

Anganwadis should provide Early Childhood Care and Education

What is the issue?

The National Education Policy, 2020 has highlighted the importance of early childhood care and education (ECCE) but the NFHS-5 finds only 13.6% of children enrolled in pre-primary schools.

What is the significance of early childhood care and education?

According to UNESCO, early childhood is defined as the period from birth to 8 years old, a time of remarkable growth with brain development at its peak.

- During early childhood, children are highly influenced by the environment and the people that surround them.
- Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is more than preparation for primary school.
- It aims at the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs in order to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing.
- ECCE has the possibility to nurture caring, capable and responsible future citizens.
- For disadvantaged children, ECCE plays an important role in compensating for the disadvantages in the family and combating educational inequalities.
- **The Sustainable Development Goal 4** aims to ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education by 2030.

Does every child have the access to ECCE?

- The existing system of Anganwadis at best serves the age group of 3-6 years, ignoring infants and toddlers.
- Due to lack of parental awareness compounded by the daily stresses of poverty, disadvantaged households are unable to provide an early learning environment.
- Many low-income families have begun to send their children to low-cost pre-schools which have a developmentally inappropriate teaching approach.
- Due to the high workload of anganwadi workers, ECCE in anganwadis remain a non-starter.

How to promote a meaningful ECCE programme in Anganwadis?

- **Activity-based framework-** A meaningful activity-based ECCE framework has to be designed that recognises the ground realities with autonomy to reflect the local context and setting.
- ICDS must supply age-appropriate activity-based play material in adequate quantities regularly.

- **Work allocation-** Routine tasks of anganwadi workers can be reduced and non-ICDS work, such as surveys can be removed altogether.
- **Capacity building-** With adequate training and additional incentives, helpers can be redesignated as childcare workers and handle routine work.
- **Working hours-** Anganwadi hours can be extended by at least three hours by providing staff with an increase in their present remuneration, with the additional time devoted for ECCE.
- This will have the added benefit of serving as partial daycare, enabling poor mothers to earn a livelihood.
 - Karnataka has already taken the lead by working from 9.30 am to 4 pm.
- **Policy-** ICDS needs a change in policy mindset, both at central and state levels, by prioritising and monitoring ECCE.
- This will additionally require all ICDS functionaries to be fully trained in ECCE, including assessment through group activities and child observation.
- **Engagement of parents-** Anganwadi workers must be re-oriented to closely engage with parents, as they play a crucial role in the cognitive development of young children.
- Appropriate messaging and low-cost affordable teaching materials can be designed and made accessible to parents.
- **State investment-** States should invest in research and training to support early childhood education, and ensure that the ECCE programme is not a downward extension of school education.

References

1. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/anganwadis-early-childhood-care-education-7746519/>
2. <https://en.unesco.org/themes/early-childhood-care-and-education>
3. <https://icds-wcd.nic.in/icds.aspx>

Quick facts

Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme

- Launched on 2nd October, 1975
- ICDS Scheme is one of the flagship programmes of the Government of India for early childhood care and development.
- **Significance-** Providing pre-school non-formal education and breaking the vicious cycle of malnutrition, morbidity, reduced learning capacity and mortality on the other.
- **Beneficiaries-** Children in the age group of 0-6 years, pregnant women and lactating mothers.
- **Objectives of the Scheme**
 - to improve the nutritional and health status of children in the age-group 0-6 years
 - to lay the foundation for proper psychological, physical and social development of the child
 - to reduce the incidence of mortality, morbidity, malnutrition and school dropout
 - to achieve effective co-ordination of policy and implementation amongst the various departments to promote child development
 - to enhance the capability of the mother to look after the normal health and nutritional

needs of the child through proper nutrition and health education

- **Services under ICDS**

1. Supplementary Nutrition
2. Pre-school non-formal education
3. Nutrition & health education
4. Immunization
5. Health check-up and
6. Referral services

