



# Call to Action

## Implementing the Nurturing Care Framework in Ghana

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### Background

Globally, 43% of children (250 million) under five years of age living in low- and middle-income countries are at risk of not achieving their development potential due to inadequate protection, nutrition and stimulation<sup>1</sup>. In Ghana, more than one quarter of children under three are behind in the domains of language, cognitive, physical, and socioemotional development. Compounding gaps in early childhood development (ECD), children in Ghana face significant nutritional deficiencies; nearly 20 percent of children under-five are stunted, five percent are wasted, and 11 percent are underweight<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the majority of children in public schools in Ghana (more than 50%) lack foundational early learning skills in numeracy and literacy (Ghana EGRA-EGMA, 2015). This is largely attributed to weak and inadequate care, stimulation and support in the early childhood period. Access to quality ECD services from birth positively impacts later development, learning and achievement and is recognized as a solution to the learning crisis currently witnessed in primary and secondary school systems (UNESCO, 2013).

There are critical consequences of weak early childhood investment, including poorer health outcomes, fewer learning skills and reduced lifetime earning potential. In addition to the losses felt by individual children and families, these consequences have larger ramifications for national economies as well as health, education and welfare systems (Heckman, 2007). Intergenerational cycles of poverty and disadvantage hinder equitable growth and prosperity. To respond to this global threat, the World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, and partners launched the Nurturing Care Framework in May 2018.<sup>3</sup> The Ghana Health Service (GHS) followed with a national level launch of the Framework in June of that same year.

### Commitment and Contribution from GHS and Partners:

GHS and its partners are committed to implementing the Nurturing Care Framework through the delivery of integrated programs promoting health, nutrition, protection and early stimulation for young children, particularly those aged 0-3. This can be achieved by supplementing ongoing national and sub-national health and nutrition activities with ECD messages that promote psychosocial stimulation and responsive caregiving between caregivers and young children.

### GHS's Call to Action:

The Government of Ghana (GOG) has made a strong commitment to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SGD 4 regarding access to quality ECD services. Recently, the GOG reaffirmed this commitment through dedication of personnel and coordination mechanisms to rollout the Nurturing Care Framework in Ghana. This investment is a critical first step given the cross-sectoral nature of the Framework, which requires engagement

<sup>1</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>2</sup> United Nations Population Division. World Urbanization Prospects: 2014 Revision

<sup>3</sup> <http://nurturing-care.org/>

and synchronization from health, nutrition, protection, early learning and child protection professionals in order to realize its full potential. To move the Framework forward, GHS calls upon other government agencies, donors, non-governmental actors and the media to significantly increase actions, investments, and attention to ECD in Ghana, especially for children under three years old.

## GHS Calls Upon Government Agencies and Partners to:

1. **Urgently invest in holistic services for young children, especially the marginalized,** by increasing the overall budget for ECD to enable relevant agencies to provide essential health, nutrition, protection, stimulation and early learning services from birth. These investments may include building capacity, competencies and monitoring mechanisms for frontline workers - such as health workers, social workers, and ECD caregivers - through additional training, mentorship and implementation tools.
2. **Invest in behavior change communication for ECD.** Limited knowledge and negative attitudes are barriers to the access and quality of ECD services for children under three. It is critical for GOG agencies and partners to develop clear communication strategies to inform the public at-large about ECD through multiple media and community platforms. Stakeholders should sensitize the public about the importance of early stimulation for brain development, including opportunities presented during pregnancy and in the first few years of life.
3. **Improve coordination and strategic leadership for ECD in Ghana.** While there are existing coordination and leadership mechanisms for ECD in Ghana, there is need to improve on strategic integration of health, early learning, and child protection at the implementation level to prevent duplication of services. Additionally, there are many opportunities to for cross-reference and referral between health, early learning and child protection sectors that go underutilized due to lack of collaboration. Effective coordination, planning, monitoring and evaluation can improve efficiency and effectiveness of services for children under three.
4. **Expand ECD services, especially early stimulation, across multiple existing platforms.** Reaching every pregnant woman and child in Ghana requires working across multiple platforms. Stakeholders should leverage existing entry points such as mother-to-mother support groups, cash transfer programs, and routine growth monitoring meetings to meet caregivers where they are. Training professionals from multiple cadres and integrating early stimulation activities across multiple platforms is one way of ensuring that caregivers of all children under three receive adequate information on how to stimulate their child's brain development.
5. **Invest in high quality parenting, family learning and support programs.** Parents and other primary caregivers are the single most important factor in ensuring that children have the best start in life. Parental behavior and activities with children are linked with improved child development outcomes<sup>4</sup>. There is need for both universal and targeted parenting and family support programs that help parents build the capacity, knowledge, behaviors and positive attitudes to provide early stimulation to their children early in life (i.e. interactive play and positive discipline). Programs should specifically target the most deprived and vulnerable families with additional services as marginalization increases family stress and affects the ability of caregivers to provide adequate care and stimulation to young children.
6. **Collect data on key ECD indicators.** Evidence and data are critical to providing and targeting ECD interventions in a diverse country like Ghana. It is vital that data on all areas of development be collected, analyzed, disseminated and used at various levels to address the needs of children. Previous data collections largely focused on health and nutrition indicators. However, stakeholders can leverage various assessment opportunities, such as Demographic and Health Surveys and regular SDG monitoring, to collect data on early learning and ECD for children under the age of three and, ultimately, bridge existing data gaps.



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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.who.int/maternal\\_child\\_adolescent/child/nurturing-care-framework-first-draft.pdf](https://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/child/nurturing-care-framework-first-draft.pdf)