

**FUNDAMENTAL STEP FOR LIFE-LONG LEARNING FOR ALL**

# Inclusive Play-based Early Childhood Education (IPECE)

## WHAT IS INCLUSIVE PLAY-BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION?

Inclusive play-based early childhood education (IPECE) provides play-based learning and educational activities for children from the age of 3 years onwards in a group setting. With a holistic approach to support children's early cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development and encourages them to explore their surrounding world and environment ([Bassok, et al., 2016](#)). It introduces young children to organized instructions and prepares them for primary education ([UIS 2012](#)). IPECE programmes focus on interactions with peers and trained educators through which children can develop creativity and curiosity in the classroom ([Ebbeck and Waniganayake, 2016](#)), further improve their use of language and social skills, start to develop logical and reasoning skills, as well

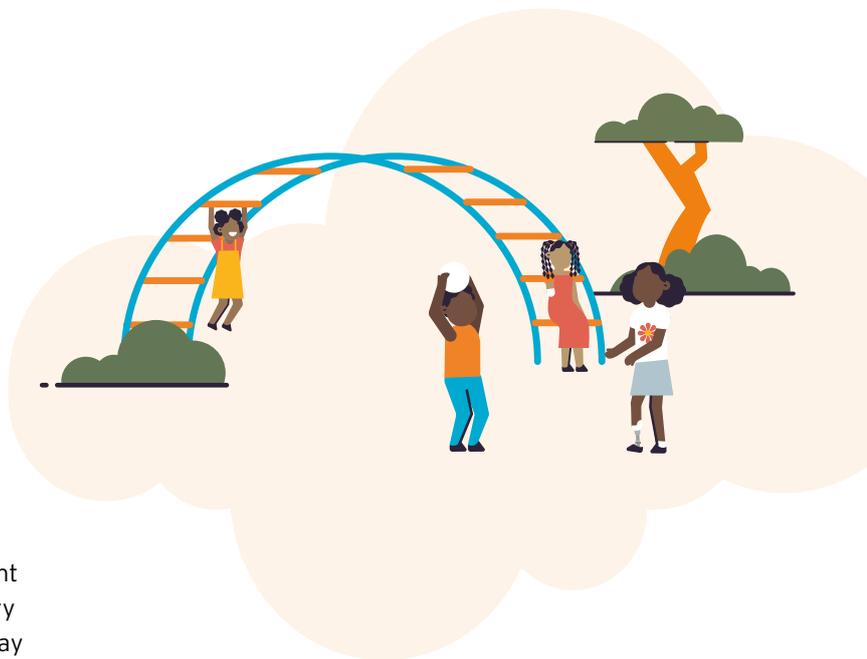
as early literacy and mathematical concepts and other school readiness skills in a play-based way ([ISCED 2011](#)). These early years of a child's life are critical for their development and learning, as 85% of brain development takes place in the first 5 years of life. Inclusivity in Play-based Early Childhood Education means that equal opportunities are provided for all children - without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, their economic status, disability, birth or other status as established in respect of the Rights of the Child - in an enabling environment that recognises the importance of learning through play for a child to reach its full potential.

## WHY PLAY IS THE WAY?

Play is the natural way in which young children gain essential knowledge and skills. For this reason, play opportunities and environments that promote play, exploration and hands-on learning are at the core of effective IPECE programmes ([UNICEF LtP](#)).

An important aspect of play is children's agency and control over the experience, children's initiative, decision-making and self-choice in play. It is important to ensure that adults are equipped with the necessary and appropriate skills to support learning through play and recognise the benefits of free play.

Learning through play happens when the activity (1) is experienced as joyful, (2) helps children find meaning in what they are doing or learning, (3) involves active, engaged, minds-on thinking, (4) as well as iterative thinking (experimentation, hypothesis testing, etc.) and (5) social interaction.



**PLAY IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT, AND PLAY-BASED LEARNING IS PARTICULARLY EFFECTIVE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD.**

## WHY INCLUSIVE PLAY-BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IS IMPORTANT FOR THE LILIANE FOUNDATION?

One of Liliane Foundation's main topics of focus is inclusive education for children with disabilities. The Liliane Foundation believes that when children are identified as early as possible, they can be stimulated with suitable rehabilitation and early education interventions. This in turn can prevent children getting secondary and more severe types of impairments. Early childhood identification, intervention and prevention strategies are far more (cost-)effective, in terms of tackling disability related barriers and limitations, disadvantage, vulnerability and social exclusion, than corrective measures later on in life ([UNESCO GEM report, 2021](#)). IPECE through its unique set up with a balance between exploration and imitation, teacher led and child-initiated play, individual and group activities, and its tangible teaching and learning materials offers a unique opportunity for caregivers/teachers to support and for children to learn (at their own pace). This makes, IPECE is a strong foundation for a life-long learning for all, including for children with disabilities. The Liliane Foundation believes that IPECE should become free and compulsory at least for a year for all children regardless of their background and status.

There are number of advantages that IPECE can offer to all children:

- Early stimulation and raising awareness of their unique gifts, talents, and abilities.
- Acceptance of human uniqueness and differences from early childhood: developing mutual understanding among children.
- Introduction to organized instructions and preparation for primary education and lifelong learning.

For children with disabilities, there are also many advantages they can benefit from, such as improvements in social-emotional and behavioural development, language and recognition, self-reliance, positioning, mobility and prevention from complexity/severity of disability. All these interventions can be done in a playful way with games that are suitable for these children which can offer the correct amount of stimulation in a safe environment with diverse practitioners from the rehabilitation, education, social, remedial-pedagogical and psychological/mental health sectors.

## WHY INCLUSIVE PLAY-BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION MATTERS?

IPECE fosters positive socialization, empathy, and a child's natural love of learning, reduces discrimination and prejudice, and prepares children for a diverse and inclusive society. There are even more compelling reasons to invest in IPECE:

### **IPECE IS A HUMAN RIGHT:**

Every child has the right to play and the right to quality education and development, regardless of their background or abilities. Ensuring access to quality IPECE is not just a matter of social justice, it is a human right.

### **IPECE PROMOTES INCLUSION:**

IPECE benefits both children with and without a disability, by promoting diversity, fostering natural social interaction, and breaking down barriers. Research shows that IPECE programs improve the development and learning outcomes of both children with and without disabilities ([Dessemontet, et al., 2012](#)).

### **IPECE STIMULATES LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTS/ CAREGIVERS:**

IPECE provides space and opportunities for parents, especially women, to work and develop professional skills during the hours that children participate in IPECE activities. This promotes more sustainable income for the maintenance of the family and the child with a disability.

### **IPECE ENSURES NUTRITION FOR ALL CHILDREN:**

IPECE presents an opportunity to improve nutrition outcomes and address stunting by expanding access to healthy foods for all children at an early age. For children with feeding disabilities this can be offered in consultation with and (re)habilitation support of a therapist or nutritionist specialized in feeding difficulties.



*Having introduced play, it has helped many children develop communication skills, social skills and some physical development. PHOTO: PO WUKWASHI WA NZAMBI*

### **IPECE ENABLES SAFETY AND PROTECTION:**

IPECE provides attentive caregivers that support children to practice new skills and behaviour in a safe, conducive learning environment and explore and try things out in a playful and fun way (in a group setting). The aspect of safety and security and responsive caregiving can be combined. IPECE in a secure group setting and a safe learning out-of-home environment provides teachers and other caregivers the opportunity to observe children and identify possible signals of neglect, abuse or violence at home or in the community. In case of child protection concerns, teachers and caregivers can organize support for the child.

### **IPECE PROVIDES RETURN ON INVESTMENT:**

Investing in IPECE can have significant economic benefits. **UNICEF stated** that "One dollar invested in ECE for disadvantaged children can bring benefits equivalent to US\$17". Furthermore, research has shown that that high-quality ECE programs lead to increased productivity, reduced crime, as well as other benefits ([Heckman et al., 2010](#)).

## INTERNATIONAL POLICY AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSIVE PLAY-BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) explicitly include a target ([SDG 4.2](#)) to ensure all children have access to quality ECE to promote their cognitive, social, and emotional development. The SDG uniquely calls for the **systematic monitoring** of the proportion of children under 5 years who are developmentally on track in health, learning, and psychosocial well-being in every country. This approach allows for the identification of children who require special support to enable them to gain unrestricted access to inclusive early childhood education and development services.

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) are two other international initiatives that aim to improve access to inclusive quality education, including ECE. The GCE advocates for increased access to inclusive quality ECE and is involved in developing and promoting SDG 4.2. The GPE provides technical and financial support to countries to help them implement and build upon current ECE programs through the **ECE Accelerator**.

Despite these efforts, so many children especially in Africa, continue to face barriers to accessing quality ECE, as shown in the below graph.

In many countries, there is a lack of resources and trained personnel to provide IPECE services, and children with disabilities and their families often face discrimination, barriers, and stigma.

UNESCO has released a **report** warning that low-income and lower-middle income countries cannot meet their SDG 4 benchmark targets by 2030 if there is insufficient annual funding ([Can countries afford their national SDG 4 benchmarks? social media resources | Global Education Monitoring Report \(unesco.org\)](#)).

This clearly shows it is essential for us to unite with other organizations and make sure we support children with disabilities and their caregivers in these critical years through early identification and interventions like Inclusive Play-based Early Childhood Education, in their communities.

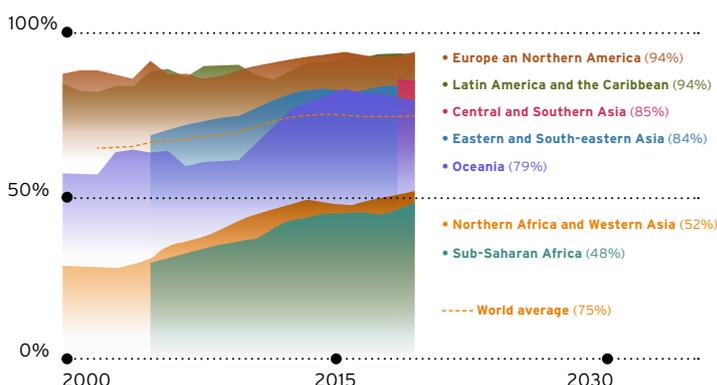
As a follow-up on SDG 4, UNESCO introduced **The Education 2030 Framework for Action**, which provides guidelines for its implementation. In 2021, UNESCO member States committed to guarantee one year minimum of free primary education and to invest a minimum of 10% of their educational spending on pre-primary education. These commitments were established further in Tashkent Declaration during the World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in 2022 and countries are encouraged to set **national benchmarks** for ECE.

UNICEF's '**Nurturing Care Framework for Early Childhood Development**' also includes ECE as a key component. This framework emphasises the need for early learning interventions. UNICEF has launched the **Early Childhood development Index (ECDI2030)** which is a data collection instrument specifically designed to gather data and monitor SDG indicator 4.2.



### EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Participation rate in pre-primary education





## GOOD IPECE PRACTICE FROM INDONESIA

In Indonesia, our two partner organizations **Yayasan Penderita Cacat Mental (YPCM)** and **Yayasan Sosial Ibu Anfrida (YSIA)** contribute to IPECE through non-formal preschools by assisting in the inclusion of 23 children with disabilities in these schools.

This project included 6 main interventions:

1. Early identification and early intervention for children with disabilities by conducting outreach, proper assessment, mapping and connecting adequate health and education services in addressing their needs.
2. Awareness raising of parents/caregivers and community members, service providers and governmental institutions on the importance of inclusion of children with disabilities in IPECE.
3. Mobilizing financial and non-financial resources of all these stakeholders in contributing towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in IPECE.
4. Capacity strengthening of teachers and rehabilitation workers in acquiring new skills and competencies in coping and working with children with disabilities in the non-formal pre-school system.
5. Developing accessible and user-friendly learning materials and methods for children with disabilities.
6. Collecting data on diverse aspects of the implementation of the interventions for monitoring, evaluation and learning purposes.



As a result of qualitatively good and holistic pre-schooling services, children with disabilities developed their self-confidence and skills, could enrol in primary schools and were accepted by their peers and supported by their teachers. Last year seven children with disabilities were accepted in regular primary schools. The participants in this project recommended promoting the visibility of inclusive early childhood development services through leaflets, posters, and videos so that more children with disabilities can be included.

## STEPS FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE PLAY-BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Important steps that each organisation can take in integration of play-based learning in its CBR focused programmes and projects:

### 1. Early detection and identification of special educational and (re)habilitational needs is crucial to respond to early and play-based learning of children with disabilities.

Early detection and identification of special educational needs is vital for planning appropriate play-based preschool interventions of a good quality, enabling children to reach their full developmental potential and play and learn with other children. This can be done by mobilizing either:

- Community workers who have intrinsic motivation and basic competencies of IPECE and understanding of the existing referral system in their communities.
- multi-disciplinary teams of experts from rehabilitation, ortho-pedagogics, pre-primary education, psychology and social work.

The initial assessment needs to be done by a rehabilitation professional who can detect an issue in the development of the child. Diagnosing the child serves as a starting point in the process of early intervention. The team of experts or community workers in collaboration with the parents/caregivers, will need to (be able) to assess children's specific developmental needs and starting capacities for early learning through play-based activities and develop an individual education and rehabilitation plan with tailor-made interventions implemented in an IPECE approach.

### 2. Integrated stakeholders' approach in addressing children's needs.

Children with disabilities have additional and often unique needs, that require integrated and community based rehabilitation (CBR) oriented service provision. These in turn require sectors to communicate and share information and expertise as represented within Liliane Foundations' CBR approach. All stakeholders of IPECE programmes need to (receive sufficient training and guidance to) be competent in supporting children through play. Collaboration between the health, the social, the education sector together with the early involvement of parents/caregivers and communities



can enable an optimum environment for IPECE services which will be beneficial for children with disabilities. The play activities can be designed between rehabilitation and educational workers and the safety and protection can be advised by social workers and psychologists. Parents/caregivers need to be involved in the process from the start and they can also play an active role in the children's play-based learning, also in their family home surroundings.

### 3. Implement minimum quality standards in the early education process.

When developing and implementing IPECE services, clear definition of standards and objectives is key to ensuring their effectiveness and quality. Well-defined, measurable standards outline actors' responsibilities, the desired outcomes of integration and the dimensions in which policies will be evaluated. Minimum standards for quality in early childhood care and education are often related to child-to-staff ratios, staff qualifications, responsive caregiving, play-based methods and materials, safety and protection and norms for safe indoor and outdoor play-spaces available to children.



*Francis playing with his teacher Elsa in the classroom.*

PHOTO: KAISAKA |  
CHIARA BELTRAMINI

#### **4. Lobby and advocacy towards governments to take on effective and sustainable non-governmental initiatives.**

In many low- and middle-income countries, civil society and non-government organizations lead the delivery of services for children with disabilities. While in some cases they work in partnership with governments, more efforts are needed to embed such services into government systems. Organisations can become more prominent in their lobby and advocacy efforts towards their governments to take responsibility in implementing inclusive early childhood education and play-based learning in the public pre-school institutions. There are some tips for IPECE advocacy:

- Promote IPECE to support the development and inclusion of children living with a disability.
- Involve relevant stakeholders such as children, youth, parents/caregivers, teachers, school leaders, unions, (ECD)education networks, government, teacher-parent associations, organisations of persons with disabilities, local leaders,

civil services and other community members in advocacy efforts, to increase awareness and support for disability rights in early childhood education.

- Promote open and collaborative communication among stakeholders to define common goals and solutions, and to build trust and relationships.
- Analyse existing policies on inclusive education and disability inclusion to identify gaps and opportunities in regard of IPECE.
- Build evidence for advocacy, awareness raising and communication on IPECE.
- Celebrate success stories!

