

# Early Childhood Development 0–3 Program in Ghana

February 2018

[www.mcsprogram.org](http://www.mcsprogram.org)

## Why the Early Years Matter

Early childhood development (ECD) supports young children’s holistic development across physical, cognitive, language and socio-emotional domains spanning the prenatal stage to early grades. The early years form the foundation for lifelong learning. During the period from conception to three years, approximately 700 neural connections are formed every second, a pace not matched during any other period in life<sup>1</sup>. Early experiences and the environments in which children develop in their first 1,000 days can have lasting impact on brain development and child well-being. These critical early experiences take place through relationships with parents or caregivers. As such, the quality and number of interactions between young children and their parents are critical for their growth and development.

It is estimated that 43% of children (or 250 million) under 5 years of age living in low- and middle-income countries are at risk of not achieving their development potential because of extreme poverty, chronic malnutrition and a lack of access to basic services and early learning opportunities.<sup>2</sup> Based on this, there is growing momentum for integrated early childhood programming that engages multiple sectors to support young children and families. Coordination among sectors, particularly the health, nutrition and ECD sectors is needed to support parents in their caregiving function.



Photo by Caroline Trutmann Marconi

In Ghana, neonatal, infant and child mortality remains relatively high. Nutrition and factors associated with being underweight contribute strongly to these deaths. Ten percent of newborns have low birthweight (less than 2.5 kg), 22 percent of children under-five are stunted, six percent are wasted, and 13 percent are underweight,<sup>3</sup> and global research shows physical stunting is associated with cognitive stunting. Therefore, adequate health and nutrition complimented by early stimulation is critical for brain development and plays an important role in a child’s physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development—the four ECD domains in which children need to progress to reach their full potential. Most parents and caregivers lack adequate knowledge on how to support their children’s development, but with training they can become effective providers of care and stimulation.

## Program Objective

The overall goal of the MCSP Ghana ECD 0-3 program is to support the implementation of ECD interventions by leveraging existing country-level health and nutrition activities to promote early stimulation and improved interaction between parents, caregivers and young children in select regions of Ghana.

<sup>1</sup> Center on the Developing Child. 2009. *Five Numbers to Remember about Early Childhood Development*. Available at: [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu).

<sup>2</sup> Black MM, Walker SP, Fernald LCH, et al. 2017. Early childhood coming of age: science through the life course. *Lancet*. 389: 77-90.

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF. 2013. At a glance: Ghana. Available at: [https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ghana\\_statistics.html](https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ghana_statistics.html).

### Strategic Objectives

**Objective 1:** Develop a set of generic early child development materials concentrating on early childhood stimulation and responsive parenting for children under 3 years and adapt to the Ghana country context.

**Objective 2:** Build capacity of community health workers (CHWs) to effectively teach caregivers with young children about the importance of and methods for psychosocial stimulation and responsive and protective parenting in targeted districts.

**Objective 3:** Assess the ability of CHWs to integrate the early childhood stimulation and responsive parenting information with their regular nutrition activities and monitor their ability to do this, to understand effectiveness and feasibility for scale-up and institutionalization of an ECD package, integrating responsive care with health and nutrition.

## Key Accomplishments to Date

- Assessed and monitored the ability of CHWs to integrate the early childhood stimulation and responsive parenting information with their regular health and nutrition activities
- Adapted and aligned a set of global ECD materials to the Ghana context. The final package of materials includes a facilitator flip chart, parenting session manual, counseling cards and early stimulation poster
- Conducted a training of trainers on the use of the Ghana ECD materials for 34 national, regional and district staff from Upper West and Eastern regions of Ghana
- Conducted trainings for 398 CHWs at the district level who will have the mandate of educating parents and other caregivers to engage in early stimulation activities with their children 0-3 years
- Conducted trainings for 300 community health volunteers at the sub-district level
- Commenced qualitative and quantitative assessments to evaluate changes in CHWs knowledge and perceptions of early stimulation practices as well as understand effectiveness and feasibility for scale-up

## Sustainability

The program is leveraging the existing structures of the Family Health Division of the Ghana Health Service (GHS). Community health officers already working at the Community-Based Health Planning and Services (CHPS) have been trained to integrate ECD into their existing health and nutrition services delivered at CHPS health compounds and through existing mother-to-mother support groups.

In addition, the program has built the capacity of CHPS workers in the GHS to implement and facilitate future ECD training. The ECD training modules and materials, which were developed with the support of the Family Health Division of the GHS and the Social Protection Agency will also be useful assets for future ECD trainings.

### About MCSP

MCSP is a global, USAID initiative to introduce and support high-impact health interventions in 25 priority countries to help prevent child and maternal deaths. MCSP supports programming in maternal, newborn, and child health, immunization, family planning and reproductive health, nutrition, health systems strengthening, water/sanitation/hygiene, malaria, prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, and pediatric HIV care and treatment. MCSP will tackle these issues through approaches that also focus on household community mobilization, gender integration, and digital health, among others.

This brief is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the terms of the Cooperative Agreement AID-OAA-A-14-00028. The contents are the responsibility of the Maternal and Child Survival Program and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government. Requests for further information on this brief or permission to reproduce or translate this publication should be addressed to MCSP Communications via [info@mcsprogram.org](mailto:info@mcsprogram.org). All rights reserved.