

ESSENTIAL PACKAGE

Developing The Essential Package of ECD Services

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Background

The early childhood period covered by Ilifa Labantwana (Ilifa) commences in pregnancy and ends at 6 years old. Particularly in the first two years, this is a period of rapid development, during which children are particularly sensitive to the quality of affection, care and stimulation they receive.

Unfortunately, significant numbers of South Africa's young children and their caregivers live in high-risk environments that compromise their care and well-being and reduce the chances that they will be able to realise their potential. Service provision is fragmented, has limited reach, and is often of insufficient quality. These challenges have major consequences for human development and societal well-being over the long term. While universal provision of a full range of services to address all children's developmental needs is optimal, resources are limited, and we need to identify the *essential* services required to ensure sound early development. Particular attention must be paid to those who are most disadvantaged and affected by preventable risks to health and development.

The Essential Package of Early Childhood Services and Support developed by Ilifa provides concrete recommendations for a well-defined package of services and support to vulnerable children and those who care for them. *The Essential Package* was conceptualised early in 2013, following which an initial draft was presented at a consultative dialogue of experts.

Based on inputs received, and following consultation with other stakeholders, *The Essential Package* was refined, published and widely distributed.

What is in *The Essential Package*?

The Essential Package places primary caregivers at the centre of the child's care and development. It focuses primarily on prevention and early intervention services, with provision for referrals for more intensive interventions. It recognises that specific inputs are required at different stages of a child's development and that it is necessary to build a developmentally appropriate continuum of services, commencing with antenatal care.

The Essential Package is aligned to services already provided in government policy and programmes. Most essential services are universally required, while others target children with particular risk profiles (e.g. exposure to an HIV+ mother in pregnancy). *The Essential Package* is also aspirational in listing services that are not currently provided, but which are considered essential. It promotes intersectoral collaboration, as far as possible. *The Essential Package* is intended primarily as a tool to assist service providers to monitor essential service delivery. Simple indicators of service delivery and for measuring success are provided.

Figure 1: Components of the Essential Package



The five components of *The Essential Package* are outlined below:



1. Nutritional Support

Poor nutrition impacts negatively on brain development, learning capacity and physical development and has serious consequences for adult productivity and economic development. *The Essential Package* provides for maternal nutrition supplementation as an essential service, to ensure foetal health and growth. Breastfeeding is promoted for at least the first six months, and children failing to thrive must be provided with supplements.



2. Primary Level Maternal and Child Health Services

During pregnancy and the first two years, *The Essential Package* seeks to support improvements to the quality of antenatal care, prevent alcohol and substance abuse, and address the need for maternal mental health services, where required. Depression affects significant numbers of women in disadvantaged communities and compromises their ability to care. Alcohol abuse and drug usage (such as metamphetamaine or *tik*) impacts foetal neurological development. If the impact of such substances is to be reduced, screening and provision of primary level mental health support must be regarded as essential services.

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Screening children for developmental delay and disabilities is an essential service. If left unattended, they constitute barriers to learning and result in preventable poor educational performance. *Road to Health* booklets must be up to date, children must be fully immunised and their growth monitored. HIV-exposed children must receive PMTCT treatment.



3. Social Services

Essential social services defined in *The Essential Package* include birth registration, social protection (e.g. Child Support Grant - CSG), and protection from maltreatment. Birth registration is a constitutional right that should be secured as early as possible, as it is required to access services, including the CSG. *The Essential Package* proposes two services for child maltreatment that seek to improve the responsiveness of the child protection system and reduce the risk of secondary traumatisation. These must be complemented by preventive services, such as parenting programmes and caregiver support.

Evidence from across the world, including low-income countries, demonstrates that access to early learning stimulation in the preschool years significantly enhances the ability of children from impoverished backgrounds to benefit from schooling.



4. Support for Primary Caregivers

Nurturing parenting during the first years of a child's life has positive effects on all aspects of child development. Such capability is compromised in poverty and other stressful environments impacting the wellbeing of the caregiver, thus increasing the risk of child neglect and under-nutrition. *The Essential Package* proposes initiatives to support vulnerable caregivers and assist them to provide nurturant care. Support for primary caregivers includes parenting education and psychosocial support.



5. Stimulation for early learning

Children whose early years are spent under impoverished conditions tend to be disadvantaged by inadequate preparation for the demands of schooling. Evidence from across the world, including low-income countries, demonstrates that access to early learning stimulation in the preschool years significantly enhances the ability of children from impoverished backgrounds to benefit from schooling. It also reduces the likelihood that they will drop out of school and increases the probability that they will be employed as adults. *The Essential Package* recommends that poor children have access to one of the following early learning



programmes: a home visiting intervention in which stimulation for early learning is provided; a centre-based programme or a weekly quality playgroup with activities oriented toward readiness to learn in school; toy and book libraries.

Where to from here?

The Essential Package forms the conceptual basis for models being tested by Ilifa in North West and KwaZulu Natal provinces, to scale up access to services for vulnerable children and their caregivers. It has been presented to stakeholders in government and the ECD non-profit sector and has received considerable recognition as an important contribution. The ideas contained in *The Essential Package* are being incorporated in recommendations for the new ECD policy and programming being developed by UNICEF and the Department of Social Development. The goal is to ensure quality services for all children. It is their right and our duty.

***The Essential Package* is available for download at:**
<http://www.ilifalabantwana.co.za/2014/03/13/the-essential-package-of-ecd-services-and-support-to-vulnerable-children-in-south-africa/>