



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

The early years are of vital importance and State parties need to take special measures to protect children and to promote good living conditions based in the best interests of the child, in accordance with the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In this time dominated by the global pandemic, there are additional risks for young children. The pandemic is not only a virus, it is a huge human crisis and it is verified that children living in conditions of poverty, extreme poverty and inequality have worsened their situation. There are also indirect consequences that affect deeply children's lives and development, such as family deaths, fear, confinement, hunger, physical estrangement, increased violence and abuse, lack of moments for play and movement, and excessive exposure to screens. Although the context and everyday life for young children are quite different, OMEPE wants to highlight certain crucial points in the best interests of all children and their wellbeing around the world.

State parties are guarantors of the fulfilment of the Rights of the Child and have the duty to implement the necessary policies to protect and support children and families, in collaboration with local authorities and organizations. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) plays a fundamental role in this support.

- Young children are citizens and State parties must also consider their specific needs in the context of education, care, health, economy, and social support.
- Young children require the adoption of specific measures within the framework of the UNCRC. Each child has a right to express his or her views freely in all matters affecting him/her, and to have them considered. Their ideas, emotions, perspectives, interests, and needs must be considered within the framework of public policies and measures developed during the pandemic, overcoming the traditional adult-centric views.
- The pandemic has affected and changed the lives and routines for young children, often with huge limitations on the children's vital need to play, move and relate with their peers, and with reduced social contacts beyond the family.
- Children have the right to quality ECEC, which implies maintaining stable relationships with significant adults, caregivers, teachers and with their peers.
- The right to education during early childhood begins at birth and is linked to young children's right to maximum support to reach their full potential. For that, State parties and other actors must strengthen ECEC, assuring rich opportunities, even in this crisis.
- Young children learn by experiencing, playing, and exploring, along with other children and "significant others", using multiple languages and their body contact and movement to communicate with others.
- The educational policies must consider the importance of continuity of ECEC, through creative and wide proposals, strategies and materials; taking into account the need for play and movement of young children, they must not be exposed for long hours to screens, so that recommendations for the use of virtual tools to caregivers should be delivered.
- In response to the characteristics of the stage, ECEC develops methodologies focused on play, the involvement of the body as a way of experiencing, discovering, and investigating the environment, the manipulation of natural and cultural objects, and close human contact.
- The organization of the ECEC environments and scenarios is characterized by multifunctional activities provided with different materials, toys, furniture, allowing free movement, play, art expressions, recreation, and outdoor play, as well as hygienic practices, nurturing and rest.
- Due to the characteristics of the early years and the ways in which they build their emotional and affective relationships with the educators and their peer group, gestures, hugs, physical contact, body language and facial expression are needed.
- The principle of progressive autonomy implies that handwashing and other hygienic habits requires time and patience for a respectful development.

Based on the above considerations, State parties should:

- Include the consideration of children's perspectives in all matters that affect them. Their ideas, emotions, interests, and needs must be considered in the framework of public policies and measures developed during the pandemic and post-pandemic, overcoming traditional views focused on adults.
 - Assume that the opening and operation of ECEC centers for children cannot depend solely on a vision focused on health or in response to economic interests. Decisions should consider the experience and knowledge of educators and families, as well as other related sectors.
 - Build comprehensive solutions with intersectoral articulations to accompany and support families, protecting children's right to health, food security, recreation, and play, vital for their growth and development, preventing and intervening in situations of domestic violence and abuse.
 - Provide a comprehensive protection of the rights, addressing special measures for the most vulnerable groups: children in poverty, inequality, famine and armed conflict; children on migration, displaced, living in camps or imprisoned, children affected by climate change, pollution, environmental degradation and natural disasters; children affected by racism, xenophobia and gender discrimination; children suffering from sexual or labor exploitation.
 - Guide and train educators on distance education strategies and communication with families and children, both during the closure of the centers and in the implementation of protocols and new approaches in institutional projects for the reopening of institutions, ensuring the provision of the necessary materials and means.
 - Guarantee young children their right to health, giving continuity to regular check-ups, vaccinations, and timely care, especially attending to recurrent eruptive and respiratory diseases during cold seasons, as well as implementing prevention and promotion strategies for health-based education.
- Consider the importance of a good use of available technologies, through creative and comprehensive proposals, strategies and materials, taking into account, that young children should not be exposed to screens for long hours and, on the other hand, that there are deep inequalities in the access of technology devices and internet connections.

A NEW REALITY for Early Childhood

Finally, the COVID-19 crisis has shown how connected we are worldwide. We cannot continue supporting this civilizing model, which has led us to an unprecedented human, social, educational, economic, and environmental global crisis.

We must focus our responsibility on the present and future lives of our children, and this requires rebuilding the society we want. There is a possibility of creating a better world, but it needs collective and solidarity efforts based on the lessons of this crisis.

Children need a State, a family, and a civil society determined to promote an holistic and humanistic education and protect their dignity and rights.

OMEP wants to highlight the importance of creating a sustainable world for humanity and for the planet, and especially for children. We will continue working in solidarity to defend and maintain the progress made towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and SDG 4, convinced that education is the main tool for building a better world for all, leaving no one behind.

SIGNED BY: OMEP EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE