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**EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT &  
INDIA'S LEARNING CRISIS**

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## EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT & INDIA'S LEARNING CRISIS

### Context

- A major crisis in **foundational learning** is unfolding globally, as the **World Bank** estimated nearly **70% of children in low and middle-income countries (LMICs)** cannot read a simple text by age 10, reflecting schooling deficits and deeper systemic failures in **early childhood development**.

### About Early Childhood Development

- It refers to the **holistic development of a child from conception to around 6 years of age**, covering:
  - ♦ **Physical growth** (health, nutrition)
  - ♦ **Cognitive development** (thinking, learning, language)
  - ♦ **Emotional and social development**
  - ♦ **Behavioural and motor skills**
- It is shaped by the **interaction between biology (brain development)** and the **child's environment (family, community, services)**.

### Scientific Basis of Early Childhood Development

- Brain development is **fastest in the first 5 years**, forming neural connections critical for learning.
- Development is **cumulative and sequential**, and early deficits are hard to reverse later.
- Around **250 million children globally** risk not reaching developmental potential due to poor early conditions.

### Why is Early Childhood Development Needed?

- **Foundation for Learning (Education):** Early skills determine **literacy, numeracy, and school readiness**.
  - ♦ Poor **early childhood development** leads to **learning poverty**.
- **Human Capital Formation:** **Early childhood development** directly impacts productivity, employability, and economic growth. Investments in **early childhood development** yield **highest returns across the life cycle**.
- **Health and Nutrition Outcomes:** Early nutrition prevents stunting, and cognitive impairment. It links to **lower morbidity and mortality**.
- **Equity and Social Justice:** Reduces inequalities caused by poverty, gender gaps, and regional disparities. It ensures **inclusive development**.
- **Prevention of Long-term Risks:** Lack of early care leads to poor mental health, low educational attainment, higher crime and unemployment.

### Global Framework Supporting Early Childhood Development

- The **WHO – UNICEF – World Bank Nurturing Care Framework** highlights 5 essentials i.e. good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, safety and security, and early learning opportunities.
- These need to be delivered in an **integrated manner**, not in silos.

### India's Policy Shift: Strengthening Early Systems

- India is increasingly recognising **early childhood development** as a **governance priority**:
  - ♦ **Anganwadi Centres (ICDS)** are being repositioned as early learning hubs.
  - ♦ Initiatives like **ECCE kits (e.g., Uttar Pradesh)** aim to integrate play-based learning into frontline systems.
  - ♦ Policy emphasis aligns with **NEP 2020**, which prioritises **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy**.
- Integrating **early childhood development** into frontline delivery systems improves both **access and effectiveness**.

### Key Efforts by India Related to Early Childhood Development

- **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), 1975:** World's largest ECD programme delivered via ~13.7 lakh Anganwadi Centres.
  - ♦ It provides supplementary nutrition, immunisation, health check-ups, referral services, and pre-school (non-formal education).
  - ♦ It acts as the **backbone of India's ECD framework**.
- **Anganwadi System:** Community-based centres for **last-mile service delivery**. It focuses on early learning, nutrition, maternal and child care.
  - ♦ **Recent reforms include** upgradation to '**Saksham Anganwadi**', digitisation through **POSHAN Tracker**, and infrastructure strengthening.
- **POSHAN Abhiyaan, 2018:** To reduce stunting, undernutrition, and anaemia, and to promote **convergence across ministries**.
  - ♦ **Recent innovations** include real-time monitoring (ICT-based tools), and behavioural change campaigns.
- **Saksham Anganwadi & POSHAN 2.0:** Key components include strengthening Anganwadi services, and focus on early childhood education and nutrition delivery.
  - ♦ Convergence of ICDS and POSHAN Abhiyaan.
- **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020:** It recognises early childhood care and education **as a foundational stage (3–8 years)**; and introduces **5+3+3+4 structure** with emphasis on Foundational Literacy & Numeracy (FLN), play and activity-based learning.
- **Health Sector Initiatives** like **Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY)** to promote institutional deliveries, **Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY)** for maternity benefits for nutrition & rest, and **Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK)** for early identification of birth defects, and developmental delays.

#### Case Study: Meghalaya's Early Childhood Development Model

- Earlier, Meghalaya had high maternal mortality, widespread anaemia, low institutional deliveries, weak antenatal care coverage, geographic isolation and poverty.
  - ♦ Early childhood care becomes central to development with **about 20% of the population under six years**.
- **Key Intervention: Guide for Monitoring Child Development (GMCD) Tool** focuses on:
  - ♦ Children aged **1–42 months**
  - ♦ **Conversational assessment** instead of rigid testing
  - ♦ Engagement of caregivers as **co-observers**
  - ♦ Use by frontline workers: ASHAs, ANMs, Anganwadi workers

#### Governance Innovation: Decentralised, Community-Led Approach

- Meghalaya's model is notable for:
  - ♦ **Decentralisation:** Empowering frontline workers
  - ♦ **Community participation:** Village Health Councils, SHGs
  - ♦ **Convergence:** Integrating health, nutrition, and education systems
- It shifts from **top-down service delivery** to **grassroots ownership and accountability**.

#### Why Meghalaya Model Works

- **Evidence-based policy:** Integrates neuroscience and developmental science
- **Systems convergence:** Aligns health, nutrition, and early learning
- **Decentralised governance:** Enables context-specific, scalable solutions

**Conclusion**

- The literacy crisis underscores that **learning begins long before schooling**.
- Meghalaya's early childhood development model demonstrates how **integrated governance, scientific evidence, and community participation** can transform early childhood outcomes.
- Scaling such models is essential for achieving **equity, productivity, and sustainable development**.

Source: IE

**Daily Mains Practice Question**

[Q] Examine the need for strengthening Early Childhood Development in India, and highlight the role of governance and early interventions.

