

COVID-19 Position Statement:

FIVE PRIORITY ACTIONS TO PROTECT, SUPPORT AND STRENGTHEN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on young children and their families around the world and will have lasting consequences for their health, nutrition, safety, and learning opportunities. UNICEF estimates that [42-66 million children could fall into extreme poverty as a result of the crisis this year, adding to the estimated 386 million children already in extreme poverty in 2019](#). Mitigating the risks of the pandemic and promoting essential nurturing care to these young children both today and after the crisis can only be achieved with attention to the early childhood workforce – the range of individuals across paid and unpaid roles who provide services to young children and their caregivers across the health, nutrition, education, and social and child protection sectors.

[The Early Childhood Workforce Initiative](#) is committed to ensuring that health, education, social and child protection workers around the world are well-supported to carry out essential duties with children and families now and prepared to continue their important work once the pandemic is under control and restrictions are eased. Failure to provide the necessary support to the early childhood workforce not only risks the health, safety and economic well-being of these individuals, but also will threaten the impressive gains in expanding access to and improving the quality of early childhood development programs made in recent years.

In line with principles outlined by the [Early Childhood Development Action Network](#) and the [International Task Force for Teachers for Education 2030](#), the following are **five key actions** that governments, civil society organizations, and funding agencies must take to support the early childhood workforce to ensure continuity and quality in efforts to promote nurturing care:

- 1. Prioritize health, safety, and psychosocial well-being.** Many members of this workforce are risking their lives every day to provide essential services to children and families. In order to minimize their exposure to the virus, it is important to limit their duties to the most essential and provide alternate working arrangements, such as telework, where possible. For essential personnel including frontline health workers and emergency childcare workers, it is important to follow WHO and other official health guidance for limiting the spread of the infection (e.g. limitations on group size in childcare, proper handwashing) and ensuring access to appropriate personal protective equipment. In addition, supervisors should provide feedback and support to help alleviate stress encountered on the job and workers should be referred to mental health support where appropriate.

2. **Expand training and guidance.** The pandemic has changed the very nature of many ECD programs, demanding new knowledge and ways of working. Many early childhood educators are required to shift to support remote early learning for the first time. Frontline health workers are facing a new public health threat and lack information and guidance on how to go about their work. Home visitors are struggling to provide continuity in services at a time when caregivers need more support than ever. Child protection workers fear that children will be at increased risk for abuse and neglect when childcare centers and preschools are out of session though they need resources to mitigate these risks. Training and guidance through online platforms or other remote tools as well as improved access to technology are enormously needed by the workforce so that they can adapt their work to social distancing requirements and better respond to future crises.

3. **Protect jobs and wages.** Despite their important work, many early childhood personnel are poorly compensated and face challenging working conditions, which will only be exacerbated by further wage reductions resulting from program closures and revenue losses. Salary continuity, job protections, and access to health care and social protection schemes are critical for ensuring that the workforce can continue to meet their own daily needs and serve young children and families both today and once the crisis abates. Where possible, hazard pay (bonuses) and compensatory leave should be considered.

4. **Respect and recognize frontline workers.** This crisis has revealed the importance of the early childhood workforce to child and family well-being. They are essential to saving lives, combatting malnutrition, protecting children from violence, educating our youngest learners, and ensuring that parents can (return to) work and rebuild the economy. Through their relationships and interactions, they are most knowledgeable about individual families' needs and are well-positioned to mobilize local networks of support across sectors. We need to hear directly from frontline workers to better understand the challenges and successes they are facing in their daily work with young children and their families. This is a crucial moment to elevate the voices of the early childhood workforce, engage them in solutions to the challenges arising during the pandemic, and ensure they have the skills and

support to provide needed services and interventions going forward.

5. **Promote equity.** The pandemic is likely to intensify challenges faced by those working in remote areas, with low-income or minority communities, with children with disabilities, or within the informal economy. More resource intensive strategies in these areas may be needed to mitigate the risks of widening inequalities. In addition, early childhood workers – as part of the broader “care workforce” - are predominantly female and often balancing both work and caregiving responsibilities. During this time of increased stress and economic insecurity for many early childhood workers, it is particularly important to mitigate the risks and target resources to the most vulnerable personnel and those they support.

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted how important the early childhood workforce is for not only supporting young children and their families, but also ensuring a strong economy. We need to recognize and support efforts to mitigate the risks that they face to reduce harm now and in the future. As a global, multi-sectoral effort, ECWI produces new knowledge and equips decision makers with tools and resources to support the development of a quality [early childhood workforce](#) at scale. In response to this crisis, ECWI will work with our partners to curate resources and conduct new analyses to inform policy and programming, highlight the voices of frontline workers to support advocacy efforts, and support collaborative learning among policymakers and practitioners to develop responses to common challenges facing the workforce during these unprecedented times. Preserving and nurturing the early childhood workforce today is key to ensuring the healthy and well-rounded development of all children across early childhood settings.

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