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A strong foundation

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Among all levels of education, Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) is considered to be the most critical level for social (relationship with others), emotional (self image and security), cognitive (thinking and reasoning) and physical development of children.

Therefore, many countries have substantial investment for the early years of children`s education. Several world organisations and fora have also emphasised the provision of equal opportunities for young children for their potential growth and development. However, in ECED, emphasis is given on the holistic development of children.

In the 1980s, an additional dimension, i.e., “care” was added to ECED to broaden its framework. Later on, it was referred to as Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD). Various academics, practitioners and policy-makers use different terms such as Early Childhood Education (ECE), Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) according to their preferences, orientations and purposes. Nevertheless, the current emphasis of an ECE seems to be more on the holistic development of children by using a multidisciplinary approach to meet children`s needs in the area of health, nutrition, care and education. Development and education are considered to be essential dimensions of Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED).

The term “Early Childhood Education” is one that has recently come into common usage. However, its meaning has yet to be fully unpacked and understood. The Encyclopedia of Education (2000) defines ECE as concerned with the learning experiences of children below the age when compulsory schooling begins (usually age five or six).

But the most suitable definition is Early Childhood Education and Development is associated with pre-primary or nursery settings, focusing on the cognitive development and socialisation of children (three to eight years). Early Childhood is defined as a period from conception to eight

years. The emphasis is placed upon the holistic (physical, intellectual, social, moral, and emotional) development of children (AKU-PDCN, 2006).

However, in Pakistan the age range for ECE is from (three to eight) years according to the National Curriculum of ECE. The reason is that in Pakistan and in most developing countries, parents do not send their children to day care centres due to a lack of them. Although most are working mothers, the child is looked after by the extended family, mostly the grandparents, aunts and other close relatives. However, the trend is changing and now due emphasis is gradually being given to the Early Years (Shakil, 2002). There is an increasing amount of national and international evidence to show that quality ECE has a positive long-term effect upon children's later development (Dowling, 2000). Governments, worldwide, have at last begun to recognise that ECE matters. However, successful early education requires more than providing children with a few facts or cognitive skills. It is about empowering children and providing them with the opportunity to "learn how to learn". It is also about providing children with the resources to deal with challenges and failure and to help them understand that achievement is as much about persistence and motivation as it is about intelligence (Daly, 2006).

Keeping in mind the importance of ECED AKU-PDCN has initiated ECED programmes in the Northern Areas of Pakistan with other educational systems including, but not confined to, the Government Education Department, Aga Khan Education Service and other NGOs.

The PDCN's initiatives taken for the betterment of young children have repeatedly shown evidence that children participate actively in classroom activities and parental involvement is also increased. However, it is a beginning of the journey which requires lots of efforts, energy and team work. In order to achieve the target all stakeholders, e.g., teachers, parents and system representatives have to join their hands and establish a friendly ECED environment where young children as well as ECED teachers can feel secure and grow independently.

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