

Early Childhood Centers in the Inter-Ministerial Module in Emergencies*

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The Early Childhood Center in the Inter-Ministerial Module (hereafter, ECC) serves as the "home for preschoolers" in the local community, and as such, as a community anchor in both routine times and emergencies. This chapter presents standards for ECC operations in emergency situations. An emergency situation is defined as a national or local event that significantly disrupts the routine of the child and family's lives. This situation requires renewed preparations and adjustments by all support systems.

This disruption of the children's life routine may have a particularly damaging effect on the well-being and welfare of certain population groups, including children and families at risk. A crisis may increase the frequency of risk situations in a variety of life areas. For example, in the *emotional-social area*, many children experience anxieties and uncertainties, some of which are also related to the parents' distress. *Family belonging* may also be affected. According to Arazi and Sabag (2020), this life area is related to aspects of childcare and supervision within the family, and includes physical care, providing an appropriate environment for child development, supplying services and treatments necessary for the child, and protecting the child against risk situations at home and outside. In emergencies, when the civilian population is required to stay at home, the frequency of risk situations in the family is liable to increase due to neglect of the children in the nutritional, hygienic, and health spheres, as well as to increased exposure to abuse and harm. In the *educational area*, if the education system is shut down for a long period, this might damage the continuity of learning and motivation to study due to the distance from educators (Arazi & Sabag, in Dolev et al., 2022).

In emergency situations, the ECC faces a double challenge: (1) New needs and the exacerbation of existing needs among children and their families, arising directly from the crisis; (2) The need to adjust the organizational systems and service provision to the emergency and to government directives. Our experience with ECC operations during the COVID-19 crisis suggests that these challenges can be best addressed by leveraging the ECC's unique organizational structure, and by collaborations, specifically by creating an

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inter-ministerial organizational umbrella to enable meeting the ECC's target population's needs (Dolev et al., 2022).

The ECC's approach to emergency situations will promote the coping skills of the children and their parents and enable them to feel supported by professionals who have their best interests in mind. This will help to enhance their sense of protection in the immediate term and minimize the negative impacts of the emergency situation in the longer term.

Recommendations for ECC Best Practices in Emergencies

In developing standards for ECC activities, five basic values have been selected, each encompassing ECC best practices (see Figure 1). This section offers explanations for each value, together with relevant action items for emergencies.

Figure 1: The Five Basic Values of ECC Operations



Management

Explanation: Optimal management in the ECC involves leading a multidisciplinary team and making decisions based on data collection and quality assurance processes, in order to ensure high-quality service focused on the needs of child and family (Ezra & Zimlichman, 2017; Lara Montero et al., 2017). In an emergency, it is critical to identify new challenges and needs in order to provide relevant interventions.

Action Items:

- Map needs: Identify the difficulties and challenges of the target population – children and their parents – as well as of the ECC staff
- Map the available resources and strengths in order to meet needs in the unique contexts of the local authority and the families served at the ECC

- Convene an inter-ministerial work team by the ECC director to receive updated guidelines and decide on required action jointly, with inter-ministerial coordination
- Consult and share information, knowledge and ideas for solutions among the community of ECC directors

Person-Centered Care

Explanation: The ECC must provide a comprehensive, coordinated, continuous, and accessible service package, while at the same time attending to the personal preferences, needs and values of the service recipient. It is also important for the parents (and their children, as much as possible) to be part of the decision-making process regarding the intervention or treatment in question: the parents must receive relevant information on potential interventions and treatments in order to select the most appropriate care for them and their children in both routine times and emergencies (Ezra & Zimlichman, 2017).

Action Items:

- Maintain proactive and continuous contact with the families to identify all their needs resulting from the emergency situation
- Involve parents in decision making regarding themselves and their children to ensure the most suitable care
- Provide dedicated and tailored interventions to meet the needs of population groups at risk, such as providing food packages and technological equipment
- Make the ECC services accessible in accordance with emergency directives (e.g., distributing activity or play kits to families, and holding online therapeutic or parental guidance meetings)
- Support families in the processes of exercising their rights as a result of the situation

Skilled Professionals

Explanation: As the home for preschoolers in the community, the ECC must employ professionals with relevant knowledge and occupational experience according to clear and agreed-upon criteria for selecting the candidates for hiring in every activity area. In an emergency, these professionals become even more essential. However, they themselves are often included among those directly or indirectly affected by the situation, and may therefore find it difficult to function fully, if at all.

Action Items:

- Map the existing human resources and those required to meet the new needs
- Hire additional dedicated employees, as required
- Define the ECC employees as essential workers for operating the emergency program
- Map the needs of the ECC staff as a target audience in its own right, also deserving of support

Continuity of Care

Explanation: To provide children and parents with a comprehensive and accurate set of services, adjusted to their needs in various life areas, the service systems must be synchronized (Satherley et al., 2021). This is particularly true of the education, welfare, and health systems in the local authority. During an emergency, coordination and synchronization of the various systems becomes all the more important, as it must enable rapid and more precise mapping of needs and adapting the interventions as quickly as possible.

Action Items:

- Establish the ECC as a complementary professional address in the local authority for consultation in emergencies on issues related to preschoolers and their parents, in accordance with the local authority's resources and relevant procedures
- Enhance the coordination and collaboration between the ECC staff and professionals in the local authority, given the emergency situation, on issues related to mapping and meeting the needs of children and their parents served at the ECC

Parent Partnership

Explanation: Parent partnership is essential to the advancement of their children. Therefore, being attentive to the parents' opinions, beliefs and needs is central to the planning of ECC interventions. This view is informed, among other things, by the strengths approach, which considers service recipients to be active agents in the process, who create and generate change in their lives by setting goals and ways to achieve them (Alfasi et al., 2021). Moreover, maintaining contact with the parents through parent partnership enables the ECC management to gain an unmediated understanding of the client's needs at all times, and thereby continually develop interventions relevant to the ECC population (Yrjölä, 2021). Even in an emergency, it is important to involve the parents as much as possible, in order to refine the interventions provided according to their needs and preferences.

Action Items:

- Consult with the parent leadership as part of the process of mapping the target population's needs and the local authority's resources
- Identify parents who can contribute in an emergency situation, and include them in ECC interventions

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