

Policy Brief

CRECHES ENABLE CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING



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This Policy brief is part of a series of seven policy briefs anchored by Forum for Creches and Childcare Services (FORCES) as an attempt to analyze the childcare ecosystem within the country. The aim is to build a strong case for universalization of childcare and strengthening of public provisioning. All the policy briefs can be accessed using the QR code:



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No child grows in a vacuum

Drawing from research on the factors affecting a child's wellbeing, this policy brief lays out a comprehensive set of arguments for the State to invest in quality childcare in an institutional setting such as the creche. In the absence of the mother, a creche is equipped to ensure the presence of adult caregivers who can provide quality care and bring about the optimum development of a child. Practical and feasible recommendations are made to carve out a road map for ensuring that all young children in India receive the nurturing they deserve.

For the scope of this policy paper, creches are defined as centers providing early childhood care and education to children under 6 years of age, for 7-8 hours. A creche's services would include vital elements like health, nutrition and early learning within a caring, protective and enabling environment.



Need For Quality Care During Rapid Brain Development

During the first few years of life, more than 1 million new neural connections are formed every second in the human brain (Child C. f., 2007). Interactions through tactile connections, music, movements, verbal communication, and sensory experiences with an adult contribute to building the fundamental circuits required for brain development. Over time, these simple circuits develop into complex ones that build a child's emotional, motor, language, and cognitive abilities. Formation of a warm and loving relationship through continued interaction between a young child and an adult impacts the strength of these circuits and helps to build trust, confidence, and a positive approach to life.

Research has shown that care provided by an adult, who responds at short notice and conveys warmth through activities like feeding, grooming and playing, is essential for the optimum development of the brain. A child also needs to develop resilience and learn skills to overcome the challenges and failures that follow adequate exposure to positive stress.

Along with proper care and engagement, the young child requires adequate nutrition. At 6 months, the child's diet of breast milk needs to be supplemented with frequent and sufficient meals that are nutrient dense and comprise a variety of food groups.

Since 80-90% of the brain develops by the time the child reaches 6 years of age, it is critical to take full advantage of this small window of opportunity to leave a lasting positive impact on an individual's life. A holistic approach that enables the development of a strong social, emotional, cognitive, and physical foundation is required to ensure the overall well-being of a child.

Children grow and learn best when they are protected from neglect and extreme or chronic stress and have plenty of opportunities to play and explore (Prevention, 2023).

Care impacts brain architecture and is the key to unlocking our full potential. Therefore, continuous presence of a responsive adult is crucial for their optimum development.



Who Takes Care of the Children?

The patriarchal gender-based division of work prevalent in society assigns mothers, and in her absence other female members of the household, the responsibility of childcare. As a result, women, especially the poor and marginalized ones, bear the triple burden of housework, care work and paid work. As per recent research conducted in the states of Jharkhand, Karnataka, Gujarat, and Odisha with working mothers belonging to families with an average income of Rs. 5000 -10,000, 59% of women are forced to compromise and adopt dangerous choices like leaving their children in the care of older siblings and in some cases even alone (Sharma, Sarathy, & Rao, 2022). This impacts the mental health and work efficiency of the mother and the wellbeing of her child who is in a crucial developmental stage.



Therefore, overburdening women with responsibilities impacts the quality of the care that they give to their young children.



Impact of Care Deficit on the Child

A child who is left alone (in the house or at the workplace) or placed in the care of an older child or an unreliable adult is at risk of being harmed. Experiencing frequent and prolonged adversities like poverty, marginalization and environmental crises results in physical and mental distress in a child. Prolonged activation of the stress response system can cause cognitive impairment, disrupt the development of the brain and other organ systems, and increase the risk of disease well into the adult years (Child C. o., n.d.).

Child of Construction Workers Mauled by a Dog at the Construction Site (Hindu, 2022): A 7-month-old child of the construction workers was mauled by a dog at the construction site in a posh residential complex where his parents worked. The residents protested the menace of dogs, however the critical issue of neglect, lack of safety and security of children was invisibilized. No seven-month-old lies unattended on the ground that can be accessed by stray dogs unless the parents are forced to leave the child in such a situation owing to their work obligations and a lack of a safer space where the child can be kept.

Even when the physical safety of a child is ensured, the absence of a responsive caregiver exposes her to neglect¹. Neglect has not attracted due attention because the importance of care and interaction is often overlooked. There is a general assumption that children grow upon their own and do not need anything beyond food and physical care. The fact that care and loving interaction lead to increased neural

connections is still not understood or easily accepted.

To be able to understand the world and interact positively with it, a child reaches out to her caregiver through gestures and sounds and the caregiver's full response completes a cycle of the 'serve and return' process. If the response is unreliable, inappropriate, or simply absent, the child's brain development may be disrupted, which would impair her future learning, behavior, and health (Child T.N., 2012).

With increasing migration and urbanization, the old traditional family structures are breaking down and nuclear families are rising in number. 50% of households in India were classified as nuclear in 2022 as compared to 37% in 2008 (Panel, 2023). As the number of adults in the family and immediate environment of the child are depleting, there are fewer individuals to interact with and take care of her nutritional and other needs. This has resulted in a serious deficit in the care required for the child's holistic development.



Therefore, it is not just physical or sexual abuse but lack of essential experiences that hamper the development of the brain architecture and hence the overall well-being of the child.



¹ The Science of Neglect made by the Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University shows how persistent absence of responsive care disrupts the developing brain.

Status of Young Children in India

While India is an emerging economy with an escalating GDP growth rate of 7.2 % and the third highest number of billionaires in the world (Forbes, 2023), 1 in 3 children below the age of 5 are stunted and underweight. 67% of children under 5 are anemic and only 11% of children under the age of 2 receive an adequate diet. The mortality rate of children under 5 per 1000 live births is 41.9 (NFHS5, 2019-2021). These statistics point towards a grossly unequal society.

The physical, sexual, and emotional harm statistics are also alarming. A systematic review of 21 studies published between 2005 and 2020 to determine the impact of child mistreatment found that up to 74% of Indian children report physical abuse and 69% sexual abuse. Furthermore, 71% of Indian children report

overall neglect, up to 60% emotional neglect, and up to 58% report physical neglect (Dr, Fernand, Choudhry, & Benegal, 2021).

There is also an acute learning crisis amongst primary school students, which can be traced back to the poor accessibility and quality of early childhood care and education. As per the latest nation-wide rural survey that reaches every district of India, only $\frac{1}{4}$ of all children in grade III were at 'grade level' in Math and $\frac{1}{5}$ in reading. The learning trajectories across grades are also relatively flat (ASER, 2022).

Over 43 % of children under the age of five are at risk of not realizing their full potential (India U. , n.d.). Therefore, the nutritional, health, mortality, and learning indicators for the young children of the country are far from satisfactory.



Affordable and Accessible Creches to Provide Quality Care

The Care Diamond Framework lists the family/community, state, not-for-profit, and market as the four entities responsible for providing care (Razavi S. , 2007). It becomes the responsibility of the state to support and foster the other three entities and, in their absence, step in to provide full-time childcare services through creches. This is considered to be a cost-effective and efficient method of providing non-familial care to young children.

Affordable and accessible quality childcare centers provide a safe space for young children

to engage, explore, and socialize with their peers under the supervision of supportive and responsive adults. Appropriate and frequent meals provided in the creches take care of a major percentage of the daily nutritional requirements of the child². Creches also provide an opportunity to regularly monitor the growth of each child and take remedial measures wherever necessary. There is substantial evidence from the ground that such centers have a positive impact on all the developmental indicators of the young child.



² The Palna scheme through which creches are run on the ground for seven and a half hours mandates provision of three meals to the children and emphasizes on ensuring adequate nutritional value in the meals provided as per the government's guidelines.

Positive Evidence from the Ground

In March 2021, the ST & SC Development, Minorities and Backward Classes Welfare Department Government of Odisha launched the PVTG Nutrition Improvement Program (OPNIP) to improve the nutritional status of the tribal groups of Odisha. Under this program, community-based creches for children between 6 months to 3 years, spot feeding centers for children between 6 months to 3 years, and care centers for pregnant and lactating mothers were run in one of the most remote and inaccessible areas of Odisha. Within one year of the program, the percentage of severely malnourished children had reduced by 4.2% and there was a 4.1% increase in the number of children in the normal category³. The program was also awarded the SKOCH Gold Award (category: State Department, sub-category: Health) for the year 2023.

Out of 6932 children from Delhi NCR and 1451 from the rural and urban parts of Punjab, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Telangana and West Bengal, who stayed for at least 3 months with a monthly attendance of 15 days or more in childcare centers run by Mobile Creches (a not-for-profit organization that provides childcare services at construction sites, urban slums and rural areas) 72% and 76% respectively had a normal to improved nutritional status.⁴

Evidence of age-appropriate learning was found in a longitudinal study on 14000 four-year-olds between age 4 - 8 in the rural areas of Assam, Rajasthan and Telangana. It indicated that pre-school participation from ages 4 to 5 years has a significant impact on children's school readiness (cognitive, pre-literacy, and pre-numeracy abilities) levels at age 5 and above (Kaul, Chaudhary, Bhattacharjea, Ramanujan, & Nanda, 2017).

The above evidence shows beyond doubt that creches have the potential to address the care deficit and ensure the wellbeing of children, especially of those belonging to poor and

marginalized families. 97% of respondents of the study conducted on 1128 women residing in the urban and rural areas of Jharkhand, Karnataka, Gujarat, and Odisha, felt that availability of creches would enable more among them to join paid work (Sharma, Sarathy, & Rao, 2022). Therefore, access to such centers can provide an opportunity for families stuck in multiple cycles of poverty and marginality to build a better life for themselves and their children.



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³ The data has been obtained from Public Health Resource Society (PHRS) that provided technical support in the OPNIP program.

⁴ This data has been obtained from the internal Monitoring Evaluation Assessment and Learning team at Mobile Creches.

Role of the State in Ensuring Childcare through a Legal and Policy Framework

India's top 10% and top 1% of the population hold 57% and 22% of the total national income respectively, while the bottom 50% earns only 13% (Chancel, Thomas Picketty, & Zucman, 2022). In such a scenario, affordability becomes an issue for a significant percentage of the population. Therefore, it is important for the State to ensure accessibility of quality childcare institutions.

Early childhood care and education are not clear legal entitlements in our country. However, the State has multiple obligations towards its youngest citizens, which are mandated through several laws and policies. The 86th Constitutional Amendment Act 2002, says that 'the State shall endeavor to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years'. The National Education Policy advocates universalization of early childhood care and education as soon as possible and not later than 2030 (MHRD M. o., 2020). The Early Childhood Care and Education Policy envisages achieving holistic development and active learning for all children below 6 years of age through free, universal, inclusive, equitable, joyful and contextualized educational opportunities (MWCD (. o., 2013). The National Plan of Action for Children lists securing legal and social protection from all kinds of abuse, exploitation, and neglect for children as one of its key priorities (MHRD M. o., 2016). The National Food Security Act, 2013, provides food security as a legal entitlement to the poorest citizens of the country. However, the present legal system remains weak as it fails to address the early developmental needs of the child holistically (India L. C., 2015).

India is a signatory to multiple international conventions, treaties, and declarations including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1989, Education for All (EFA) 1990, the Dakar Framework for Action 2000, and the Moscow

Framework for Action 2010. The country is also working on the following sustainable development goals that relate directly to young children: Goal 1- No poverty; Goal 2 - Zero hunger, Goal 3 - Good health and wellbeing; and Goal 4 - Quality education. The G-20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration committed to promoting investment in affordable care infrastructure for addressing the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work as well as ensuring equal access to affordable and quality education from early childhood up to higher learning during adulthood (G20, 2023). The national and international commitments that India has made require the country to massively invest in the well-being of the young child.

The Integrated Child Development Service Scheme is the largest national program for early childhood care and development. It provides six comprehensive services for children under the age of 6: supplementary nutrition and growth monitoring, immunization, health check-ups, health and nutrition education, referral services, and non-formal pre-school education. The scheme has been instrumental in providing essential services and is an attempt to ensure last mile access. However, there are several institutional weaknesses that need to be overcome for the scheme to truly realize its vision. Besides infrastructural, quality and implementation issues, there is also the issue of responding to women's needs. Anganwadi centers, through which ICDS services are provided, remain open only for about 4 - 6 hours a day. This is inadequate for parents who are working full-time. The children under 3 only receive nutritional support from the ICDS in the form of Take Home Ration (THR). There is no mechanism to monitor whether this reaches the child.

The Strengthening and restructuring of ICDS scheme recommended conversion of 5% of Anganwadis into Anganwadis cum creches (MWCD, Implementation of Restructured ICDS,



2013) but this has not materialized yet. There are 13.96 lakh Anganwadis registered under the Poshan tracker (MWCD, 2023) and the Ministry of Women and Child Development targets to open 17000 Anganwadi cum creches by FY 2025-26 (MWCD, Annual Report, 2023), which is only 1.2% of the total number of Anganwadis. There are only 2688 creches running under the Palna scheme through which the government provides day care facilities for children (MWCD, 2023). Needless to say, this number is grossly inadequate for our country.

Several erstwhile labour laws of the country mandated the provision of creches subject to a stipulated number of female employees in the organization. The Maternity Benefit Act 2017, Inter-state Migrant Workers Act 1980, Contract Labour Act 1970, and other specific Acts for different sectors have limitations and are largely unavailable to the beneficiaries. In the unorganized sector, the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) has the provision of assigning one woman caregiver for the children on a worksite provided they are

more than 5 in number (GOI, 2005). However, the progress towards implementing these recommendations has been slow (Singh, n.d.). The heavy dependency on the employers, absence of political will, and lack of know-how have rendered these Acts unsuccessful.

Full-day childcare services is a need that remains largely unfulfilled and urgent steps are required to address this issue. However, some positive steps have been taken in the right direction. Haryana has become the first state in India to launch a policy that envisages universalization of creches (Government, 2023). In its 2023 budget, the Karnataka government has announced setting up of creches in 4000 Gram Panchayats for mothers employed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), as well as for those living in the vicinity (Chowdhury & Ravindranath, 2023). The effective implementation of these initiatives and their replication in other parts of the country are vital to improve the bleak status of the young child in India.

Recommendations

Building awareness amongst stakeholders about ECCE

There is an urgent need to generate awareness about the importance of developmentally appropriate ECCE and the long-lasting impact of the investment in this area. All entities of the care diamond need to be oriented on the best practices for childcare. The community and families need to be made aware of their rights and entitlements to generate a demand for quality creches.

Effective utilization of existing resources to universalize creches

The process of converting Anganwadis to Anganwadi-cum-creches should be accelerated. By implementing the existing nationwide ICDS program to operate creches, the government will not only avoid duplication but ensure effective utilization of the available resources.

The lowest tier of governance - the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) and Municipalities - have been empowered through the 73rd and 74th amendments. They can be motivated to open and monitor creches.

Legislating a law to establish the right to care

Through framing of appropriate rules, the child will become entitled to quality care. This will ensure provisioning through creation of systems and structures, with allocation of adequate funds through creative collaborations and partnerships. Extend Right to Education Act to include children under six years of age.

Setting up of minimum quality standards

Formulate quality parameters for creches/daycares/preschools/nurseries to ensure uniformity and better understanding of the early childcare program across all sections of service providers.

Regular monitoring and evaluation

Develop a regulatory framework for the private sector and not-for profit sector and lay the base for an aspirational framework of norms for the government sector. This will, to some extent, provide a level playing field for all children under the age of six.

Professionalization of care work

Professionalize the sector by recognizing the needs of the care providers. This can be done by improving their working conditions and paying them adequate remuneration instead of an honoraria. Invest in training the workers and avoid overburdening them with administrative tasks.

Setting up a National ECCE Council

A national ECCE Council with corresponding state councils should be set up immediately to implement the above on priority and ensure the allocation of the required funds. The Council will develop mechanisms for a convergence of the MWCD, MOE, MPR, and other related bodies to ensure a care continuum as well as rationalization of existing schemes. This would help avoid duplication and strengthen governance mechanisms to actualize the plan for meeting the SDG targets. The Council members should have the ability and skills to negotiate their way through conflicting political issues, provide support to women and families for childcare, get the State to acknowledge care as a social responsibility, and make care for the young child a national priority.

Commissioning research on ECCE

The ECCE indicators should be monitored through longitudinal research so that the policies can be backed by information and evidence.

Adequate Investment in ECCE

The above is only possible through adequate investment in ECCE and timely dispensation of funds.

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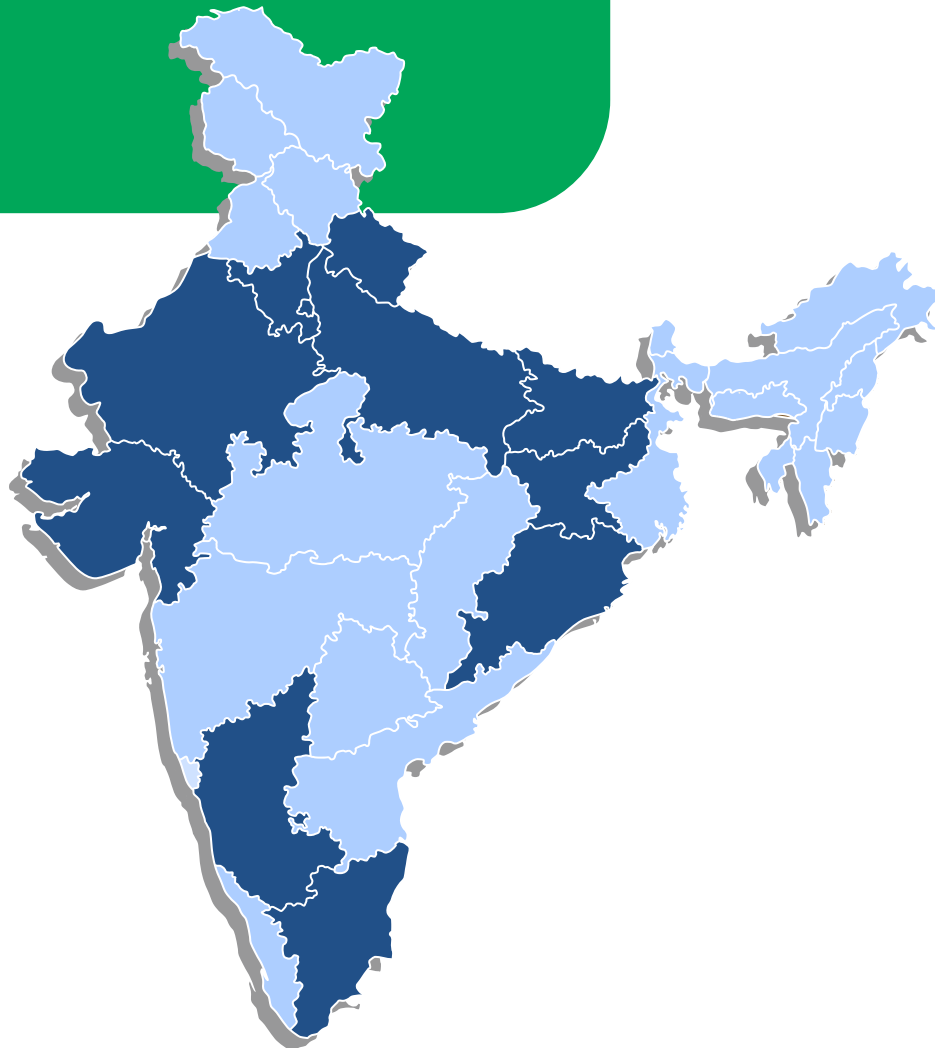
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FORCES Network

Forum for Creches and Childcare Services (FORCES) is a national network of organizations, trade unions, academia, state chapters and individual experts who are committed to working on the issues of overlapping rights of young children and their mothers/primary caregivers; especially focusing on children and women who live in multiple forms of poverty and deprivation. FORCES has its presence in 11 states of India.



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