

Social science
that makes
a difference



The Impact of COVID-19 on Early Childhood Development: Theory and Practice

Dr Ntombizodumo Mkwanazi
Email: NMkwanazi@hsrc.ac.za

Outline

- Background
- Sustainable Development Goals and ECD
- Life Course Theory
- Conclusions
- Further Reading

Background

- Nutrition is vital for Early Childhood Development (ECD)
- Breastmilk is the first nutrition for the infant
- It has all nutrients and contains antibodies that enhance the infant's immune system
- COVID-19 resulted in confusion and mixed messages on the safety of breastmilk
- The World Health Organization's guidance has been for COVID-19 infected mothers to be supported to breastfeed
- To date no studies have found COVID-19 in breastmilk
- Breastmilk benefits outweigh potential transmission risks



Background cont...

- ECD is on both political and global agenda (Shawar & Shiffman 2017; Richter et al. 2017; 2018: Lancet Series)
- COVID-19 has resulted in disruptions in ECD and exacerbated the major existing inequalities in both LMICs and HICs
- Investing in the first 1000 days can alter a child's trajectory (Phillips & Shonkoff 2000)
- Parents, caregivers and families need to be supported in providing nurturing care and protection (Britto 2017: Lancet Series)

SDGs and ECD



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



SDGs and ECD

- The achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that seek to address these inequalities have been threatened by the outbreak of COVID-19
- SDGs provide a 'road map' that could be the guide if the world is to survive and thrive during and beyond COVID-19
- Of the 17 SDGs, seven directly impact on ECD (the foundation of all human development across the life course)

SDGs and ECD

- End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages
- Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning
- Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- Reduce inequality within and among countries

Life Course Theory (LCT)

LCT posits that:

- People's lives should be analysed within structural, social and cultural contexts
- All stages of a person's life are intricately intertwined with each other, with the lives of other people in society, and with past and future generations of their families
- Health and well-being depend on interactions between risk and protective factors throughout people's lives

LCT cont...

- A life course approach with a focus on early years has the potential to reduce health inequalities
- Transition periods such as ECD should be best utilized to ensure:
 - ✓ **Early action** for the best start in life including breastfeeding
 - ✓ **Appropriate** timing such as the first 1000 days, a critical period for rapid brain development
 - ✓ **Collective action** by the society including government, NGOs, civil society and academia to create healthy environments

15 ways to support young children and families during COVID-19 (The World Bank)

1. Emergency food delivery, including micronutrients
2. Provide pregnant women/new mothers counselling on health/breastfeeding/care during COVID-19
3. Use health and nutrition platforms to deliver messages on coping, parenting and early stimulation
4. Promote family handwashing and hygiene, particularly in low-resource environments
5. Targeted childcare and psychosocial support for essential workers on the frontline of the crisis
6. Distribute books, learning and play materials to homes or through community resource centres
7. Integrate early childhood education (ECE) into basic education distance learning programmes
8. Educational entertainment for young children delivered through radio/TV/internet/social media
9. Ensure ECE includes mass re-enrolment campaigns and hygiene protocols for young children
10. Expand cash transfers, child grants and social safety nets to promote ECD
11. Support parents with coping, stress management and parenting strategies delivered via phones/radio/TV/internet/social media . Provide information to frontline workers to
12. Respond to child protection and mental health issues
13. Set up support services for women and children experiencing domestic violence and abuse
14. Ensure information campaigns integrate key messages to promote ECD and nurturing care related to nutrition, health, stimulation and learning, violence prevention and psychosocial support
15. Agriculture extension programmes offer opportunities to reach young children and families with services and information

Source: World Bank 2020

Conclusions

- Mothers with COVID-19 need to be supported to continue breastfeeding
- Disruptions in children's schooling, immunizations and nutrition due to COVID-19 are threatening ECD
- COVID-19-related awareness can accompany ECD awareness and support for parental well-being and responsive caregiving
- The negative effects will not only impact the entire life course of the child, but also the future generations
- Collective action is urgently required from all sectors to mitigate these effects whilst the world move towards the road-to-recovery



Further reading

1. Yoshikawa et al. (2020). Effects of the Global Coronavirus Disease-2019 Pandemic on Early Childhood Development: Short- and Long-Term Risks and Mitigating Program and Policy Actions DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2020.05.020>
2. World Health Organization (2018). The life course approach: from theory to practice. Case stories from two small countries in Europe. https://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/374359/life-course-iceland-malta-eng.pdf?ua=1
3. Aagaard-Hansen et al. (2019). What are the public health implications of the life course perspective? <https://doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2019.1603491>
4. Schwarzenberg & Georgieff (2018) <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-3716>
5. The Minsk Declaration <https://www.euro.who.int/en/publications/policy-documents/the-minsk-declaration>
6. Y-Ling Chi et al. (2020). “Beyond COVID-19: A Whole of Health Look at Impacts During the Pandemic Response.” CGD Policy Paper 177. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/beyond-covid-19-whole-health-lookimpacts-during-pandemic-response>

Thank You!

