

# What we can learn from the Cuban Early Childhood Development system

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Cuba has made a strong commitment to holistic early childhood development (ECD), setting up a national system that has inspired other countries in the region and presents interesting examples of good practice in the design and large-scale implementation of cost-effective, integrated ECD services. A recent publication, *Early Childhood Development in Cuba*, by UNICEF Cuba and the UNICEF Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (2016), documented the Cuban ECD system’s implementation strategies and most significant results, highlighting four key elements:

- 1 Family is the centrepiece of the Cuban system. Cuba strives to equip families with the necessary skills and knowledge to create stimulating, caring and safe home environments. Daycare centres involve families through monthly group activities, while family doctors provide information on appropriate nutrition and preventing injuries in the home. Families are seen as embedded in communities, which share responsibility for children alongside state service providers.
- 2 ECD services are provided in a coordinated and integrated manner. For example, the community-based programme ‘Educa a tu Hijo’ (‘Educate your Child’) is implemented by coordinating groups with representatives from sectors including education, health, culture, sports, and community organisations. It is the non-institutional modality of early childhood education, preparing families to stimulate their children’s development through activities in the home.
- 3 Risk prevention and early detection are key. The Cuban ECD model is designed to anticipate and remedy potential threats to a child’s development before they occur. For instance, well child care is a priority: children’s growth and development are regularly monitored, taking into account

social well-being and non-medical factors such as living conditions or parents’ employment. At the beginning of each school year the education sector identifies families who need specific attention, to monitor and prevent any negative impact on child development, such as families with low salaries or a history of alcoholism.

- 4 The Cuban system pays attention to diversity: ECD services in Cuba are accessible to all children, with specific attention to ensuring access for the most vulnerable. Educa a tu Hijo has specific activities adapted for children with disabilities or who are hospitalised. The programme is also implemented in the prison system – group activities are organised when children visit their parents in prison, accompanied by a family member. This has had a significant impact on prisoners and strengthened the interactions between young children and their incarcerated parents.

Cuba’s integrated system has had significant results for children. It has achieved universal access to quality early childhood education, whether institutional or community-based; significant child development outcomes; universal maternal and child healthcare; and protective environments at the family and community levels.

## Reference

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UNICEF (2016). *Early Childhood Development in Cuba: Sharing the experience of a scaled-up integrated system that promotes the best start in life for every child*. Havana: UNICEF. Available at: [http://www.unicef.org/cuba/resources\\_32528.htm](http://www.unicef.org/cuba/resources_32528.htm) (accessed April 2016).

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