for individual assessment, building a GSED toolbox that will be completed by 2025.

The ECD country profile for UAE has some missing data because UAE has not conducted population-based surveys such as MICS and DHS from which data are extracted. The profile therefore needs to be reviewed and updated with missing data that are available. It is worth mentioning that the UAE conducts national surveys, and a health survey is planned for the end of the year. The latter is an opportunity to include ECD specific questions. Since there are no national data on the % of children who are developmentally on track, it was suggested that the GSED and ECDI2030 might provide a basis for collecting country representative data.

Participants recommended to

- Create a forum through which relevant stakeholders can share what data is being collected, how it is being stored, and how it is being used. MOHAP can provide leadership to coordinate this activity, which might start in the health sector and extend to other sectors as part of the development of a multi-sectoral plan.
- Collate available data and annotate a profile of ECD-relevant policies and service coverage for the UAE, following the ECD country profile template, and provide disaggregated data by emirate.
- Consider adding ECD-specific questions in the upcoming national health survey, using the UNICEF MICS ECD module indicators and questionnaires.
- Consider conducting a population-representative survey of childhood development in the country, using the GSED and/or ECDI2030 tools.
- Consider establishing a unique ID number for all children that can be used to ensure equitable access to services and facilitate coordination across service.

*Strategic action 5:* This action area covers scaling up, private sector engagement and digital innovations. For scaling up, the key learning is to start small, carefully document and review progress, make adaptations as needed to fit the context, and expand (geographically and in breadth) once there is proof that implementation is feasible, acceptable, and effective.

Private sector engagement is important, not only in health service delivery but also of companies and enterprises who work in the private sphere. WHO has developed a family and child-friendly policy initiative that call for policies such as maternity and paternity leave, breastfeeding breaks, affordable childcare, and child benefits in the workplace. The discussion highlighted that UAE has a maternity policy that may not be implemented uniformly across different geographies and population groups and is quite limited with 16 weeks of paid leave. There was a keen interest to further investigate this area and strengthen it.

Digital innovations are widely available and applied in the UAE and several apps were identified that support early childhood development. They can complement face-to-face interactions and provide basic information to a wide audience. Participants suggested that a mapping be done of available digital tools



and initiatives to support ECD and to develop a platform through which these can be made accessible for a wider audience.

Participants recommended to

- Review the maternity and paternity protection policies and its implementation and seek to expand coverage to allow more weeks of maternity leave and fathers' involvement. Ensure consistency in implementation in public and private sectors.
- Review child protection policies and ensure consistency in implementation in public and private sectors.
- Engage private sectors entities and appeal to their corporate social responsibility to adhere to policies and invest in childcare provisions and services in the workplace and in the community
- Map available digital tools that support early childhood development, assess accuracy, and consistency and facilitate use across initiative and geographical boundaries.
- Enhance collaboration with universities and academic institutions to generate local evidence, keep track of global and regional evidence, and facilitate learning on what works.

### **Conclusions and next steps**

The meeting highlighted the wealth of resources that the UAE harnesses to promote and support early childhood development. The diversity in approaches between emirates and stakeholders allows for joint learning and exchange of experience, tools, and best practices. A national strategic plan will be instrumental to provide direction. The plan will articulate evidence-based policies, interventions and services to create enabling environments for child development, considering the 5 components of nurturing care, the 5 strategic actions, and the three levels of care to serve the population.

All caregivers and young children need some support for nurturing care, and this support can be provided as part of routine health and nutrition services and well child clinics, as well as in childcare services and nurseries. Families and children at risk of sub-optimal development need extra support through home visits, group sessions or targeted outreach. And specialized services need to be available for those children who experience developmental disabilities.

Promotion, prevention, and support are essential in services. Monitoring of children's development is best done when integrated as part of counselling and support, not as an entry point to consultation. When delivered with quality, services not only impact on children's development, but they also contribute to preventing child abuse and neglect, improving caregiver mental health, and improving health and nutrition outcomes.

The intention to conduct a national training of trainers on early childhood development in September 2023 will be a useful step in the process to develop the plan as it provides for hand-on experience with the foundational aspects of nurturing care. If in the meantime, progress can be made on the suggested mappings, participants in this course can be invited to have a meaningful and facilitated dialogue on the content of the strategic plan afterwards.

For immediate next steps, it is recommended that MOHAP provides leadership to:

- **Create a task force with relevant actors who can assess the situation for young children across**

**the emirates.** The tasks will be to assess the variation in policies and services within the different emirates and relevant institutions; the activities that are taking place where and by whom; who are beneficiaries that have access and who does not; what the core services are that are being provided, the standards they adhere to, and the ways capacities are being built, of the workforce and the public.

- **Develop a profile with relevant data for early childhood development.** The Countdown ECD country profile template and the indicator definitions that accompany it are a good starting point. The tasks will be to compile available data that provide an understanding of the protective and risk factors that affect children’s development in the UAE, as well as their caregivers’ mental health and psychosocial wellbeing; implementation of essential policies; access and coverage of essential interventions and services; and caregiver demand and utilization of these services.
- **Convene a training of trainers on care for child development.** The UNICEF/WHO CCD training materials are a foundation resource for capacity development of the workforce. They aim to provide frontline workers with the capacities to support caregivers in providing nurturing care. A training of master trainers not only will build capacity for future training, it will also expand the pool of experts who can contribute to planning and management of the activities in an informed way. WHO regional office will assist MOHAP in making available resource persons to conduct the training and it is recommended to add a day for planning as part of the activity.

In the closing session, Dr Suad Abdulrahman Alawar mentioned that MOHAP in collaboration with WHO-EMRO will convene a national workshop on Scoping mission on strengthening the health system response to violence in September 2023. This workshop can make an important contribution to the dialogues that were held, because of the overlap in policies and interventions to support early childhood development and prevention child maltreatment, abuse, or neglect.

## **Annexes**

- Annex 1: Agenda
- Annex 2: List of participants
- Annex 3: NCF Strategic Actions - Proposed Outputs