Early Childhood Care and Education with special reference to Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract

The first six years of life are crucial for human development because during this time, development occurs at a rate that is faster than it is at any other point in the life cycle. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) provides a supportive and stimulating environment for children during these foundational stages of lifelong learning, which benefits children's long-term development and learning. In India, families prioritize their young children and promote fundamental values in them through customary child care methods that are usually shared by all family members, specially the women. However, due to the nuclear family system, women's increased employment, education, and urbanization over the past few decades, there have been changes in both the family structure and the social context. As a result, no one is home today to look after the small children. Care for young children during their early childhood years and get them ready for formal schooling is therefore perceived as necessary. Besides ECCE, teaching kids mathematics, reading, and writing skills is crucial as these are necessary for formal school preparation. These days, early childhood care and education (ECCE) is universally acknowledged as an essential component for overall development of the child.

This paper aims to study the current status of ECCE in the India and UT of Jammu and Kashmir. The proposed paper also aim to study the beneficiaries given under the ECCE programme . Through this paper researcher also try to highlight the challenges faced by ECCE in the UT of Jammu and Kashmir and various initiatives started by government of India and J&K government for implanting ECCE programs.

Keywords: Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Education, Development, Challenges.

Introduction

The first six years of a child's life are widely recognized as the most crucial for lifelong development because during this time, children develop the cognitive, motor, social, and emotional skills that set the stage for holistic growth and lifelong learning. Early childhood is defined as the important first six years of life, with distinct sub-stages (conception to birth, birth to three years, and three years to six years) that have needs specific to the age group in accordance with the life cycle approach. It's the time of greatest growth and development and is essential to existence. (ECCE policy 2013)

Sub stages of ECCE:-

- **Conceptions to birth**:-Maternal counseling, safe childbirth, maternity entitlements, child protection, and non-discrimination.
- **Birth to three years**:- survival, safety, protective environment, health care, nutrition including infant and young child feeding practices for the first six months, attachment to an adult, opportunity for psycho-social stimulation and early interaction in safe, nurturing and stimulating environments within the home and appropriate child care centres .
- **Three to six years**: Protection from hazards, health care, nutrition, attachment to an adult, developmentally appropriate play-based preschool education with a structured and planned school readiness component for 5 to 6 year olds.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) provides a supportive and stimulating environment by fulfilling age specific needs of children during these formative years of life which benefits their long-term development and learning. Early life experiences shape a child's developing brain and create neural connections that serve as the foundation for language, reasoning, problem solving, social skills, behavior, and emotional well-being (Rhode Island Kids Count, 2005, p. 6). Therefore, Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) (2013, p. 8) envisaged, "in order to improve learning outcomes and sustain them in the long run, early years may be the best place to invest. ". That can be done by providing quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to all children.). According to the Asia-Pacific End of Decade Notes on Education for All 2012, created by the United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) refers to a range of processes and mechanisms that sustain and support development during period between birth and 8 years of life. It encompasses education, physical, social and emotional care, intellectual stimulation, health care and nutrition" (p.4) Early Childhood Care and Education aims to support a child's optimal development of their full potential and establish the foundation for holistic growth and lifetime learning.

The overall priorities of Early Childhood Care and Education are:

- Ensure every child receives respect, appreciation, safety, and the development of a positive self-concept.
- Depending on the abilities of each child, provide solid foundations for their physical and motor development.
- Develop good eating habits, exercise, grooming, and self-care practices.
- Allow efficient communication and encourage the use of both expressive and receptive language.
- Encourage integration and growth of the senses
- Encourage intellectual curiosity and enhance philosophical comprehension of the surroundings by providing opportunities for research, analysis, and experimentation.
- Develop emotional stability, interpersonal skills, and cognitive abilities
- Develop an awareness of aesthetics and encourage creative learning.
- Instill in yourself the basic human values of respect and compassion, as well as behaviors that are healthy for your culture and stage of development.
- Easeful transfer from home to ECCE center to formal schooling.

Importance of ECCE

ECCE plays an important role in the development of Children. It helps nurture their early learning and provide a strong foundation for their future education. ECCE centers include preschools, nurseries, kindergartens, Montessori schools, Anganwadi, Balwadi, crèches, laboratory nursery schools, co-operative nursery school and day care centers. These are managed by either the Government or NGO or private organisations.

The importance of ECCE can be highlighted by the following points:

- **Learning begins at birth :** Early life experiences lay the groundwork for all further education. It is the initial phase of the foundation. Early childhood is the time when learning is most advanced. The child's learning process is greatly aided by ECCE.
- **Smooth transition to primary school:** Strong early foundations that can guarantee a smooth transition to primary education include good health, nutrition, and a nurturing environment. The National Policy on Education (NPE-1986/1992), realizing the critical importance of ECE, in an unprecedented way acknowledged ECE as a program essential to human development and as a means of promoting universalisation of elementary education.
- **Helpful to disadvantaged sections of people:** The disadvantaged sections are compensated by ECCE. Preschool programs that focus on feeding, health care, hand and head exercises, and both structured and

unstructured play support for mental development. Preschools assist the children of low-income families in overcoming their difficult circumstances by promoting the development of young children and helping them to develop coping mechanisms through innovative childcare programs. Interaction between various environments is crucial. Female literacy remains lower even after 77 years of independence and per capita income is extremely low, a sizeable portion of the population lives in poverty, and the human development index is in poor shape. Many of our homes don't offer the best environment for a child's overall development in their early years because of these factors. Under the supervision of a teacher, the ECCE centers offer these developmental opportunities to children

- **Reduction in poverty**: It is common knowledge that, due to socioeconomic pressures, both parents work these days and spend all or most of the day apart from their children. One key tool for decreasing poverty is ECCE. Family members can go to work because ECCE centers provide free meals, vaccinations, and education for children, relieving them of the responsibility of caring for the young children (ages 0–6) at home. They can escape poverty because parents do not have to spend money on their kids' food, health care, or education. As one develops their earning potential throughout life, the appropriate knowledge, attitudes, and skills acquired through ECE are highly beneficial.
- **Emotional support:** Early emotional support helps them feel more secure both physically and personally. The bonds between families should be strengthened at this time. By planning different activities like clay modeling, paper tearing, finger printing, and crayoning, ECCE helps to instill positive emotions and channel the negative emotions in the right direction.
- **Improvement in primary education:** Enrollment in ECCE programs facilitates the smooth adjustment to primary education. ECCE can increase primary education's effectiveness by lowering dropout rates . While it is expected to give the child the necessary experience and maturation to meet the demands of the primary curriculum, it also has an indirect effect on girls' enrollment and retention in primary schools by serving as a substitute care facility for younger siblings attending ECCE .
- **Support to parents:** Enrollment in ECCE programs facilitates the smooth adjustment to primary education. Reduced dropout rates mean better outcomes for ECCE programs. These programs give parents and other caregivers access to parental education and other forms of support, which enhance adult learning and skill development. Early childhood is a life stage with the same rights and significance as any other, and understanding this is essential for the successful transitions of young children. It's a time when societies help children cross new levels, not just a training ground for growing older. Children are primed for the next stage of life by their peers, families, and communities.
- **Promotion of girls' education:** Gender inequality is a problem. One useful tool for advancing gender equality is ECCE. Elder sisters typically take care of their siblings, so they don't finish their elementary schooling. The older sisters are able to finish their education by enrolling the younger children in preschools. ECCE thus encourages girls' education.
- **Meeting needs of changing family structure:** Joint families disappeared. Elders and siblings were responsible for caring for the younger ones in the past. Small families consisting of a husband, wife, and child have replaced joint families as a result of modernization. As a result, ECCE is absolutely necessary to look after the kids while supporting the parents in maintaining their careers and household responsibilities.
- **Developmental perspectives:** Compared to older children and adults, children's motor, physical, social, cognitive, and emotional functioning is different. As a result, it requires a unique setting, with ECCE being viewed as a comprehensive intervention supporting physical, mental, and social development. The National Policy on Education advised against the risks of limiting education to the teaching of the 3 Rs. and stressed the importance of making it play-based. The term "early childhood development program" has become a universal term, emphasizing the holistic and integrated concept of ECE.
- **Foundation for personality development**:- The early years establish the foundation for later stages of personality development. Early life experiences shape an individual's habits, attitudes, interests, and level of trust in other people and the world. Early life must be demanding and full of learning opportunities for healthy personality development. Early childhood education in an ECCE center is the best way to provide rich and challenging experiences.
- **Social equality**:- Social inequality is pervasive. When compared to children who are socially advanced, children who are socially backward do not have equal opportunities. By facilitating interactions between kids from various castes and classes, a preschool (ECCE center) promotes social equality .

- **Best child care services:-** ECCE is the best service offered by the government, non-profit organizations, and private sector because it combines programs for development, feeding, health, and education at the same time.
- **Group activity:-** Children love to interact with other children. After two or three years, they start to value their peer group more and more. Preschool provides an opportunity for a child to play with other children, which helps them learn social skills like sharing, waiting for their turn, cooperating with others, and others.
- **Investment in human resource development:-**Today, it is widely accepted that any country's economic development requires investments in human resource development as well. Given that human development proceeds on a continuum and that development is fundamentally cumulative, funding initiatives for children in the 0–6 age range become extremely important because they lay the foundation for both for basic education and lifelong learning and development .

Early childhood care and education plays very important role. Early childhood education (ECCE) is a continuous process that invests in basic education and lifelong learning. It helps children develop physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually, acquire good habits, adjust to others, promote independence, and contribute to individual and family upliftment, literacy, and nation development. ECCE also supports working parents by providing a safe and nurturing environment for their children. The Indian government has implemented several measures to promote quality, including policies, plans, acts, constitutional amendments, the creation of curriculum frameworks and quality standards, schemes, and flagship programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). India may have compromised on the non-negotiable ECCE quality standards, which has resulted in the emergence of both anticipated and unforeseen problems and difficulties. Consequently, the nation has failed to meet its goal of guaranteeing ECCE quality. But new research indicates that significant progress has been made in the direction of quality reforms. Of course, there are shortcomings in certain areas and in some aspects of the work, but there has also been progress in other areas, demonstrating that maintaining quality is a goal that can be attained.

Early Childhood Care and Education: A global perspective

Early childhood is a complex concept with many names and definitions used by different countries, stakeholders, and organizations. For instance, early childhood education is referred to as early childhood care and education (ECCE) by UNESCO, early childhood education and care (ECEC) by the OECD, early child development (ECD) by the World Bank, and early childhood development (ECD) by UNICEF. ECCE has long been present in all spheres of global society. However, in the 21st century, the world officially acknowledged its importance, which prompted us to outline international obligations for it. Three key stepping stones in this endeavor were the Education for All (EFA) movement, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948. The World Education Forum in 2000 adopted the "Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All," and the Jomtien World Conference on Education for All in 1990 adopted the "World Declaration on Education for All" and the "Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs." These events marked turning points in the global EFA movement. UNESCO started the Education for All Global Monitoring Reports in succession to aid in these efforts. According to EFA GMR 2008 “programmes for under-3s that include nutrition, health and cognitive components have a positive impact on child well-being. Yet, only 53% of the world’s countries have an official ECCE programme targeting this age group”. In many countries “governments often view the care and education of very young children as the responsibility of families and/or private providers. As a result, there are few national frameworks for financing, coordinating and supervising ECCE programmes (UNESCO, 2007, p. 11). However, the report in 2015 revealed, since 2000, the focus on ECCE has increased in both poor and rich countries. Early Childhood Education (ECE) services have also expanded considerably (UNESCO, 2015a). With this expansion, slowly the focus moved towards improving the quality of ECCE and making it free and compulsory, especially for disadvantaged children. Therefore, equitable and early investment in quality of the ECCE services and programs became vital concern. Recognising this, the World Education Forum 2015 adopted the ‘Incheon Declaration for Education 2030’, that encouraged the “provision of at least one year of free and compulsory quality pre-primary education and access to quality early childhood development, care and education for all children” (UNESCO,

2015b, p. 7). A lot of countries now prioritize ECCE quality assurance. To track down this worldwide commitment, they are working very hard. One of the nations pursuing this goal through numerous initiatives is India.

Early Childhood Care and Education: Indian context

In India, early childhood education institutions were first founded in the 19th century, just before the country achieved its independence (Swaminathan, 1992). In order to meet the needs of Indian elites and British rulers, these institutions were essentially built on the models of Froebellian kindergartens and British infant schools. Traditionally, a typical child received their childcare mostly from extended family members or through informal childcare arrangements. In spite of these kinds of initiatives, the concept of early childhood care and Education as well as the formal childcare sector expanded very slowly in India. Preserving children from the threat of poverty was the primary driving force behind the need for early childhood care and post-independence interventions. It also encouraged women to enter the workforce in order to ensure that all sections received high-quality education (Pattnaik, 1996 & Sharma et al., 2008). In order to provide comprehensive services primarily to the impoverished segment of society between the ages of 0 – 6years, the Indian government launched the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program in 1975. UNICEF, an international organization, was instrumental in providing ICDS with material and technical support, including growth charts, IFA tablets, photocopying machines, typewriters, and jeeps.

Objectives of the study

1. To study the current status of ECCE in India and the UT of J&K.
2. To study the status of Beneficiaries under the ECCE programs.
3. To study the various challenges in implementation of ECCE programs in J&K.
4. To suggest few measures for effective implementation of ECCE programmes in J&K.

Methodology

The present study is based on secondary data. The data was gathered from the reports of MoWCD and the National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy (2013). The additional data was also gathered from books, journals, and other sources.

Analysis and discussions

Current status of ECCE in India and the UT of J&K

According to the 2011 census, 158.7 percent of the population is between the ages of 0-6years, making it difficult to serve them (ECCE Policy, 2013). Since 90% of a child's brain develops during the first five years of life, it is common knowledge that this period promotes rapid learning. The most empirical aspect of a person's personality is derived from their perceptions of events over a period of 0–6 years. This includes their emotions, moral principles, and interpersonal and situational skills. The term Early childhood care and education is not new at all. According to its historical cultural legacy, the early years are typically seen as the primary time for instilling in children the fundamental values and abilities. The majority of a child's early upbringing and education took the form of stories that were passed down from generation to generation within families, and this care and education was informal. Nowadays, kids can play in the sand and mud, and toys made of wood, clay, or mud can also help kids develop their fine motor skills without causing them worry or anxiety. But as time went on, these tried-and-true methods of child care expanded, and contemporary offerings emerged. Even though we are highly skilled at providing early childhood care and education, we quickly abandoned the outdated, inferior methods and embraced new, western approaches and theories with very little knowledge and even less training. A reduction in joint to nuclear families was one of the other factors contributing to the change. Parental responsibilities moved from many family members and became entrenched in the shoulders of the mothers and fathers. The idea of organized preschool education began to take off when they began to look for assistance from outside organizations. When Madam

Montessori visited India, she had the opportunity to meet Mahatma Gandhi. They both shared the same views regarding the Indianized version of the Montessori method, which ultimately resulted in the first preschool education center being established in Gujarat. Although there has been significant progress in the last 60–70 years, there is still insufficient funding to allow us to consider ourselves proficient in the early childhood care and education sector. Primary education is prioritized over early childhood education, and it frequently receives less attention when it comes to regulations and teacher preparation. In order to transfer practical knowledge, it must be simple to comprehend, avoid abrupt disruptions, and the student should take pleasure in their time in school.

The current situation of Early childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India and J&K focused on improving the quality and accessibility of serving for young children. The government has implemented the National early childhood care and education(ECCE) policy,which aim to provide comprehensive care and education for children up to the age of 6 years.The Integrated Child Development Services(ICDS) program plays a crucial role in delivering ECCE services, including anganwadi centres that offer nutrition, health and learning support. It is essential to examine the current status of ECCE in India and the UT of J&K to identify areas for improvement and address the challenges faced in implementing these policies effectively in India and the UT of Jammu and Kashmir. The current status of the ECCE in India and the UT of J&K Can be interpreted through the enrollment of students in different pre-schools and schools.

Table 1: **Percentage of Children enrolled in different type of pre-schools and schools by 2022 in India**

Age	Pre-school			School			Not in pre-school or school	Total
	Anganwadi	Govt Pre-primary	Pvt LKG/ UKG	Govt	Pvt	Other		
Age 3	66.8	1.3	7.7	1.9	0.6	0.1	21.7	100
Age 4	61.2	2.7	18.1	3.8	1.8	0.1	12.3	100
Age 5	35.3	3.4	23.4	24.6	7.3	0.4	5.5	100
Age 6	8.2	2.1	13.8	57.1	15.7	0.5	2.6	100

Source: ASER Report (2022)

Table 2: Percentage of Children enrolled in different type of pre-schools and schools by 2022 in J&K

Age	Pre-school			School			Not in pre-school or school	Total
	Anganwadi	Govt Pre-primary	Pvt LKG/ UKG	Govt	Pvt	Other		
Age 3	63.6	4.6	13.7	2.1	1.1	0.5	14.4	100
Age 4	39.4	15.1	31.2	3.8	3.3	0.3	6.9	100
Age 5	11.4	22.4	41.7	14.8	8.0	0.0	1.6	100
Age 6	2.8	13.3	34.0	30.7	18.6	0.0	0.6	100

Source: ASER Report (2022)

In terms of the growth in the number of operational projects and Anganwadi Centers (AWCs), there has been a notable advancement in the implementation of Anganwadi Services under the Umbrella ICDS Scheme during the XI and XII Plans.

Table 3: The year-wise trend in coverage of beneficiaries (as on 31.03.2022) is indicated below:

Year ending	No. of operational		Number of Beneficiaries(in lakh)	
	Projects	AWCs	Supplementary Nutrition Program	Pre-School Education
31.03.2017	7074	13,54,792	983.42	340.52
31.03.2018	7075	13,63,021	892.77	325.91
31.03.2019	7075	13,72,872	875.61	301.92
31.03.2020	7075	13,81,376	855.05	245.04
31.03.2021	7075	13,87,432	831.83	230.38
31.03.2022	7075	13,91,004	949.94	285.82

Source: Ministry of Women and Child development report (2022-23)

The number of operational AWCs reported as on 31th march 2022 is 13,91,004.The number of beneficiaries[Children (6 months to 6 years) and pregnant Women & Lactating Mothers]for Supplementary Nutrition Program reported as on 31th march 2022 is 949.94 lakh. The number of beneficiaries [Children (3 to 6 years)] Pre-School Education Program reported as on 31 march 2022 is 285.82 Lakh.

Table 4: Beneficiaries (children) under the SNP and PSE under Anganwadi service scheme in different states/UT of India by 31.03.2022 is indicated below:-

States/UTs	Beneficiaries of Supplementary Nutrition [Children (6months -6 years)+P&LM]	Beneficiaries of Pre-School education (Children 3 -6 years)
Andhra Pradesh	3195634	918768
Arunachal Pradesh	181587	87120
Assam	3724709	1716760
Bihar	10026587	3905485
Chhattisgarh	2598568	854030
Goa	77118	0
Gujarat	4103158	1641131
Haryana	1257388	359274
Himachal Pradesh	484497	117597
Jharkhand	3747609	1016446
Karnataka	4806744	1834621
Kerala	1488386	537338
Madhya Pradesh	6932661	2750740
Maharashtra	7638084	2421736
Manipur	392651	0
Meghalaya	545343	230759
Mizoram	131482	22279
Nagaland	410312	180819
Odisha	4023086	1731916
Punjab	1221764	344960
Rajasthan	4859324	1488690
Sikkim	21933	7435
Tamil Nadu	3481133	819922
Telangana	1972233	565879
Tripura	366771	176387
Uttar Pradesh	16251139	4025343

Uttarakhand	762516	262835
West Bengal	8335893	0
A & N Islands	19701	16782
Chandigarh	59431	24242
Dadra & N Haveli and Daman & Diu	40417	15842
Delhi	881463	257948
Jammu & Kashmir	**886493**	**232751**
Ladakh	21673	9235
Lakshadweep	4935	1063
Puducherry	41983	6076
All India	**94994406**	**28582209**

Source: Ministry of Women and Child development report(2022-23)

As per the report of the Ministry of Women and Child Development (2022-23) in the country of India, **a** total of 94994406 beneficiaries (Children 6 months -6 years plus P&LM) are covered under the beneficiaries of supplementary nutrition and 28582209 children aged 6 months to 6 years are covered under the beneficiaries of preschool education.

Table 5:- The year-wise trend in coverage of beneficiaries (as on 31.03.2022) in the UT of J&K is indicated below:

Year ending	**No. of operational**		**Number of Beneficiaries**	
	Projects	**AWCs**	**Supplementary Nutrition Program**	**Pre-School Education**
31.03.2019	141	29599	774656	274351
31.03.2020	128	28460	444585	231351
31.03.2021	128	28460	770680	0
31.03.2022	128	28078	886493	232751

Source: Ministry of Women and Child development report

The number of operational AWCs reported as on 31th march 2022 in the UT of J&K is 28078.The number of beneficiaries [Children (6 months to 6 years) and pregnant Women & Lactating Mothers]for Supplementary Nutrition Program reported as on 31th march 2022 is 886493. The number of beneficiaries [Children (3 to 6 years)] Pre-School Education Program reported as on 31 march 2022 is 232751.

Initiatives started by Government of India and UT of J&K:

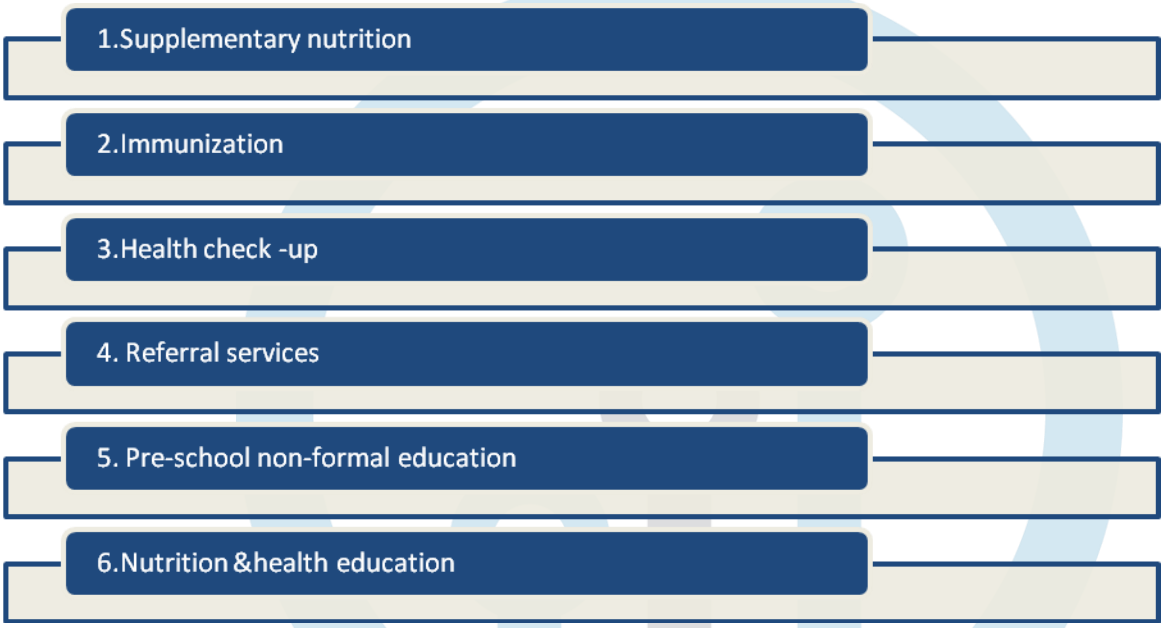
Following are the government initiatives that are headed in the direction of ECCE:-

Integrated Child Development service scheme:-The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme is one of the world's largest programs for early childhood care and education. Launched on 2 October 1975, the ICDS Scheme is currently among the biggest and most distinctive early childhood development programs in the world. India's response to the challenge of providing preschool education on the one hand and ending the cycle of malnutrition, morbidity, reduced learning capacity, and mortality on the other is embodied in the International Child Development Society (ICDS), which is the leading symbol of India's commitment to her children.

- To improve the nutritional and health status of children in the age-group 0-6 years;
- To lay the foundation for proper psychological, physical and social development of the child;
- To reduce the incidence of mortality, morbidity, malnutrition and school dropout;

- To achieve effective co-ordination of policy and implementation amongst the various departments to promote child development; and
- To enhance the capability of the mother to look after the normal health and nutritional needs of the child through proper nutrition and health education.

The following services are included in the package that aims to accomplish the objectives mentioned above:



The concept of delivering a package of services is primarily founded on the understanding that if the various services grow in an integrated way, the overall impact will be much greater because the effectiveness of a given service depends on the support it receives from related services.

Services	Target Group	Service provided by
Supplementary Nutrition	Children below 6 years Pregnant &lactating mother	Anganwadi worker and Anganwadi helper.
Immunization	Children below 6 years Pregnant & lactating mother	ANM/MO
Health Check –up	Children below 6 years Pregnant & lactating mother	ANM/MO/AWW
Referral services	Children below 6 years Pregnant & lactating mother	AWW/ANM/MO
Pre-School Education	Children 3-6 years	AWW
Nutrition & Health Education	Women(15-45 years)	AWW/ANM/MO

Source:- https://wcd.nic.in/integrated-child-development-services-icds-scheme

Poshan (Prime Minister Overarching Scheme For Holistic Nourishment) Abhiyaan :- On March 8, 2018, the Government of India launched Poshan Abhiyaan, a flagship program.On International Women's Day, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi introduces it in Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan. Poshan Abhiyaan and his partner financed by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and government budgetary support. The primary objective of the Poshan Abhiyaan is to improve the nutritional status of children under six years old, women who are pregnant, and nursing mothers. Abhiyaan has worked to accomplish goals such as lowering low birth weight and reducing stunting, anemia, and undernutrition in children, women, and teenage girls.

Additionally, it intensifies their emphasis on preparing Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) to use ICT-based tools, which simplify program administration and supervision. Anganwadi workers, or AWWs, are mandated

to document the beneficiaries' personal information, monitor the growing baby in real time during pregnancy, and record the newborn's height and weight on the mobile phones that are given to them. The people who are at risk must then receive follow-up SMS alerts from them. The five main focuses of Poshan Abhiyaan are sanitation, hygiene, diarrhea control, and the prevention of anemia in women, girls, and children.

National Early Childhood Care and Education policy (2013):- The National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy was approved by the Indian government in 2013. The National ECCE Curriculum Framework and the Quality Standards for ECCE are also considered components of the Policy framework. All children under the age of six will have universal access to high-quality early childhood education, according to the policy. The vision of the policy is to, "achieve holistic development and active learning capacity of all children below six years of age by promoting free, universal, inclusive, equitable, joyful and contextualised opportunities for laying foundation and attaining full potential." The main focuses of the policy are equitable and inclusive access, raising quality, bolstering capacity, research and documentation, advocacy, and raising awareness. Since families are the best environments for caring for young children, the policy places the utmost emphasis on enhancing family capabilities to protect and care for the child.

National Creche Scheme:- The National Creche Scheme is an initiative for children that is funded centrally and was started by the Ministry of Women and Child Development. In order to provide day care for children under six years old whose mothers are working.

Scheme of Nutrients' supplement:- The National Health Mission is in charge of carrying out this program, which supplies micronutrients like vitamin and iron supplements. The primary focus of this plan is the prevalence of anemia in the nation. Beneficiaries if this schema is children of 0-6 years of age and malnourished children in the state.

Right to Education act :- The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009 establishes the legal framework for implementing the right to education under Article 21 A. Although this law primarily relates to elementary education, state governments are not required to offer early childhood care and education (Section 11). The RTE further requires that the entry class for admissions and reservations under the RTE be pre-school in cases where schools offer preschool education (Section 12). Consequently, it is mandatory for all schools that offer early childhood education to provide free and compulsory preschool education.

POSHAN 2.0 :- In February 2021, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman introduced Mission Poshan 2.0. The mission is to prevent further declines in nutrition indices. In order to achieve this goal, the government has chosen to concentrate on and finance the integration of a range of nutritional programs across the country. Mission POSHAN 2.0 brings together the Anganwadi Services, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Supplementary Nutrition Programme, POSHAN Abhiyan and Scheme for Adolescent Girls and National Crèche Scheme.

Challenges faced in the implementation of ECCE programmes in J&K

In the UT of Jammu and Kashmir, ECCE programs face several challenges. Limited infrastructure, lack of trained teachers, inadequate funding and many more that pose obstacles to the effective implementation of such programs. However, efforts are being made to overcome these challenges and ensure quality ECCE for all children in the region.

Some of the challenges faced by ECCE programs in the Jammu and Kashmir Union Territory are:-

- **Inadequate infrastructure:-** The necessary infrastructure for early childhood education (ECCE) programs, such as well-equipped classrooms, play areas, and sanitary facilities, is frequently lacking in rural Jammu and Kashmir. This may lower the standard of early childhood education and care that

these children receive. To guarantee that every child has equitable access to high-quality ECCE, infrastructure improvements in rural areas are essential.

- **Shortage of Trained Teachers :-** A scarcity of qualified educators with a focus on early childhood education exists. This makes it more difficult to apply suitable teaching methods and provide high-quality ECCE programs.
- **Inadequate Funding :-** Programs for early childhood education are not given enough funding in the UT of J&K which restricts their impact and reach. Sufficient funding is essential to guarantee that teachers have access to materials, resources, and training.
- **Reaching Remote Areas :-** The geographical terrain of Jammu and Kashmir presents challenges in reaching children in remote and inaccessible areas. Providing ECCE services to these areas requires additional efforts and resources.
- **Cultural and Linguistic Diversity :-** Jammu and Kashmir is renowned for having a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It can be difficult to modify ECCE programs to accommodate this diversity and maintain inclusivity.
- **Limited awareness and understanding :-** A large number of parents and other caregivers in Jammu and Kashmir are unaware of the value of early childhood care and education. This may make it more difficult for them to support and participate in ECCE programs.
- **Inequitable access :-** Access to ECCE programs may differ among communities that are marginalized and those who live in remote locations. Promoting inclusive and equitable early childhood education requires guaranteeing equal access for all children.
- **Parental involvement :-** It can be difficult to promote parents' active participation in ECCE programs. For the purpose of promoting children's holistic development, it is critical to establish strong relationships between parents, caregivers, and ECCE professionals.
- **Monitoring and evaluation :-** Evaluating the efficacy and impact of ECCE programs requires the implementation of efficient monitoring and evaluation systems. Ensuring accountability and identifying opportunities for improvement can be achieved by strengthening these procedures.
- **Limited parental involvement and engagement in ECCE :-** It can be difficult to encourage parents to be actively involved in their child's early education in Jammu and Kashmir because some parents may encounter obstacles like ignorance or a lack of resources.
- **Lack of standardized curriculum and assessment practices :-** The absence of a standardized curriculum and assessment practices in ECCE programs can lead to inconsistencies in teaching methods and evaluation of children's progress**.**
- **Limited research and data on ECCE in Jammu and Kashmir** :- Lack of research and data on ECCE is a big challenge in the UT of J&K. There is a need for more research and data collection to understand the specific needs, challenges, and impact of ECCE programs in Jammu and Kashmir.

Despite these challenges, it is important to address and overcome them to ensure that all children in Jammu and Kashmir have access to quality early childhood care and education .These challenges highlight the need for comprehensive policies, adequate resources, and collaborative efforts to address the diverse needs of early childhood care and education in the UT Jammu and Kashmir.

The way forward: Improving ECCE status in J&K

The Indian and Jammu and Kashmir governments have made significant strides in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), establishing Anganwadi centers and providing nutritious meals through the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program. They recognize the importance of ECCE in shaping a child's future and are committed to improving it. However, more comprehensive policies are needed to ensure quality care and education during early years, focusing on infrastructure, teacher training, curriculum, parental involvement, and monitoring mechanisms.

- **Enhance teacher training programs**:- Provide comprehensive and specialized training for ECCE teachers to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively support children's development.

- **Increase accessibility:-** Establish more early childhood care and education (ECCE) centres in Jammu and Kashmir's underprivileged and isolated areas to guarantee that every child has access to high-quality early childhood care and education.
- **Strengthen parent and community engagement :-** Foster partnerships between ECCE centers, parents, and the local community to create a supportive and inclusive environment for children's learning and development**.**
- **Improve infrastructure :-** To give children a secure and engaging environment, invest in building and maintaining of ECCE facilities, such as classrooms, play areas, and restrooms.
- **Enhance curriculum and teaching materials :-** Provide curriculum materials that are both age-and culturally-appropriate and that support holistic development while meeting the varied needs of children in Jammu and Kashmir.
- **Increase awareness and outreach :-** Organize awareness campaigns that educate parents and the community about the value of early childhood care and education, encouraging them to get involved and provide their support.
- **Strengthen monitoring and evaluation :-** Provide strong evaluation and monitoring systems to guarantee the quality and effectiveness of Early Childhood Education (ECCE) initiatives in Jammu & Kashmir.
- **Foster collaboration with local communities :-** Encourage partnerships with local community organizations, NGOs, and volunteers to support ECCE initiatives. Their involvement can provide additional resources, expertise, and support to enhance the quality of ECCE programs in the region.
- **Increase funding and resources :-** Allocate more financial resources to ECCE programs in Jammu and Kashmir to ensure adequate staffing, infrastructure, and learning materials**.**
- **Enhance professional development opportunities:-** Offer continuous professional development opportunities for ECCE teachers and caregivers to enhance their knowledge and skills in early childhood education and keep up with emerging trends and research**.**

Thus, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) plays a vital role in laying the foundation for a child's overall development. It is heartening to see the efforts of both the Indian government and the government of Jammu and Kashmir in implementing policies and initiatives to ensure access to quality ECCE services. However, there is still work to be done. It is crucial for policymakers to continue prioritizing ECCE and allocate sufficient resources to address the challenges faced in its implementation. Additionally, active involvement and support from parents are key in creating a nurturing environment for children's growth and learning. By addressing the challenges, promoting teacher training, and enhancing parental engagement, we can provide every child with the best possible start in life. Together, we can build a brighter future for our children and ensure that ECCE remains a priority on the national agenda.

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