

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) Landscape in Singapore

What was the ECD Landscape Study?

This study was conducted in 2022–2023 to investigate the ECD landscape across four countries in Asia: China, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore. The study looked at both policies that govern early childhood development and programmes, and to understand what services and programmes are provided for young children and their families. Using available information about policies and programmes, the study also identified opportunities and investment for action in ECD for each country and across the region.¹

How was the ECD Landscape Study conducted?

A desktop search, expert interviews, and a review of existing literature were conducted to address the following questions:

- What parenting and ECD *programmes, services and policies* aimed at families with children between the ages of 0 to 6 years are currently being implemented across each country?

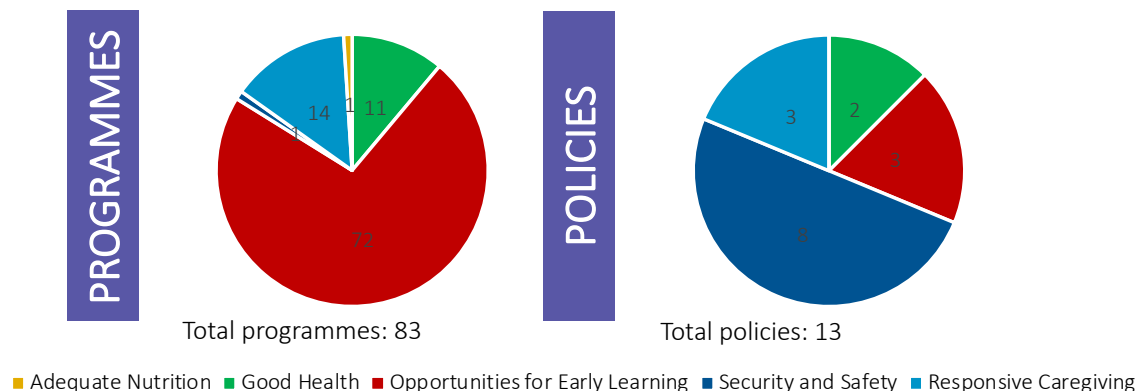


- When mapped against international frameworks, what *gaps* currently exist in the ECD programme provision in each country?
- What *evaluations* have been undertaken of ECD programmes and services?

The study used the WHO & UNICEF Nurturing Care Framework and the World Bank 25 Key Interventions to frame data collection and analysis. Additionally, the final chapter was reviewed by local experts.

What programmes and policies were found in Singapore?

Overall, there were 83 programmes and 13 policies identified in Singapore. Based on publicly available reports or publications, or information found on programme websites, we found that 12 out of 83 of the programmes in Singapore have been evaluated.



¹ This study, launched in July 2023, has been funded by the Centre for Holistic Initiatives for Learning and Development (CHILD), who partnered on research on Singapore, and 11 other funders and partners convened by the Asia Philanthropy Circle, who supported research on Indonesia, the Philippines and China.

"What works" in Singapore's ECD policy and programme provision?

Over the past 60 years, Singapore's focus on economic growth and development has included a commitment to making progress in the early childhood landscape. Investments in the growth of this sector continue in recognition of the relationship between ECD and achieving long-term human development potential.



- In spite of strong indicators within this area, an inter-agency taskforce was set up by the government to ensure continued improvements to child and maternal health and well-being



- The Singapore government has comprehensive policies, including parental leave policies, provision of affordable childcare, and a recently developed plan for more green spaces that could provide opportunities for outdoor play.



- SG has a comprehensive universal healthcare system with easy access to services, at low or no cost. Additionally, There is strong local evidence of the impact of maternal mental health on child outcomes and at the same time there are multiple stakeholders examining avenues to improve screening and provide intervention.



- Singapore is one of the world's safest countries in which to be a young child, where the government puts in place policies and regulations to address social protection and social services for children and families. It also has a broad coverage and service provision for children and families with multiple needs. For example, Singapore has recently expanded low-cost immunisation at government-funded polyclinics to provide greater access to all families.



- The last decade has seen sustained funding to improve access to and quality of childcare and formal early learning opportunities, with an increased focus on the inclusion of children with additional needs. Policies provide universal subsidies and targeted fee assistance to ensure that Singaporean and Singapore Permanent Resident children, regardless of family income, have access to childcare

What are the needs and opportunities in the ECD landscape in Singapore?

- Reduce childhood obesity and increase breastfeeding

The rate of childhood obesity in Singapore has increased, particularly during the pandemic years. Poor nutritional intake and an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, among other factors, contribute to the rise of childhood obesity. Many existing interventions that aim to address childhood obesity work in silos, with little cross-sectoral collaboration. Additionally, not enough is known about the state of breastfeeding in Singapore, as the available data is not up-to-date and not representative of the population.

There is a need to improve awareness of the importance of healthy eating and active lifestyles and examine how families instil healthy eating habits in their children. At the same time, government and community agencies can explore the barriers faced by some families in accessing and providing appropriate nutrition for their children. In terms of breastfeeding, government and community agencies can work with partners in non-health sectors to improve support for new mothers (e.g., advocating for more flexible employment and workplaces to support the needs of pregnant women and new mothers).

- Focus on non-maternal caregivers

A large proportion of young children in Singapore are cared for by grandparents and other non-maternal caregivers, particularly after women return to work following childbirth. Enhancing the caregiving practices of non-maternal caregivers will be beneficial to young children. This is in tandem with encouraging fathers to fully utilise paternity leave provisions and to be actively engaged in childcare responsibilities.

There are opportunities here to work with community partners who provide programmes and services on sensitive and responsive caregiving to expand their reach to non-maternal caregivers who have a significant role in the lives of young children. Within the private sector, there are also opportunities to increase employers' awareness and understanding of the benefits of paid parental leave, especially for low-income families. This shift in employer culture is a crucial step to increasing leave utilisation.

- Coordination across systems and providers

Singapore has a comprehensive set of programmes and services for families. This has led to numerous complicated systems with multiple entry points, depending on when you approach services. There is no centralised point of contact for families to access the support they require. Experts interviewed noted that for families who are already time-poor, the current system adds a layer of complexity in accessing the services that are most meaningful and necessary.

To address this, it would be crucial to work with community partners to develop 'navigation aides' to support families in making sense of the plethora of services that they are available to them. In addition, more needs to be done to simplify pathways and referral points.

- Retain and train the ECD workforce

While work has been done over the last decade to develop and implement professional standards and career pathways, efforts have been primarily focused on the early childhood education workforce. There are still gaps in other professions, including social work, learning support practitioners, and maternal and child health nurses. Furthermore, there is high turnover and attrition across the sector. While this issue is not unique to Singapore, local research is needed to understand the factors that lead to low retention rates. Working with local organisations can provide added support to the various professions.

- Strengthen data-driven decision making

There is a lack of specific ECD data at both national and programmatic level, such as data on initiation and sustainment of breastfeeding. Expert interviewees have highlighted the need for a coherent long-term outcome monitoring system for the sector. This would support the work of professionals who interact directly with children and caregivers to understand the impact of service provision, and to address gaps in a timely manner.