

Report on the Regional Teleconference:
Strengthening Supports for Children from Birth to Three Years
Held on Friday June 24, 2011
Via UWI Open Campus

1. Attendance

Heather Gallimore welcomed 56 participants from 13 countries to the second teleconference in this UNESCO-supported series of regional networking activities, which included: Antigua & Barbuda (7), Bahamas (3), Barbados (2), Belize (11), Bermuda (5), British Virgin Islands (Tortola 1), Cayman Islands (2 - Grand Cayman 1, Cayman Brac 2), Dominica (3), Grenada (4), Jamaica (5), Montserrat (1), St. Vincent & the Grenadines (6), and Trinidad & Tobago (4).

2. Introduction of Topic: *Strengthening Supports for Children from Birth to Three Years* –

This teleconference was planned in conjunction with the regional policy forum on **Supporting the development of children zero to three, particularly the most vulnerable**, scheduled for 27-30 June, in Kingstown, St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The teleconference outputs were expected to inform the forum of health, education, social development and parenting support agencies. Several participants indicated their country would be participating in the forum.

Excerpts from the policy forum concept note were summarized and shared, and research cited. For example, according to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007), the quality of a child's early environment and the availability of appropriate experiences during sensitive periods of development are crucial in determining the strength or weakness of the brain's architecture, which, in turn, determines health, cognitive abilities and self-regulation. Children most at risk for poverty are most vulnerable to its effects.

Here in the Caribbean, many sectors (health, nutrition, education, child care and protection) have increased their focus on the child's development in the early years of life. Interventions to support ECD have grown – research and knowledge, public awareness and capacity building of parents and practitioners. We know that integrated home-based and/or center-based ECD services of good quality have some of the highest rates of return on investment of any social or economic investment, across income levels. The reality of our youngest citizens, however, leaves much to speculation as little is known about the quality of parental care and of non-parental care arrangements or the extent of its use. We think we know which interventions work but we know little about systematic evaluations of the types of interventions that work best for children from birth to three. Such research findings are featured in the Lancet Series, Paper 3.

Participants were asked to elaborate on the status of young children in their country, specifically, to share on:

- What/where are the existing gaps in addressing the needs of children from birth to three, particularly the most vulnerable?
- How can we better reach children, birth to 3, and provide quality parenting education and EC services in an increasingly challenging economic climate?

3. Discussion

The opening comments of participants are summarized, as follows.

- Grand Cayman: We must promote the value of play and the connection between playing and learning; we need to educate parents and train caregivers to understand the importance and dynamics of play, their role in facilitating play (focus less on ABCs and 123), and to encourage language and the natural progression of growth development. The community has to be involved and help to facilitate play, for the social, emotional, physical, intellectual and creative development of young children. A holistic approach is needed in order to keep the joy in learning, engagement and involvement of children.
- Cayman Brac: During these foundation years (birth to 3), we need to embrace children, make them feel safe, nurture them and make them know they are important. The focus should be on helping children to develop their communication skills, rather than on children being able to give the 'right answers'.
- Grenada: There is an increasing emphasis on childhood play, however, the location of many centres is not conducive to facilitating play; this needs to be addressed. It is particularly important for the prevention of chronic diseases, such as obesity.
- Barbados: Parenting education begins with mothers in the prenatal and neonatal phase as provided by community nurses, depending on the status of the mother. The Childcare Board becomes involved with young children who are at risk. Despite seeing an increase in father involvement, more is needed and fathers should be targeted.
- Dominica: We need to look at the institutions responsible for monitoring and ensuring standards of care; how we can support and strengthen national mechanisms to ensure standards and prevent abuse.
- Grenada: Not enough is being done to encourage fathers to attend prenatal sessions with mothers, sometimes fathers are not aware that this is part of their duties.
- St. Vincent: Their Ministry of Health is piloting the early stimulation programme in homes, using the Highscope Curriculum to train Community Health Aides; we need to look at the impact of this intervention as it is already showing impressive results. Only recently has the focus shifted from preschool to birth to 3. The Roving Caregivers Programme (RCP) training and methodology is woven into aspects of health interventions in the Early Childhood Health Outreach (ECHO) Programme as part of the Ministry's effort to monitor, stimulate and assess young children's growth and development (booklet). Policy directives need to be developed to support and monitor birth to three services. Interactions between children and caregivers/parents in the earliest years must be encouraged; births to three are the critical foundation years.
- Antigua: Nurses attend to birth to three group (primarily health care with some parenting education). Day care centres offer early stimulation, however, there are no home intervention programmes and parenting education is not centralized but rather done by the day care centre.
- Bermuda: Services are governed by Health and Education. Universal home visits are provided to every mother, a health passport (immunization and development record). Parenting classes are provided, and more efforts need to be made to involve fathers. Every two year old receives a developmental assessment and receives the necessary interventions. It is difficult to reach the most vulnerable.
- British Virgin Islands: There exists a problem with speech and language development, and there are few interventions for children birth to three. The Department of Education, Health and Social Development is developing policy.

- Montserrat: We need to focus on parents and caregivers, from conception to three years, and raise awareness of brain development in the early years. We need to examine best practices and what is most effective. Child-rearing and child development education should be compulsory in the secondary school curriculum. It was suggested that parent involvement in parenting education sessions should be required for their child to remain in the programme.
- Barbados: Suggested mid-wives in rural areas be trained in early stimulation and parenting.

Pre-teleconference comments from the CaribECD e-forum were shared and discussed as they raised key considerations, specifically:

- “The lack of parent-child interaction maybe a problem even amongst more affluent households, as amidst severe economic conditions parents work more hours to maintain standards of living, and in so doing, depend heavily on external supports to provide interactions which children ought to experience with parents. Do you know if there is current research that looks at this shift?”

- “A guest to the forum responded that this raises a critical point about alternate care-- whether formal, as in day care services, or informal such as a nanny at home or time in a relative's care. I do not know of any studies which have compared the issues of quality and child outcomes in home vs. alternative care situations. Perhaps the forum will assist in knowing if such work exists, or in stimulating someone to undertake this research.”

- “There are some parents who have to work extra hours however there are many parents who are not involved simply because they don't know how to be. As society moves away from the tight knit family that raises its own into reliance on outside care providers, there is a loss in the teaching of family interactions. There is no need to lay blame for this issue within society as it is simply there. Finding a solution to counteract the trend is the challenge. Young parents who perhaps weren't engaged (in the home) as children are now raising a new generation of disengaged children within the home. A form of parent education is necessary but it must be one that informs in an appealing way to the newest generation of parents. They want to parent right, they want to be involved but they are either inexperienced, uninformed, or lack the motivation to get involved with their children.”

- “While we are all aware of the importance of early stimulation for our children, those of us who are education officers do not have enough influence on how the resources are to be distributed. It is important that the organizations (all concerned) meet the policy makers, the ministers of government, and get them to understand the importance of placing emphasis on Early Childhood Education, beginning with the early years. Can there be a common strategy/policy within CARICOM, OECS (the region) that "forces" everyone to pay attention?”

Teleconference participants' responses to the e-forum comments included:

- St. Vincent & the Grenadines: Parenting policy and guidelines are needed to provide parents, particularly young parents, with the necessary support and ‘know how’ to take care of their children and understand their role. Parenting education should begin in school.
- Jamaica: Agreed with the need for curriculum-based parenting education but noted its limitations as much is on-the-job training; there is no ‘magic bullet’, so we need to have on-going supports available.
- Bermuda: We need national policy on parenting and national campaigns to promote healthy parenting practices.
- Jamaica: the National Parenting Support Policy, which is not yet official (accepted in Cabinet, to be debated by Parliament), is not about holding parents accountable but rather the broad areas of support that need to be in place, from before birth, for parents to be fulfil their responsibilities.

- Dominica: The national policy must not be punitive but supportive. Child protection policy is in place. We need to focus on early detection of problems and interventions in/support for vulnerable families.
- Cayman: Countries with strong early childhood policies are doing best; government policy is critical.
- Jamaica: Established standards (841 under 12 sub-headings) to assess early childhood institutions; some are mandatory (part of legal framework) and some are voluntary. The Early Childhood Commission provides regular training, particularly on the detection and prevention of child abuse. Their 56 Development Officers just underwent training. Persons are needed at the community level to serve as ‘village teachers’ and to ensure parenting practices support the best interests of children.
- Bahamas: At risk programmes focus on the family islands; they are training parents (in the absence of day care centres) to provide early stimulation. An activity handbook given to parents and an electronic copy was requested for the CaribECD website.
- Coordinator: Called for resources that can be shared on CaribECD, including guidelines, curricula, policy briefs, etc.
- Trinidad & Tobago: Servol’s parent outreach program works with parents in the home, providing child development, early stimulation and parenting education. They are finding that social issues are impacting early childhood programmes, they are doing more social work than parenting education. There needs to be a multi-pronged approach at the community level to support parents in ways that can help them to focus on parenting rather than solely on meeting family’s basic needs. Parenting facilitators, medical practitioner and social workers working together will have a greater impact and governments should support this approach.
- What more can we do, and do differently, practical given varying levels of available resources? It is important to consider the range of ideas and innovative approaches.
- Jamaica’s new Parents Place concept is the result of consultations with parents. It engages community-based organizations to provide support for parents; bringing information, skills training, income generation training, etc. There is no blue-print, community members design the Parents Place based on the communities’ needs. The will start-up with 7 Parents Places. There are three levels of implementation: (1) Public libraries house a parenting resource section with catalogued parenting materials and provide only information; (2) NGOs facilitate training and access to information; and, (3) making referrals to assess children. Starting with seven Parents Places around the island, each is designed and managed by community members to be responsive to community needs and to serve as a central resource centre for parents to interact and gain support.
- Bermuda: Parents Places are a great idea. In order to facilitate early identification of and interventions families at-risk, they have developed a Memorandum of Understanding primarily between government agencies (social services, health, housing and child protection agencies working with vulnerable families) to identify families that need support and to provide appropriate referrals. They are also embarking on a major PR campaign to make the community aware of available services.
- Coordinator: An often overlooked resource is churches. In Jamaica, churches were instrumental in facilitating public education sessions to introduce the new EC standards and regulations, in 2006. Church leaders and congregations should be engaged in public education efforts.
- Belize: They have been working with churches in a preschool community over the last three years and have witnessed significant progress and success with the pooling of resources. In another community, they have seen tremendous success from the collaboration of various community bodies.
- Bermuda: Churches provide family support services, particularly public education.

- Grenada: Does not have active church involvement in public education but agrees there should be.
- Cayman Islands: Sunday schools and vacation bible schools are helping to spread the message of the importance of early childhood development, particularly early spiritual growth.
- How can we help to ensure consistency in the messages that are being promoted? National policy is needed to indicate the messages to be given; a centralized body should provide such messages to church councils and all entities involved in community development to ensure uniformity.
- Dominica: The Early Childhood Council, established by the recently-amended Education Act, recognizes the importance of early childhood education. This multidisciplinary team includes the church, NGOs and EC experts in making policy, advocacy, etc. Historically in Dominica, preschools have been run by churches and they played an important role in establishing the importance of ECD.

4. Renovation and Upgrading of the CaribECD Website

The CaribECD website is currently under renovation and will soon be re-launched. A few participants reported visiting the site and found the information valuable, noting they needed to spend more time exploring the site. Participants were encouraged to visit the site, make suggestions and share resources, and urged to use the e-forum between teleconferences.

The introduction of Country Pages <http://www.open.uwi.edu/caribecd/caribbean-country-contacts> is intended to provide a profile of ECD services, issues and key contacts for each English-speaking Caribbean country, and will include:

- Main government ECD contacts, listing relevant ministries contact persons and contact info,
- NGOs serving ECD interests, including parenting supports
- Resources, e.g. Programme overviews and Standards for services for children, birth to three
- Electronic links to local organizations

The questionnaire developed by UNICEF to collect general information for the Kingstown Forum contains much of the information that is sought. CCDC will request this information for sharing on the country pages of the website.

A call was also made for Caribbean games, stories and products for children and parents to be included on the Children's Page of the website.

Visit: <http://www.open.uwi.edu/caribecd/welcome> and e-mail your suggestions to heather.gallimore@open.uwi.edu

5. **The CCDC, UWI publication *Learning Outcomes for Early Childhood Development in the Caribbean – A Handbook for Practitioners*** provides visualizations of the Learning Outcomes to guide early childhood practitioners in their choice of curricula for children. It aims to address questions from the practitioner's point of view: What am I trying to achieve? What can I do to achieve it? What works? What doesn't work? How could I organize what I do to achieve it? How can I be sure about children's rights? How can I involve parents? What kind of resources will help me?

The Handbook features six areas of learning and development - Wellness, Effective Communication, Valuing Culture, Intellectual Empowerment, Respect for Self and Others, Resilience. These form the

six sections of the Handbook and each section follows a sequence of birth to three years, three to five years and five to seven years of age. Each section elaborates on the main expectations of children during each age span and sets out what practitioners can do to support children's learning and development.

Practitioners are alerted to what practices are inappropriate. Practical suggestions for involving parents and community, for supporting diversity and special needs, and for realizing children's rights, are included, together with examples of effective practice in different parts of the region. Translating these understandings and suggestions into their own work, practitioners can plan the curricula they offer and ensure that they engage parents effectively in the process.

The final sections of the Handbook provide useful examples from across the Region of resources in use. They include architect's scale drawings of learning environments that can be used by practitioners to guide discussions on refurbishment and new-build projects for early childhood settings. Tips on how to support children's free choice, manage children's behaviour and build secure relationships provide expanded guidance on how to overcome challenges to ensuring success in achieving children's learning and development.

Barbados, Dominica, and Trinidad participants noted they had not seen it nor were aware it is available. Antigua, Belize noted they have it and are finding it useful. Few participants were aware of the publication and several noted their interest. Participants and CCDC should check with local UNICEF offices to see if copies are available. Copies can be ordered from CCDC and colleagues will be notified when the next print run is ready.

8. Summary reports on teleconferences

The report on the April 28 teleconference was sent to participants and posted on the website. The subsequent reports will not be sent to participants. Instead it will be posted on the website and participants will be notified when it is uploaded, in July.

9. E-Forum & Teleconference evaluation

Most participants did not visit the electronic forum prior to the teleconference but were expected to after reviewing reports on this teleconference and the Kingstown Forum.

Several participants expressed gratitude for the teleconferences, noting the need for such opportunities for knowledge sharing, resource exchange and professional development. They are happy to interact cost-effectively with several countries and agree one strength is the facility. Antigua suggested that this teleconference body become a formal voice to share the many questions and concerns raised with Ministry officials, such as the establishment of standards. Bahamas noted other Ministries such as Social Services and Public Health should be invited to participate. Belize plans to intend other stakeholders to these teleconferences, such as from Health and Human Services. The ideas being exchanged can be locally adapted and implemented. Bermuda noted that the gaps in services are similar across countries and the need for exchanging tools and resources being used in programmes. Cayman's social services were represented and will endeavour to include more entities in the next teleconference. Dominica noted its appreciation for this interesting, informative session and looks forward to the next session. Jamaica finds these sessions extremely valuable and looks forward to getting resources and to participating in more such fora. Trinidad noted this session was enlightening and also looks forward to the session on Corporal Punishment.

Participants were asked to suggest topics to be discussed in future teleconferences.

Cayman Islands asked if there is a regional ECD conference being planned and called for the convening of such. CCDC will check and post notice of upcoming events on the CaribECD website.

Technical glitches with some audio connections were noted and promptly addressed by the Open Campus Learning Centres' technicians.

10. Next teleconference is scheduled for Thursday September 22 at 9:30 a.m. EST, 10:30 a.m. AST. The topic of discussion is *Positive discipline in early childhood and effective alternatives to corporal punishment, with guest speaker, Dr. Helen Henningham.*

The final teleconference in the 2011 series will be held on Thursday November 17 and focus on: *Child rights training (CRT): Lessons learned and regional ECD sector CRT needs.*

Participants were reminded to send attendance lists to the Coordinator, Heather Gallimore, who thanked all for their participation and closed the forum.