

Early Childhood Development in Qatar: Status and opportunities for the future

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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مؤتمر القمة العالمي للابتكار في التعليم

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Executive Summary

The years between conception until age five mark the most important period for a child's development. The foundations for a lifetime of learning are laid long before entering primary school. The building blocks of the brain and nervous system are formed and critical skills and capacities are developed (Nelson 2000). Physical development occurs rapidly as children develop both gross and fine motor skills. Executive functions that enable individuals to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully are also developed. Even early literacy and numeracy skills begin to emerge.

Together, the healthy development in each of these areas lays a strong foundation for children's holistic development later in life (Bierman and others 2008; McCain and Mustard 1999). In turn, inadequate development in one or more of these domains can impede brain development, with subsequent negative impacts throughout the individual's lifespan. For example, early gaps in executive functioning, and language skills jeopardize a child's capacity and motivation to learn upon entering primary school. Low levels of school readiness, in turn, can lead to poor academic performance (World Bank 2015a).

Despite this overwhelming evidence, child development outcomes in Qatar are below what is expected given its level of economic development. Gaps in self-regulation skills persist, with a third of children ages three and four being unable to attend to, and focus on, simple tasks without being distracted easily. Early literacy and numeracy skills are not being developed by many young children in the country, with 60 percent of children in this age group unable to read four popular, simple words, and 30 percent unable to name and recognize symbols for all numerals one to ten.

Addressing these early gaps is key for shaping not only the life course of Qatar's young children, but also the trajectory of the country's development. Improved early childhood development (ECD) in the country has the potential to enhance children's academic performance in primary and secondary school. Indeed, this study finds that students who attended preprimary education perform significantly better than their peers at age 15 in all subjects of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (mathematics, reading, and science), after accounting for school, teacher, and family characteristics. Improved early development can also lead to better health outcomes and higher earnings later in life (Karoly 2016; Phillips and others 2016; Gertler and others 2014; Dickens and others 2006). Moreover, benefits are likely to extend beyond the individual to the economy and society, potentially improving economic outcomes and even reducing crime rates (Sala-i-Martin, Doppelhofer, and Miller 2004; Walker 2011).

Realizing this potential requires Qatar to invest in three key areas: strengthening the policy environment for ECD in the country, improving the coverage and scope of programs, and establishing a comprehensive quality assurance system for continuous quality improvement of ECD services.

A stronger policy environment is needed to design and implement effective ECD interventions in Qatar. Short-term priorities should include the establishment of a multisectoral body that coordinates the development of a comprehensive ECD strategy for Qatar which clearly articulates the government's goals and objectives for ECD, and that oversees implementation of the strategy. With these two initial steps taken, important policy actions should follow, including the development of a comprehensive child protection policy, and the expansion of breastfeeding and parental leave policies.

ECD programs should be broad in their scope and implemented widely, reaching all children in Qatar. The coverage of nutrition programs and preprimary education should be significantly increased. Efforts to increase coverage should include an expanded supply of programs, but also key demand-side interventions. Public demand for ECD programs will need to be cultivated if coverage is to grow. In addition, efforts should consider and address inequalities in ECD coverage across socioeconomic lines. The scope of ECD programs provided can also be expanded in the medium-term to include parenting and caregiver programs.

Establishing a strong quality assurance system in Qatar is essential to guarantee that ECD programs yield the expected results. While Qatar has already developed most of the elements of an ECD quality assurance system, the country should fully articulate and align these various elements into a coherent system. Qatar should harmonize quality standards for all public and private teachers and providers, and develop a coherent curriculum covering ages zero to six. A parallel effort should be undertaken to implement monitoring and incentive mechanisms to ensure compliance with established quality standards. To establish a baseline from which to monitor progress, Qatar could develop a set of key performance indicators supported by a robust data system that measures child development outcomes and links them to the quality of service delivery. These data will be invaluable as the country moves forward in strengthening its ECD system.



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