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AGA KHAN FOUNDATION

ECD NBRC F4HE RESEARCH ADVOCACY CONFERENCE 2025

Advocacy Brief

**“Prioritizing and Scaling ECD Parenting and
Responsive Caregiving Education in
Healthcare, Education and Community
Settings”**

Organizer: ECD PREP, OBGYN AKU

This roundtable, part of an advocacy conference funded by Foundations for Health and Empowerment, Aga Khan Foundation, in partnership with Global Affairs Canada, aims to advocate for and prioritize ECD parenting education across various settings, including health, education, community centers, and broader systems.

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RESPONSIVE CAREGIVING

*“If we change the beginning
of the story, we change the
whole story”*

Raffi Cavoukian

**#ECDPREPOBGYN
#F4HERESEARCH**

Early Childhood Development, Parenting Readiness Education Program (ECD, PREP), at the Department of ObGyn, Aga Khan University, Karachi Pakistan organized a four-day Foundation for Health and Empowerment (F4HE) research advocacy conference from 12th-15th February 2025 Aga Khan University Pakistan supported by Aga Khan Foundation and Global Affairs Canada. As a part of the conference, a consultative roundtable was hosted that brought various stakeholders across the government sectors, healthcare, education and community leadership, civil societies, international aid agencies, schools, and training institutions. The roundtable discussions aimed to foster collaboration among these stakeholders for the integration and scalability of early childhood development responsive caregiving, and parenting education programs in existing systems of Pakistan. The recommendations derived from the discussion reinforced the urgent need for multisectoral collaboration, evidence-driven approaches, and systematic policy integration to make parenting programs accessible, scalable, and sustainable.

We sincerely thank the broader team of Contributors across Aga Khan University, UNICEF, Aga Khan Foundation, and partner organizations who supported this effort, attended the roundtable and shared their vision of scaling the parenting programs. Each individual's dedication has been vital in advancing the cause of ECD parenting education across health, education, and community systems.



F4HE ECD Research

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is a crucial phase during which a child's brain undergoes rapid growth that shapes a child's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. Responsive caregiving during the early years is important for ensuring a strong parent-child attachment. Research has shown that children experiencing consistent attention and response from their caregivers during the early years can enhance a sense of security and attachment among children.

However, parents of young children require support from various stakeholders, including healthcare systems, academic institutions, and the community, to develop effective parental practices such as responsive caregiving.

ECD PREP, AKU is conducting a broader implementation research study on ECD Newborn Responsive Caregiving Parenting Education supported by the Aga Khan Foundation and Global Affairs Canada. The overarching aim of this study is to assess the system's readiness and feasibility for the implementation and integration of ECD responsive parenting education programs in healthcare settings to promote and scale early childhood development in the region. The more details regarding this can be found on : https://www.ocerints.org/socioint24_e-publication/papers/Shelina%20Bhamani.pdf



According to UNICEF, 43% of children under 5 globally are at risk of poor development due to a lack of awareness among caregivers, poverty, malnutrition, and basic needs for early childhood development and care.

UNICEF (2019). A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing quality early childhood education.



Key Themes-ECD Parenting and Responsive Caregiving Education in:



Systems and Policies

Implementing and integrating parenting education programs into the existing system requires supportive policies that ensure easy access to parenting education services for every caregiver. The system and government can develop policies that mandate ECD, parenting education programs, and supportive environments. Moreover, fostering quality healthcare resources and promoting evidence-based policies by systems can bridge the gap in early childhood services. Effective investment in programs would ultimately promote equitable dynamics in children's development for the future.



Healthcare Systems

Healthcare systems can act as hubs in scaling ECD and parenting education by integrating these services into healthcare settings. Parents have a primary role in providing a nurturing, stimulating environment for their children. Therefore, by providing parental education sessions or a supportive environment in healthcare settings during pre-and post-natal, parents can be well-equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to foster healthy growth, responsive caregiving, and early learning opportunities. Moreover, healthcare providers, especially nurses and midwives, can play a substantial role in promoting parenting engagement and education.



Education Sector and the Community Settings

Education and community play a vital role in scaling ECD and parenting engagement. Creating an inclusive educational environment for parents and caregivers and fostering community leaders' engagement can enhance and support the holistic growth of both parents and their children. This equips parents and caregivers with the essential knowledge that supports their parental practices. Through formal and informal learning opportunities, the education sector can promote parental understanding of ECD, nurturing care, and responsive caregiving. Well-educated parents or caregivers are more likely to be responsive and provide a stimulating learning environment to their children, which fosters their brain development. Moreover, communities can also contribute to supporting parents of young children by providing them with supportive environments where parents can access education resources easily. Community healthcare centers offering parenting counseling services can help parents to understand their child's needs and desires effectively and appropriately.



Workforce and Academia

As Gilbert K. Chesterton stated, “Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.” By adopting this concept, Early Childhood Development (ECD) workforce development in healthcare and educational departments should be implemented to build evidence and focus on improving the gaps. Trained providers, including nurses, lady health workers (LHWs), and midwives, play a substantial role in educating parents and caregivers of young children on the importance of development during the early years. Therefore, it is imperative to develop the capacity of providers on ECD and its essential concepts since they act as a primary link between a caregiver and the healthcare system. In this modern era, technology has made it easy to access remote areas, and therefore, using digital platforms, a large number of caregivers can be trained to be a source of guidance for parents and caregivers.



Recommendations Derived from Advocacy Round Table Discussion



Systems and Policies

1. Develop a comprehensive mapping study to build evidence around current best practices and the themes that require time to support parents.
2. Conduct a rigorous policy analysis at all levels, i.e., public and private sectors, to explore the opportunities and gaps to support parents at all levels: local, provincial, national, and regional.
3. Establish a 'one voice' multisectoral consortium for large-scale parenting education and converting this agenda into a parenting education campaign.
4. Integrate parenting education in all sector agendas to ensure all ministries are building schemes for parents in national action plans.
5. Promote family-friendly policies, their stringent administration, and extensive management at both public and private levels.
6. Strengthen public, private, and academic partnerships to reach out to places with limited access and resources.
7. Integrate and expand nurturing care framework components in all parenting programs across all age groups.
8. Set up a parenting hotline to respond to their daily routine queries and help regarding child development.
9. Collaborate with social media channels, mobile companies, influencers, and journalists to offer a mass-level positive parenting awareness.
10. Encourage workplaces to adopt family-friendly policies, such as paternity leave and flexible working hours.



Healthcare

1. Screen and detect early developmental delays by conducting regularized and universal child development assessments.
2. Equip parents in all visits starting antenatal to paediatrics check-ins regarding positive parenting and child development at home.
3. Establish referral systems between the education and healthcare sectors via which regularized health screening should become part of quarterly/annual child assessment/observations.
4. Training of residents, nurses, and allied health workers on components of nurturing care framework and supporting parents in healthcare settings.
5. Making healthcare centers more health promotive by creating a conducive learning environment by instilling parenting education posters, handouts and infographics in the clinical, in patient and outpatient areas.
6. Hold advocacy events to give parenting education on international days

Recommendations Derived from Round Table Discussion



Education Sector, Academia and Workforce

1. Mandate all the educational systems to have a parent educator/counsellor and a parenting education policy within their systems and in the schools.
2. Design and scale a comprehensive parenting education curriculum to support holistic development at home with a specific focus on fathers' engagement, positive home environment, safe technology use, school readiness skills, and social-emotional learning.
3. Conduct routine research and surveys around issues and challenges faced by the parents and populate the data on a central parenting education dashboard.
4. Establish a strong referral system with the hospitals around the school for any health or developmental emergency.
5. Integrate sessions on nurturing care components, supporting development at home, and positive parenting in parent-teacher orientation, meetings, and school management team meetings.
6. Launch a national parenting association; engage parents; and capitalise on their skills and abilities to promote parenting education on a large scale.
7. Link parenting education programmes with incentives for social safety programmes in underserved communities.
8. Develop an elective but mandatory curriculum on parenting education in all teacher education programmes, i.e., B.Ed., M.Ed., M.Phil., or MS (catering to different levels, such as undergraduate/postgraduate/CPD/technical/social sciences). Institutionalise it through public-private partnerships and endorsements by the Higher Education Commission.
9. Offer capacity building on different topics of parenting education using the academia platform and translate those into all local and regional languages for massive outreach.
10. Strengthen the capacity of academia to build evidence around different emerging themes in parenting and provide evidence-based solutions and policy actions to the state.
11. Launch awareness campaigns to reduce stigma around seeking mental health support during parenting and postpartum periods.

RT Advocacy Conceptual Lead and Principal Investigator F4HE ECD Responsive Parenting

Shelina Bhamani (ECD PREP Lead)

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Advocacy Round Table: Gallery



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All stated recommendations are viewpoints of experts and do not necessarily endorse or represent organizational viewpoints.

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Early Childhood Development

Early childhood development (ECD) starts from conception till age eight. It is one of the most significant periods of human life span development. Investments in early childhood development yield socio-economic, transgenerational health and global development benefits. Responsive caregiving is one of the fundamental pillars of early childhood development. This is the period of human life span development that requires extensive support from the caregivers for a healthy start to life. Parenting and responsive caregiving in the 21st century, and specifically in this new-normal post-COVID-19 world has undergone massive challenges and consequently undergone a huge transformation. Globally, there have been various research studies that accentuate the impact of responsive caregiving and positive parental engagement on various child developmental indicators such as health, nutrition, safety and protection, learning and stimulation, and responsive caregiving. Our programme and philosophy are inspired by the WHO Nurturing Care Framework (Reference <https://nurturing-care.org/>). It is essential to support parents and caregivers to provide optimal care and wellbeing opportunities to the young children to thrive for a better future and this continuous and involved parenting support needs to start before birth and continue until the age of eight. Considering the vital importance, the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology has initiated ECD PREP which will offer a wide range of services on Parenting Education and Responsive Caregiving by integrating education, research and services.



<https://www.aku.edu/mcpk/obs-gyn/Pages/ecd-prep.aspx>

