



EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT (ECD) MESSAGE BRIEF

**STRENGTHENING CAREGIVER
BEHAVIOURS FOR EARLY
CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT**





INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Development outcomes are shaped by the cumulative effects of everyday caregiver behaviours that influence children's growth, learning capacity, emotional wellbeing, and long-term potential. While investments in nutrition, health, safety, and learning are essential, their effectiveness depends heavily on how caregivers make decisions, adopt practices, and sustain nurturing interactions within real-life household and community systems.

This Communication & Behaviour Brief presents a structured set of priority caregiver behaviours designed to support integrated Early Childhood Development programming.

The brief is intentionally organized using a systems and behaviour adoption lens, recognizing that caregiving practices are activated, reinforced, and sustained through multiple interacting delivery platforms, social structures, and decision environments.

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEF

This Brief serves as a practical reference to guide Early Childhood Development communication, materials development, counselling tools, and multisectoral programming. It provides a harmonized framework of priority behaviours that can be adapted across communication channels, service delivery platforms, and community engagement strategies. While reinforcing a unified behavioural principle, the Brief aims to ensure that ECD communication remains:

- Behaviorally focused
- Caregiver-centred
- Conceptually coherent
- Implementation-friendly

By stabilizing behavioural priorities, the Brief supports consistent messaging, reduces fragmentation, and strengthens alignment across health, nutrition, learning, WASH, protection, and gender-related interventions.

CONCEPTUAL POSITIONING

This Brief positions Early Childhood Development communication as a behaviour adoption intervention rather than a purely informational or sector-specific messaging tool. The organization of behaviours reflects how caregiving practices operate within everyday systems including household decision environments, health service interfaces, learning and caregiving contexts, social norms structures, and gender dynamics. Rather than grouping behaviours strictly by technical domains, the Brief adopts a systems-oriented structure that aligns behavioural priorities with the environments through which they are influenced, reinforced, and sustained.

This framing strengthens multisectoral integration, improves usability across stakeholder groups, and supports practical application within diverse programmatic settings. Across all domains, priority behaviours are organized under six system-oriented domains.

KEY BEHAVIOURS & MESSAGES ACROSS SIX DOMAINS:

1. Food & Nutrition

Priority Focus: Strengthening optimal infant and young child feeding practices that support child growth, health, and development.

Key Issues / Barriers

- Delayed initiation of breastfeeding
- Mixed feeding norms (water, herbs, other liquids)
- Early cessation of breastfeeding (before 2 years)
- Limited dietary diversity
- Perceived cost of nutritious foods
- Poor food hygiene practices leading to diarrhea and frequent illness
- Influence of household decision-makers on food allocation
- Marketing/preference for sugary & processed foods
- Poor feeding environment
- Cultural beliefs and misconceptions about breastfeeding and feeding

Priority Audience(s)

- Primary
Pregnant women

Mothers of children 0–2 years

- Secondary
- Fathers
- Grandmothers / older female relatives
- Household decision-makers
- Influencers
- Health workers
- Faith actors
- Community WASH Volunteers/WASHCOM members

Key Messages

- Put your baby to the breast within the first hour after birth. Early breastfeeding helps your baby learn to suck well, protects them from infections, and helps your body start producing plenty of milk, and helps you to bond with your baby.
- Breastfeed your baby exclusively for the first six months. During the first six months, breastmilk is all your baby needs—no water, no food, no other liquids. Breastfeeding nourishes your baby's body and supports rapid brain development, emotional bonding, and protection from illness
- At six months, add soft, diverse foods and continue breastfeeding to two years or more. Offer mashed or semi-solid foods 2–3 times and 1–2 snacks each day, using locally available foods like grains, beans, vegetables, fruits, eggs, fish, meat, and dairy to help your child grow strong and healthy.

- Make feeding supportive and responsive. Young children need patience, encouragement, and active feeding. Positive feeding interactions support both nutrition and emotional development.
- Keep meals clean and safe for your baby. Wash your hands before cooking and feeding, use clean utensils, store food safely, and avoid bottles or teats so germs don't make your baby sick. Clean hands, utensils, and food help prevent diarrhea and other illnesses so your baby can absorb nutrients and grow well.
- Plan your household budget to include nutritious, affordable foods—and limit sugary drinks and junk foods. Children's stomachs are small, so every bite matters. Choosing healthy, local foods helps the whole family stay nourished and saves money in the long run.

2. HEALTH & CARESEEKING

Priority Focus: Promoting preventive care utilization, early illness management, and developmental surveillance.

Key Issues / Barriers

- Late antenatal clinic (ANC) initiation / insufficient visits
- Low postnatal clinic (PNC) attendance

- Irregular clinic attendance
- Limited developmental monitoring awareness
- Normalization of developmental delays
- Distance / cost barriers
- Competing household priorities
- Fear / mistrust of facilities
- Low male support for care-seeking
- Poor hygiene and unsafe conditions in health facilities

Priority Audience(s)

- **Primary**
 - > Pregnant women
 - > Mothers of children 0–5 years
- **Secondary**
 - > Fathers
 - > Grandmothers / older female relatives
 - > Household decision-makers
- **Influencers**
 - > Health workers
 - > Faith actors
 - > Community WASH volunteers / WASHCOM members

Key Messages

- Attend antenatal care at least eight times during pregnancy and start early. These visits help you understand your health, monitor your baby's growth, and prevent problems early—while also giving you

counselling, multiple micronutrient supplements, and malaria prevention for a healthy mother and baby.

- Healthy pregnancies support healthy brain development. Seeking care early and regularly during pregnancy protects you and your baby and supports your child's future growth and learning.
- After birth, return for routine check-ups for both you and your baby. This ensures you are healing well and that your baby is breastfeeding, growing, and adjusting safely in the first weeks of life.
- Take your child for immunization, growth monitoring, and development checks according to the clinic schedule. Vaccines and regular checks protect your child from serious illnesses and help you track healthy development.
- Your child's development matters. Children grow at different paces but missing key milestones — like not sitting by 9 months, not walking by 18 months, or not saying words by age 2, may signal a delay that benefits from early attention.
- Monitoring developmental milestones helps you spot early signs of concern, so children who need extra support can get it at the right time, improving long-term outcomes.
- Seeking help early when worried about your child's development allows health workers to guide you, offer simple strategies at home, or provide referrals before challenges become harder to address.

- Developmental delays are not a failure or anyone's fault; early identification during routine child health checks ensures children receive timely support, therapy, or treatment.
- Seek care immediately when your child is sick; early treatment prevents complications and supports a quicker recovery.
- Use modern family planning to space births safely: Healthy spacing gives mothers time to recover and supports healthier pregnancies and stronger children.
- Clean water, clean toilets, and handwashing in clinics help protect mothers and babies from infections.

3. EARLY STIMULATION & LEARNING

Priority Focus: Encouraging caregiver-child interaction behaviours that support brain development, language, and socio-emotional growth.

Key Issues / Barriers

- Limited awareness of early learning importance
- Belief that learning begins at school
- Caregiver workload constraints
- Limited play materials
- High screen exposure
- Low father engagement
- Norms minimizing play value
- Limited access to books to support early learning

Priority Audience(s)

- **Primary**
Mothers / caregivers
- **Secondary**
 - > Fathers
 - > Grandparents
 - > Teachers
- **Influencers**
 - > Daycare/ Creche owners
 - > Faith actors

Key Messages

- Talk, sing, read, and tell stories to your child every day, show them pictures and use your local language. A child's brain develops most rapidly in the early years. These simple interactions build your child's brain, strengthen language skills, and help them feel loved and connected.
- Play with your child using simple toys or household items at home. Play helps children learn to think, imagine, and solve problems, even with low-cost or homemade materials.
- Encourage your child's curiosity by allowing safe exploration, both indoors and outdoors. Regular outdoor play and movement help children learn confidence, coordination, and new skills.

- Create safe spaces for them to crawl. Providing a safe and clean spaces for babies to move, crawl, and explore supports physical and brain development
- Limit screen time and give your child more face-to-face interaction and hands-on activities. Young children learn best from Human interaction, play, and real-life experiences, not from screens. Excessive screen exposure may interfere with development
- Involve fathers in daily play and learning, use praise to guide your child, and support opportunities for early learning and preschool. Active involvement and positive reinforcement help children feel supported and ready for learning

4. SAFE, CLEAN & ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS

Priority Focus: Reducing environmental and injury risks affecting child health and development.

Key Issues / Barriers

- Inconsistent handwashing
- Unsafe water storage
- Household hazards
- Poor waste disposal
- Unsafe disposal of children's feces around the home
- Limited risk perception
- Overcrowded living conditions
- Limited supervision structures

Priority Audience(s)

- **Primary**
 - > Caregivers / parents
- **Secondary**
 - > Health workers
 - > Household members
- **Influencers**
 - > Faith actors
 - > Community sanitation champions / WASHCOM members.

Key Messages

- Wash your hands and your child's hands with soap at key times. Clean hands protect your child from germs during feeding, cooking, toileting, and play.
- Keep your child's play area clean and safe. Remove sharp objects, dirt, electrical gadgets/ sockets and waste so your child can explore without getting sick or hurt.
- Store your drinking water safely. Use clean, covered containers to keep your family's water free from contamination.
- Dispose of waste properly around your home. A tidy environment reduces pests, germs, and sickness.
- Dispose of children's feces in a toilet or latrine to stop germs from spreading.

- Keep dangerous items out of your child's reach. Store hot objects liquids, chemicals, open water, and sharp tools safely to prevent burns, poisoning, drowning, and injuries.
- Create safe sleeping environment for your child. Provide safe sleeping spaces and beddings/cots for your child to prevent injury, falls or suffocation during sleep.

5. POSITIVE PARENTING & PROTECTION

Priority Focus: Strengthening nurturing, violence-free caregiving norms and child protection behaviours.

Key Issues / Barriers

- Prevailing norms supporting harsh discipline
- Low recognition of emotional harm
- Gender norms
- Stigma toward disability
- Early marriage pressures
- Limited caregiver stress management

Priority Audience(s)

- **Primary**
 - > Parents / caregivers
- **Secondary**
 - > Fathers
 - > Community influencers
- **Influencers**
 - > Faith actors
 - > Community Leaders

Key Messages

- Guide your child with patience and love. Responding to your child's needs with patience and affection helps them feel safe, valued, and secure, while building their confidence, trust, and emotional security.
- Children communicate through their behaviour, crying, withdrawal, or acting out often signal needs or feelings. Understanding these cues and responding with patience strengthens the caregiver-child relationship.
- Warm, loving interactions build emotional bonds, support brain development, and help all children, including those with developmental delays or disabilities, learn and thrive.
- Protect your child from all forms of violence. Keeping them safe from hitting, shouting, and humiliation helps them feel respected and secure. Avoid violent or forceful shaking when carrying or playing with your baby. Being available to supervise your child when they play guarantees their safety during play. Teach children to report unusual touch from familiar and unfamiliar persons to keep them safe and secure.
- Support girls to stay in school. Education strengthens their skills, confidence, and future opportunities.
- Delay marriage for girls until they are grown. Early marriage harms their health, rights, and overall well-being.

- Include children with disabilities in everyday play and learning. When they feel loved and accepted, they grow in ability, confidence, and social skills.
- Emotional security helps children explore and learn. A calm, loving, and violence-free environment helps children feel safe, valued, and confident, while reducing stigma ensures children with disabilities receive early care and support.
- Caregivers are not alone; support systems are available. Joining caregiver support groups strengthens coping and caregiving capacity

6. WOMEN & GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT

Priority Focus: Strengthening enabling conditions influencing caregiver capacity and child outcomes.

Key Issues / Barriers

- Unequal workload distribution
- Limited decision-making power
- Nutritional neglect of mothers
- Early marriage norms
- Limited male involvement
- Economic dependency constraints

Priority Audience(s)

- **Primary**
 - > Women / mothers
 - > Adolescent girls

- **Secondary**
 - > Fathers / men
 - > Household decision-makers
- **Influencers**
 - > Faith actors
 - > Community Leaders

Key Messages

- Share household responsibilities with all family members. When fathers and relatives help with childcare and chores, mothers have more time, energy, and strength to care for their children.
- Make important decisions together as a family. Joint choices about food, health, and learning lead to healthier and more supportive homes.
- Support mothers with rest, good nutrition, and emotional care. When mothers are physically and mentally healthy, they can care for their babies more effectively.
- Encourage girls to stay in school and build strong life skills. Delaying marriage and pregnancy gives girls the opportunity to grow, learn, and reach their full potential.
- Fathers and family members play an important role in nurturing care. Shared caregiving strengthens children's development and family well-being.
- When care and chores are shared, caregivers have more time to keep children clean, fed, and healthy.