



Early Childhood Development in the West Bank and Gaza

ANERA
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ANERA Reports
on the ground in the Middle East

Volume 5 | February 2014



WHAT FUTURE FOR PALESTINIAN CHILDREN?

Palestinian children in the West Bank and Gaza have to navigate the daily obstacles imposed by occupation from the moment they enter the world. They are the innocent victims of the economic, political, social and health conditions around them.

Nearly six out of ten families in the West Bank and Gaza live below the United Nations' poverty line. Most eke out a living on less than \$2 a day.¹ The most vulnerable are preschoolers at an age when they are developing their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical abilities. Malnutrition and ill health plague children under five, many of whom suffer from anemia. In East Jerusalem alone, 95,000 children live in chronic poverty.²

Add to that the stress of violent surroundings that interrupts their schooling, and you have a critical challenge for Palestinian society.

Early Childhood Development

The earliest months and years of life – from conception to six years of age – are considered the most important developmental period in a person's life. This is when the foundation for future cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development is set. Research and experience demonstrate that the lack of vital stimulation, safe and secure surroundings, health, nutrition, and quality care in the early years can compromise an adult's cognitive, intellectual, and emotional capabilities. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that many challenges adults face, such as mental health issues, obesity, heart disease, criminality, and poor literacy and numeracy, can be traced back to deficiencies in early childhood.³

For Palestinians, the failure to devote sufficient resources and attention to nurturing young children could compromise not just the economic welfare but the prospects of future generations. Research shows that the quality of the nurturing environment of children often provides the tools for critical thinking, tolerance and understanding, as well as nurturing respect for differences between people and the basic rights of others. Early childhood development (ECD) cannot be viewed as a luxury, but rather as an essential building block for the next generation of Palestinian entrepreneurs, educators, inventors, and leaders.

In the context of human development, ECD is defined as programs and services for families and children from conception to six years of age in the fields of education, health, nutrition, protection, and sanitation. ECD is holistic, referring to a child's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.

Key Facts on ECD

- Early childhood is the most important phase for overall development throughout the lifespan.
- Brain and biological development during the first years of life is highly influenced by a child's environment.
- Early experiences determine health, education and economic participation for the rest of life.
- There are simple and effective ways for families and caregivers to ensure optimal child development.

WHO | Early Childhood Development: A Powerful Equalizer

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN THE WEST BANK & GAZA

Early childhood development in the West Bank and Gaza is compromised by serious deficiencies in the quality of and access to programs and services – among which are low enrollment, inadequate facilities, inexperienced teachers, reliance on inappropriate rote learning methods and limited parental involvement or understanding among families of the importance of good ECD practices. In addition to the poor quality of available preschool programs, rising poverty and barriers to mobility caused by the separation wall have led in recent years to a decline in pre-primary enrollment rates.⁴

Most Palestinian children cannot afford or gain access to high quality preschool education. In 2010-11, only 85,200 children or 38% of eligible children were enrolled in preschool.⁵ In Gaza,

West Bank & Gaza Facts

Nearly **20%** of the population is under the age of 5⁹

74% of Palestinian children in East Jerusalem live in poverty¹⁰

Only 4 preschools in the entire West Bank and Gaza are **public**

1,132 preschools are run by the **non-profit** sector¹¹

Only **38%** of eligible children are enrolled in preschools¹²

just 3% of preschool teachers hold an education degree or diploma.⁶ An ANERA survey of preschools in the Hebron and Jerusalem areas revealed child/teacher ratios from between 25 and 30 students per teacher.⁷ Field visits to preschools throughout Gaza showed that 86.7% of teachers rely on lecture-style teaching.⁸ Responses to the survey also show that children have few protections and are sometimes subjected to verbal, physical, and emotional abuse in the classroom and at home.

The schools and classrooms for preschoolers are rarely safe, stimulating or otherwise adequate for positive child development. They tend to be overcrowded, poorly ventilated, and unsafe. Very few preschools have safe outdoor play areas, stimulating toys or learning tools

like clay, crayons, drawing pads, building blocks, or appealing children's books. Accommodations are rarely made for children with disabilities. Families often have limited knowledge of proper ECD practices that aim to help each child reach his or her maximum potential.

Since its establishment in late 1994, the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education has increased access to primary education with a large-scale school building program and the introduction of the first national Palestinian curriculum. But early childhood development is not supported by a national framework or public financing so there are gaps in service delivery that severely affect the quality and availability of preschool educational services. There are only four public preschools in the entire West Bank and Gaza. The non-profit sector runs the remaining 1,132.¹³

“I cannot let time or obstacles stand in my way of helping the children in my community learn and thrive. I’ll keep going until I’ve done everything I can for my students.”

Principal Najwa Abu Thabet, Al Mosadar Preschool in Gaza

CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES

In the past few years there have been some strides toward improving the early childhood development sector in the West Bank and Gaza. The Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education is working towards establishing a national ECD curriculum framework; creating and implementing new national standards for licensing preschools based on the physical condition of the school; and institutionalizing regular inspections of preschools.

The ministry, however, does not have adequate financial and human resources to make all of the improvements that are vital to fostering early childhood development. To bring about substantial, wide-spread changes, the ministry must work in partnership with the non-governmental sector – with organizations such as ANERA.

ANERA has been engaged in improving the health and education of young children in Gaza for more than 10 years and in the West Bank for four years. ANERA has worked to build a coordinated program that combines nutritional, health, educational and social aspects of a broad ECD program to meet the development needs of young Palestinian children (see a timeline of ANERA's ECD-related activities on pages 8-9). ANERA's ECD program, named *Right Start!*, brings together teachers, parents and other ECD stakeholders to promote quality services that meet a young child's holistic development needs. ANERA's program integrates health and nutrition, professional development of teachers, school infrastructure upgrades, positive-parenting outreach, and curricula that include greater emphasis on reading and artistic expression.



Child Health and Nutrition

Challenges

Nutrition problems are chronic in Gaza and the West Bank. In 2010, 19.4% of children between 6-59 months had anemia, with an incidence of 25.6% in the West Bank and 13.4% in Gaza.¹⁴

72.6% of preschool-aged children in Gaza drink tea,¹⁵ which increases vitamin deficiencies.

ANERA's 2012 and 2013 surveys of preschools, teachers, and caregivers in Gaza revealed a number of inappropriate nutritional practices. Availability of food and taste preference ranked before nutritional value and child age when determining what to serve young children. It is normal for children to drink tea – a troubling trend because poor diet coupled with heavy tea consumption increases the rate of anemia in children.

One of the most critical issues facing Palestinian preschool children (aged 3-6) is that of malnutrition. The combined effects of the Israeli siege and poverty in Gaza have resulted in the widespread development of anemia among women and children; consequently, stunting in Gaza's children is on the rise, affecting about 31.4% of children under the age of two.¹⁶ The consequences of poor nutrition resulting in underweight, stunting, and anemia are enormous and seriously impair the child's physical, cognitive, and social faculties.

Immunization and growth monitoring is offered through the Palestinian Ministry of Health, UNRWA, and some non-profit organizations in the first year of life and occasionally up to 18 months. In Gaza, food aid programs mostly target older children or families as a whole. As such, preschool-aged children remain neglected with little access to vital foodstuffs and essential screening, referral and growth monitoring services. Teachers and parents caring for this age group often do not have the necessary knowledge or skills to begin identifying and addressing health and nutritional problems. This situation threatens an entire generation of young Palestinians with a lifetime of morbidity, and social and economic challenges unless urgent national efforts are made to address this chronic problem.

The Response

Successful ECD programs include health as a vital component, emphasizing the direct link between hygiene and nutrition – including vitamins, supplementation and consumption of fortified food products – and the physical and cognitive development of children in the early years of life.

In a 2002 health assessment, ANERA discovered that Gaza's children were suffering from anemia, vitamin A deficiency, and acute and chronic malnutrition.¹⁷ Many were at risk of irreversible physical and neurological damage. In response, from 2003 to 2011, ANERA's Milk for Preschoolers program delivered a vitamin-fortified snack of milk and biscuits every school day to thousands of preschoolers throughout Gaza.

Today, in both the West Bank and Gaza, ANERA holds awareness sessions for families to help increase their understanding of childhood nutrition, health and development. ANERA partners with local Palestinian health organizations to run mobile health services at targeted preschools and community centers in Gaza. Health teams provide physical exams, assess hearing and vision, monitor growth, and screen for anemia and parasitic infections. These types of interventions are proving successful in improving knowledge of child nutrition and health care, but more work must be done to ensure that new practices are effectively implemented and nutritionally sound.

Teacher Development

Challenges

Preschools in the West Bank and Gaza are usually staffed by young, inexperienced teachers with only a secondary education and little awareness of effective ECD teaching and learning practices. Many preschool teachers end up in the education sector because they do not believe there are alternative job opportunities or because they simply need a salary. But low salaries and status mean teaching is not an attractive profession, leading to a high teacher-turnover rate. Few professional development opportunities exist for individuals who want to specialize in preschool education and in-service training is rare, which means most teachers continue using poor pedagogical methods.

In its 2012-2013 assessment of preschools in Gaza, ANERA's surveyors found that nearly 90% of teachers used non-participatory methods of teaching in their classrooms, which are proven not to be as effective for maintaining preschooler interest and attention as are interactive teaching practices such as songs, music, movement, drama, and puppet shows.¹⁸

Child safety and emotional well-being are not high priorities within the preschool sector. Only 54% of preschool teachers in Gaza report avoiding physical, verbal and emotional punishment in the classroom and only 39.5% of teachers practice health and safety-related activities with their children regularly.¹⁹

The Response

ANERA is organizing new training courses for principals, teachers, and community workers to improve their knowledge of fundamental ECD teaching best practices, effective reading, and positive parenting.

ANERA initiated a pilot teacher training program in 2010 with eight teachers and two supervisors from two preschools in Bethlehem and 12 teachers from Nablus. The program provided preschool educators comprehensive classes on teaching methods for young children. Eight teachers from that first class have become trainers themselves. During the 2012-2013 academic year in Gaza, 127 preschool teachers participated in ANERA's intensive nine-day training on active learning, nutrition and healthy eating habits, reading strategies, child protection and positive parenting.

These kinds of professional development initiatives, organized by ANERA and other non-profits, train teachers in child-centered learning principles that emphasize a child's unique identity in the context of the learning process.

“We discovered that anemia in the Middle East is most often caused by malnutrition or parasite infections... We can treat it by encouraging good eating habits and iron-rich foods in the diet...”

*Dr. Alaa Al Massri
Palestinian Medical Relief Society in Gaza*

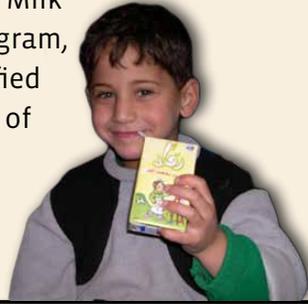


Highlights from ANERA's Early Childhood Development Program

2003

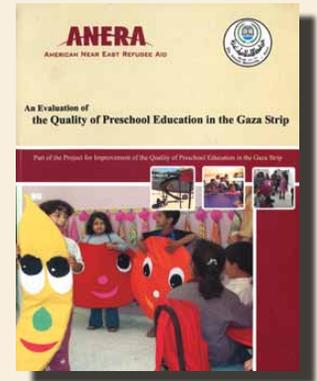


Began the eight-year Milk for Preschoolers program, delivering a vitamin-fortified carton of milk and packet of biscuits every school day to thousands of children in Gaza.



2005

Published an evaluation of preschools in Gaza to measure the quality of preschool education based on curricula, teacher qualifications, materials used and parent participation.



2010

Four preschools in Nablus and Bethlehem, West Bank, began piloting the different facets of ANERA's ECD programming: school renovation, teacher training, positive parenting, artistic expression and reading aloud.



Renovated four pilot West Bank schools.

2011



Launched "Arts for Childhood," delivering music, drama, photography and expressive arts training sessions for preschool staff at four West Bank pilot preschools.



2012



Launched the *Let's Read!* initiative to give children access to quality books and learning materials and to increase teacher and parent awareness of the importance of reading aloud and making the experience fun and interactive.



Renovated 60 preschools in Gaza.

2013



Transformed 10 preschools in the Jerusalem and Hebron areas and four in Gaza into safe and stimulating places for young children.

Began construction of a brand new preschool in Al-Majd in Hebron.

For 2 years, delivered a new pair of TOMS shoes to every child at 130 Gaza preschools.

2006-7



Delivered an in-service training course on active learning techniques for 80 Gaza preschool teachers.

2009-10



Renovated 42 Gaza preschools, making them safer, cleaner and more child-centered learning environments.



Screened and tested 20,000 Gaza children for hearing impairments, providing 100+ with hearing aids.

2009

Palestinian Ministry of Education approved a multi-year initiative under ANERA's leadership to map out a national strategy for ECD. The initiative brought together teachers, parents and other ECD stakeholders to promote quality preschool education.



Began offering an in-service ECD training certificate. 24 teachers and administrators start an intensive 35-day ECD training course on child development, child rights, learning theories, safety, room organization, arts and play.

8,000 preschoolers in Gaza received a new pair of Crocs shoes.



Brought together 45 parents for "Positive Parenting" workshops at four West Bank preschools, where they learned simple and effective ways of ensuring their children's optimal development.



Hosted health-themed summer camps for 2,000 preschoolers in Gaza.



In the West Bank, 300 preschoolers attended expressive arts summer camps.



Conducted 704 "Positive Parenting" sessions, reaching 3,277 caregivers and parents, in Gaza.



Delivered 40 health education sessions for parents on parasite infection, prevention and personal hygiene in Gaza.



Established special reading corners in 90 preschools in Gaza.

5,345 Gaza preschoolers received their own bags filled with children's books.



Trained 360 Gaza teachers and other preschool stakeholders on fundamentals of ECD, reading aloud techniques, positive-parenting strategies and facilitation skills.



37 preschool teachers from Jerusalem and Hebron completed in-service teacher training and eight previously trained teachers became trainers themselves.



9,000 preschoolers in the West Bank and Gaza received their own bags of books.



= Infrastructure



= Teacher Training



= Health



= Reading



= Parenting



= Arts

School Infrastructure

Challenges

The majority of Palestinian preschools in the West Bank and Gaza are inadequate environments for the care and education of children. Many schools were not initially designed to be childcare and education centers, and are instead last-minute additions to community centers and mosques. Preschools are overcrowded, dilapidated, and lack facilities such as playgrounds, reading corners, and educational books that encourage positive learning experiences. Classrooms are poorly lit, lack proper ventilation, and do not meet safety and health standards. While many preschools have play areas, playground equipment is in short supply and safety levels are poor.

The Response

ANERA and other international non-profits are working to improve conditions at Palestinian preschools, making them safer, more child-appropriate, and cheerful learning environments.

Since 2009, ANERA has renovated 106 preschools in Gaza and 14 in the West Bank, making water fountains and bathrooms more child-friendly, replacing roofs, painting classrooms, installing new blackboards, repairing and brightening playgrounds, installing sun shades over play areas, and erecting water tanks for clean drinking water.



“They left a dilapidated preschool last summer and now everything is brand new. I hear their joy when they tell new students about all the bright new colors in their classrooms, new bathrooms and drinking fountains.”

Principal Salwa Abu Ayesh, Baraem Al-Amal wa Al-Mahaba Preschool in Gaza

Encouraging Emerging Literacy Skills

Challenges

Neglect of reading at the preschool age threatens the future of all Palestinian children, leaving them ill-prepared for success in primary school and beyond. Reading is understood to foster better language and literacy skills in children, but families and teachers are often unaware of the benefits of early exposure to books and reading. There also is a critical shortage of high-quality, locally-produced and culturally-appropriate reading materials in the West Bank and Gaza.

The Response

To build support for reading in schools, ANERA established the *Hayya Naqra! (Let's Read!)* initiative, which aims to increase teacher and family awareness of the importance of reading as well as to develop and distribute high quality children's books and resources. To date, ANERA has installed 90 special reading corners in Gaza and 14 in West Bank preschools and has distributed over 14,000 book bags to preschoolers filled with story books and other educational materials. Key to the success of this initiative is working with teachers and families to read aloud to children, encouraging them to use their imagination and memory to engage actively in story-telling.



5-year-old Malak Al-Ja'ara reads a story on her own at the Bethlehem Governmental Kindergarten.



Ola El-Quissi and her son
Mohammad at the
El-Shatee' Preschool
in Gaza.

Positive Parenting

Challenges

Most of a child's early learning takes place at home and among family members, not within the walls of a classroom. Families in the West Bank and Gaza, under pressure to provide the basics for their families, often have limited knowledge of easy-to-implement positive practices that can address the developmental needs of young children. There is little contact with preschool staff and a lack of knowledge or awareness of the important role parents play as teachers of their children.

ANERA's 2012-2013 assessment of caregiver and parent knowledge in Gaza found that 65.2% had never participated in ECD-related training, including sessions on child learning, child development, and child rights. A minority of families reported engaging in activities like reading to a child at bedtime, regularly buying or creating new toys, and taking children to weekly recreational activities. Parents and other caregivers admit that sometimes they rely on the destructive practice of corporal punishment to discipline children.²⁰

The Response

Successful ECD programs involve parents, teachers, caregivers and the wider community in providing stimulating physical and mental activities for children in safe environments – home, community, and preschool.

Family participation in ANERA's positive parenting workshops has improved awareness of their special role in stimulating the cognitive, social and emotional development of their children.

Families and communities are beginning to understand that ECD is an integrated strategy that depends on their interactions with children and the preschool community. They report, for instance, reading to their children more and taking them out for social activities more frequently. Positive practices for enforcing child discipline are also beginning to take root, such as acknowledging when a child is behaving appropriately and avoiding physical or emotional punishment for perceived negative behaviors. Over 80% of parents who participate in ANERA's ECD programming in Gaza report providing weekly incentives to their children to promote good behavior.²¹



A West Bank family and friends enjoying a park ANERA built in their Ramallah community.

Expressive Arts and Activities

Challenges

Children in Palestinian communities undergo huge trauma very early in life, due to occupation, siege, and periods of bombing and violence. Their psychological condition can be very fragile. Children need play and artistic release to help maintain a positive outlook and encourage a continued desire to learn. Arts education in early childhood has a profound impact on cognitive development, motor skills, psychosocial development, creativity, and enhanced self-esteem.

The Response

ANERA's Arts for Childhood program integrates arts into Palestinian preschool curricula, exposing preschoolers to the world of arts and increasing parents' and communities' awareness of the importance of arts in children's growth and development. ANERA collaborates with local artists and organizations to provide resource materials and trainers to introduce children to music, dance, drama, photography, fine art, story-telling, and handicrafts. ANERA's summer camp program in Gaza and the West Bank provides critical play opportunities for thousands of Palestinian children. Campers participate in sessions on drawing, sports, and music while also learning about hygiene and proper nutrition.



“The children come from poor families in El-Shijaeya [Gaza] and don’t have much. So I am delighted that they have had an opportunity to have fun and also develop their creative abilities... The most popular activity at summer camp is coloring.”

*Areej El-Jamaal, Counselor
ANERA summer camp at
Al Tifl Saeed Preschool, 2012*

MOVING FORWARD

ANERA's comprehensive approach to early childhood development in the Palestinian territories has made important gains for preschool teachers, children and their families. ANERA makes children a priority in its efforts to improve school infrastructure and support child-centered curricula. Our ECD program has created bright and inspiring spaces for children to learn and play and encouraged teachers to further their professional development and share knowledge with peers. Importantly, ANERA's projects have spread awareness about the value of ECD and attracted the interest of families in preschool education.

While these improvements are encouraging, considerable work still needs to be done to integrate efforts at the community, household, preschool, and policy-making levels to improve access to and efficacy of ECD programs and services. The needs of Palestinian preschool children are huge, as only 30-40% of children currently receive basic services. ANERA hopes to consolidate gains in the ECD sector in the following ways:

- Continue and expand training programs for teachers and teacher-trainers in child-centered learning practices.
- Build and renovate more preschools to serve as models for expanding preschool access.
- Reach more parents and caregivers with classes in positive-parenting techniques.
- Collaborate with government and higher education partners to establish an accredited ECD diploma.
- Offer health and nutrition advice and support to more children and parents.
- Continue expanding creative opportunities for children outside of the classroom, including summer camps and art workshops.

ANERA's decade of experience implementing ECD programming in the West Bank and Gaza gives us a prime opportunity to help shape and direct a national strategy for Palestinian communities. We remain committed to improving the delivery and scope of our ECD interventions through collaborating with the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education and other partners to make the preschool experience a reality for all Palestinian children.

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SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Text: Nada Dajani, Liz Demarest, Laurie Kassman, Sulieman Mleahat and Michelle Munjanattu

Photos: Nada Dajani and Rania Elhilou

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ABOUT ANERA'S ON-THE-GROUND SERIES

The ANERA on-the-ground series is designed to add a humanitarian voice to the story of life in the Middle East. With data from ANERA's professional staff, people who live and work in the communities they serve, and with over 40 years of experience in the region, ANERA has a unique opportunity to build a fuller understanding of what life is like for families struggling to survive within an atmosphere of severe political strife and daily turmoil.