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Linda Richter

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The Nurturing Care Framework: From Policies to Parents

Linda M. Richter

When most people think of early childhood development, what comes to mind is preprimary school learning; similarly, when they think about how best to ensure a child turns out well, their thoughts turn to adolescents. The FrameWorks Institute in Washington, DC, calls this “aging up,” a phenomenon that has been demonstrated as a bias in policy and public thinking in several countries, including South Africa (Richter, Tomlinson, Watt, Hunt, & Lindland, 2019). Yet it is the earliest period of life, from conception to two to three years of age, that most strongly regulates our trajectory across the course of our lives (Shonkoff, Richter, van der Gaag, & Bhutta, 2012) and that influences how children cope with early formal learning and the challenges of adolescence.

This earliest period of life is less visible because it plays out in the privacy of homes and child care centers, and it is most directly influenced by the quality of relationships between young children and their parents and caregivers. Until quite recently it wasn't clear what the issues during this period were and how they could be addressed (Shawar & Shiffman, 2017). However, the 2017 publication of the *Lancet* series *Advancing Early Childhood Development: From Science to Scale* accelerated a growing convergence between scientific evidence and political commitment on the importance of addressing poverty, inequality, and social exclusion, starting at the beginning of life.

Across three comprehensive reviews (Black et al., 2017; Britto et al., 2017; Richter et al., 2017), the series assembled evidence to show that the foundations for brain and mental development are laid down during the first few years of life, with demonstrable benefits and disadvantages over the long term for health, well-being, learning, and earning. Very large numbers of children in low- and middle-income countries—an estimated 250,000,000, or 43% of all children under the age of five—are at risk of not reaching their human potential because they experience adverse conditions during early development: extreme poverty (living on less than USD 1.90 a day) and undernutrition, leading to stunted growth. Risk is highest in sub-Saharan Africa, where some 60% of young children are exposed to such conditions, and higher in rural regions than in urban areas. A poor start in life comes at great cost to individuals, who are predicted to earn nearly a third less than other adults in their society, as well as to societies as a whole. Some countries, such as Ethiopia, Madagascar, India, and Pakistan, will likely lose more in human potential in the future as a result of stunting than their governments currently spend on health care.

The series distilled the current knowledge of what can be done, and of how and by whom, and prompted the Nurturing Care Framework (World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, & World Bank Group, 2018). The framework proposes a continuum of nested activities essential to the developmental integrity of young children (see Figure 1). All children need to receive health care and good nutrition, be kept safe and secure, have opportunities for early learning, and be cared for by

affectionate and responsive caregivers. On a day-by-day basis, nurturing care is provided by parents, families, and caregivers. In turn, they are helped by supportive services, both formal and informal. At the macro level, all families, especially the most vulnerable, need an enabling environment of supportive government policies. These include parental leave, child care, and financial support when needed. Most countries (with the exception of the United States of America), provide paid maternity leave, and an increasing number also provide paid paternity leave. In 2018, 75% of men and 48% of women worldwide were employed or looking for work. Many more women in poor countries work in the informal sector, trading, waste picking, sewing, or doing laundry at home. This work keeps them busy at, or away from, home—illustrating the need of most families for affordable, quality child care.

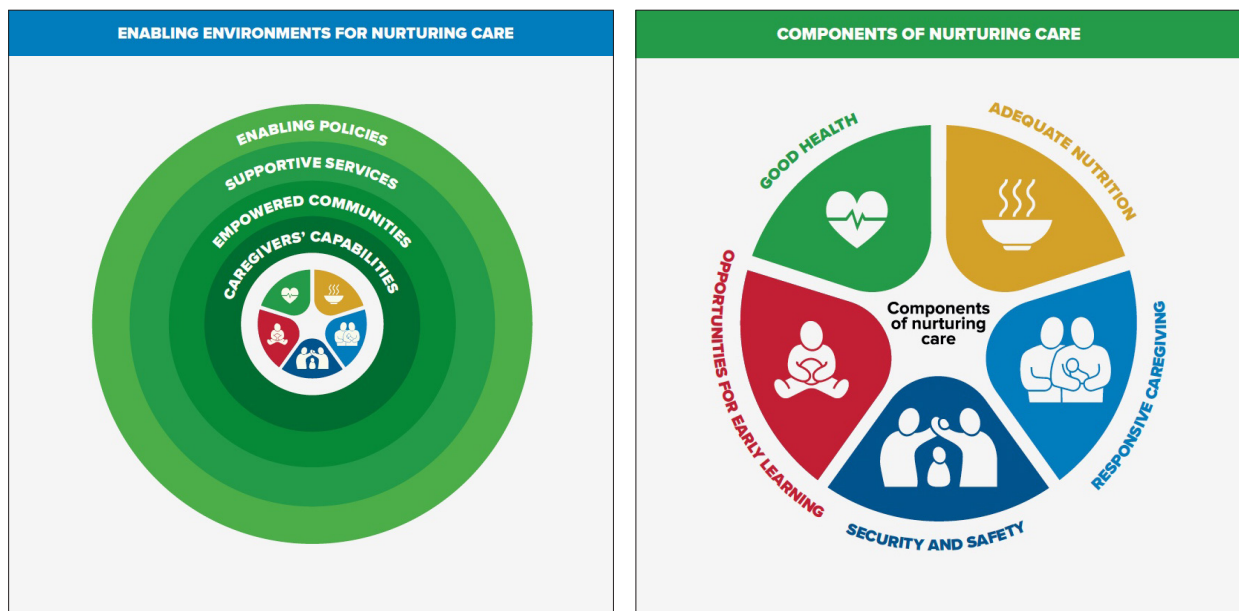


Figure 1. The Nurturing Care Framework

Source: World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, and World Bank Group, 2018, *Nurturing care for early childhood development: A framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential* (p. 17 and p. 12), Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.

The health sector has an important role to play in fostering and supporting nurturing care. The most frequent contacts with pregnant women and families with young children occur in that sector, and many existing health services and child care practices—notably kangaroo care, breastfeeding, and nutritional supplementation for women and young children—have measurable benefits for childhood development (Vaivada, Gaffey, & Bhutta, 2017). In addition, there are many examples that show that interventions to promote responsive caregiving and early learning can be integrated into health services in centers and in the community, with positive effects on young children's development (Peacock-Chambers, Ivy, & Bair-Merritt, 2017; Walker et al., 2018).

Most encouraging is the fact that in several low- and middle-income countries, programs to promote early childhood development are being scaled up to the national level, paid for by governments and secured

by legislation. For example, India's Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), inspired by Head Start and started in 1975, provided one or more of six services to more than 110,000,000 pregnant women and young children in 2016 (Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, 2016). The Chilean program Chile Crece Contigo is almost universal, reaching more than 80% of the country's poor children and families. In 2014 Brazil launched Criança Feliz, which is currently reaching about half of all poor families with young children in that country. The Brazilian program is unique in that it has been set up to include a rigorous evaluation of its effects on children's development through a comparison of communities reached by it, in a staggered design. In all of these programs, political commitment to human development, starting early, is key.

A significant milestone was the adoption in 2018, by the 20 richest countries in the world, the G20, of the Initiative for Early Childhood Development. The opening paragraph of the Initiative's declaration states that "We [the G20] are convinced that early childhood is one of the most significant and influential phases of life - especially the first 1,000 days. It determines the basis for every child's future health, well-being, learning and earnings potential, and sets the groundwork for young children's emotional security, cultural and personal identity, and for developing competencies, resilience and adaptability" (G20, 2018). The document concludes with commitments to collaborations to fund and support multisectoral early childhood development programs, especially in low- and middle-income countries. As a benchmark, funding equal to 1% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been proposed, with a recommendation that rich countries and donors assist poorer countries to achieve it (Richter et al., 2018).

The challenge ahead is to design a minimum package of services for all young children that is supported by solid scientific evidence and that is both sufficiently specific and flexible enough for diverse country conditions. In 2018, the World Bank costed out a package to address children's early development and learning needs, comprising prenatal health care, birth assistance, immunizations, micronutrients, quality preschool, birth registration, and information for (and presumably services to support) parents regarding the importance of breastfeeding and early stimulation (World Bank Group, 2019, p. 128). However, more work has to be done to design a package specific to the zero to three age group that includes affordable high-quality child care. In addition, it is important that governments and civil society increasingly accept and act on early childhood development as a critical component of investment in human health and capital.

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About the Author



Linda Richter, a developmental psychologist, is the author or co-author of more than 400 papers and chapters on basic and policy research in child and family development. She led the 2017 Lancet Series, *Advancing Early Child Development: From Science to Scale*, and is engaged in related follow-up implementation activities including the development of the Nurturing Care Framework and the Early Childhood Development Country Profiles as part of Countdown to 2030. Linda led the development of South Africa's National Integrated Early Child Development Policy and Programme, adopted by Cabinet in 2015, and is the Principal Investigator of several large-scale, long-term collaborative projects, including a birth cohort study of 3,273 South African children followed up for 28 years.