

AVSI Approach to Early Childhood Development and to Early Childhood Education

Education is a lifelong journey and relationships are essential to the discovery of the self and of the world in which we live

With over 50 years of experience as a global NGO, AVSI Foundation is renowned for championing a holistic approach to child development and its long-standing commitment in promoting the protection and healthy development of children, as well as the provision of quality education for all.

AVSI's demonstrated record of building community-based and local organizations is facilitated by its decentralized management structure which includes international headquarters in Italy and the US and dynamic regional offices in Kenya, Lebanon, Ivory Coast, Haiti, Brazil. Currently, AVSI is implementing more than 70 projects in the education and educational services sector, serving almost one million direct beneficiaries across 22 countries worldwide. Education is a lifelong journey and **relationships are essential** to the discovery of self and the world in which we live. AVSI takes a socio-ecological approachⁱ which sees childhood development as an interactive process with multiple levels of relationships that influence the acquisition of competencies. The model emphasizes the complex interplay between education, health, nutrition, protection and safety, and responsive caregiving as necessary for nurturing care and development.ⁱⁱ

Access to quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) is crucial for healthy development.ⁱⁱⁱ Cognitive scientists agree that the groundwork for lifelong learning is laid between the ages of three and 10.^{iv} Pre-primary education provides the foundation for higher levels of education and is key to lifelong learning and continued development.^v At the same time, adequate early learning environments can foster the growth of self-aware adults who exercise critical thinking and demonstrate skills needed in facing 21st-century challenges.^{vi} Furthermore, education that integrates psychosocial support and social-emotional learning in a safe and supportive environment improves children's intellectual and emotional competencies, sense of control and self-worth.^{vii} In line with this holistic approach, multi-sectoral implementation of activities becomes essential to meet the whole range of child developmental needs including protection, health, education, and nutrition.

Below are three examples of child development programs designed and implemented by AVSI in countries experiencing prolonged crises or extreme poverty. The interventions focus on strengthening caregivers and communities as key protection actors while ensuring infants, toddlers, and preschoolers have access to quality education experiences.

LEBANON: QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NON-FORMAL SETTINGS

In Lebanon, AVSI has been implementing non-formal education activities with refugee children in response to the Syrian crises since 2015. The activities involve key actors and follow the Social Ecological Model:

For **toddlers and preschool children** (3-5 years), AVSI provides equitable access to safe, secure, and stimulating environments for playing and learning; AVSI offers activities and experiences that address academic and much needed social emotional skills (SEL) to help children develop physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially while interacting with responsive adults.

For **front-line educators**, AVSI provides specialized training for teachers, educators, and facilitators to foster professional knowledge and skills in child development pedagogy at age-appropriate levels. Trainings are especially geared to improve educator awareness towards the crucial link between the **quality of educator-child interactions and child development** and to enhance pedagogical competencies through differentiated instruction and integration of playful methods of teaching and learning (examples: use of Lego toys, educational apps for play-based classroom activities regular class observations and monitoring). Coaching is also key to professional development because it ensures that educators put into practice early childhood principles and methods.

For **caregivers**—through awareness sessions and engaging activities, AVSI works with parents to foster an understanding that the needs of children go beyond the physical (especially challenging in contexts with a scarcity of basic items like food) to include social and psychological needs. Robust attention is given to: the importance of assuring a safe home environment by focusing on child protection measures (including personal hygiene, dangers of household products, safety on the roads, violence and abuse, online safety and cyberbullying, etc.); the importance of positive parental response to children’s needs even when their expressions can be inappropriate and very challenging; and the importance of parental engagement in their children’s learning by encouraging caregivers to meet with teachers and review their child’s profile at the end of a learning cycle.

RWANDA: MULTISECTORAL COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH TO EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

In Rwanda, AVSI has developed a multisectoral approach based on the concept of connecting parents, community, schools, social and health services, and local authorities (called “PACOME” – a French acronym for *PA*rents, *CO*mmunauté, *E*cole).

Building on an initial response in 2015, the intervention has transformed kindergartens into Early Childhood Development centers that offer a variety of related community activities and services. Centers provide a **multisectoral approach** through safe, well-

furnished physical spaces for early childhood development, education, protection, and care; nutrition services, including feeding, monitoring, counseling, and prevention of malnutrition; legal assistance for children and family documentation; gender and social norms sensitization; training in parenting skills and a forum for mothers to interact.

Key to the success of the program is the **vital and proactive role parents and communities** play in all aspects of child development. The program takes a partnership approach to ensure the active participation of parents, mainly mothers, as **key partners and assets** in the design, programming, and evaluation processes. Parental involvement is crucial in making the ECD centers operational. In Rwanda, parents formed committees to build capacity on ECD practices and activities, nutritional methods, prenatal health measures, and other relevant topics. Finally, “model parents” were selected and trained to ensure coordination between the centers and contribute to government policy and planning strategies in the ECD sector. Thanks to this participatory approach, AVSI has been able to scale up ECD services and expand from an exclusively center-based approach to one that is flexible enough to reach children and caregivers at home, thereby, facilitating wider access in rural communities.

Lastly, engaging **local authorities and government officials** in the process boosts government ownership of the ECD community-based model, and facilitates **the scaling-up of new ECDs** in communities, while providing state supervision of the community-based management of the centers.

The PACOME approach leads to greater **sustainability** because the community assumes ownership of the center, strengthening the partnership between the local population and existing community structures, while decreasing the need for external resources and aid.

ECUADOR: “PELCA” PROGRAM, “PRESCHOOL AT HOME”

Since 2005 in **Ecuador**, AVSI has been successfully operating its *Preschool at Home* program (*Preescolar en la Casa* in Spanish) involving vulnerable communities in rural areas of Portoviejo and suburbs of Quito with limited access to education services.

Centered on the **education and development of children aged 0-5 years**, the program works with parents to activate and strengthen their vital role as educators (especially mothers who are the primary caregivers in the context).

Through periodic small group trainings, parents engage in instructional activities with their children under the direction of professional educators. Trainings cover principles and age-appropriate strategies for childhood education and development including hygiene and nutrition. Parents receive homework and evaluation packages to be completed with children until the next group session. The training serves both the need for children to have responsive caregivers and also empowers parents by valuing their dignity and role in the educational process. Regular home visits conducted by professional educators provide individualized support to families in their home setting.

Since the context is characterized by high levels of violence, training sessions also **emphasize family and parent-child relations**, resilience, social-emotional learning, and financial literacy. The periodic meetings support parents, especially women, by providing a safe space to discuss challenges, seek advice from other caregivers and share experiences. This exchange process reinforces community ties and facilitates the transition of children to primary schools.

ⁱ Bronfenbrenner, U. (1992). *Ecological systems theory*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

ⁱⁱ Early childhood development coming of age: science through the life course; Published online October 4, 2016; www.thelancet.com

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/how-early-childhood-experiences-affect-lifelong-health-and-learning/>

^{iv} Barratt-Pugh, C., & Rohl, M. (2000). *Literacy learning in the early years* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003116325>

^v Reshma, P. M., & Vasumathi, T. (2020). Redefining pre-primary education through e-learning: A supplementary strategy across the world. In P. Suresh Prabu, A. Sivakumar, & V. Parthiban (Eds.), *Developing the next generation learners in this digital era (Vol. 1)* (pp. 158–167). Lulu Publication.

^{vi} Cano-Hila, A. B., & Argemí-Baldich, R. (2021). Early childhood and lockdown: The challenge of building a virtual mutual support network between children, families and school for sustainable education and increasing their well-being. [La primera infancia y el encierro: el desafío de construir una red]. *Sustainability*, 13, 3654. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13073654> Abstract:

^{vii} INEE Background Paper on Psychosocial Support and Social and Emotional Learning for Children and Youth in Emergency Settings, 2016