Policy Brief: Scaling Up ECD Parenting Programmes

Lessons from the Caregiver Learning Through Play (CLTP) Consortium Project

1. Importance of ECD Parenting Programmes and Play-Based Approaches

Early Childhood Development (ECD) parenting programmes are vital, especially in low-resource settings where children often lack access to formal early learning environments. These programmes equip parents and caregivers with the skills to support their children's cognitive, emotional, and social growth, addressing gaps in early learning through play-based approaches. **Play-based learning encourages curiosity, problem-solving, and bonding, all essential to child development.** Programmes like CLTP emphasise that learning through play is not just beneficial but crucial, particularly for families in resource-poor communities, where structured early learning opportunities are rare.

2. Background of the CLTP Programme

The **Caregiver Learning Through Play (CLTP)** programme, funded by the **LEGO Foundation** and led by **HOPE worldwide South Africa (HWSA)** in partnership with three national organisations: **Save the Children SA, Ntataise, and the Early Learning Resource Unity (ELRU)**, focuses on creating a systemic change in ECD through responsive caregiving and learning through play in the home environment. The consortium leverages the strengths of each partner organisation, covering multiple provinces and deeply rooted community connections. CLTP has reached **518 688 parents and caregivers and 6858 ECD Practitioners over 4 years**, delivering play-centered learning in culturally relevant ways that meet local needs. The programme has also influenced the review of the Government's National Parenting Programme curriculum. This collaboration has enabled the CLTP programme to create a broad, positive impact in ECD across South Africa.

Prime Partner:	Lead Partner in M&E and Advocacy:	ECD Network and Implementing Partner:	Implementing Partner:
Experience in curriculum-based ECD Parenting and Play programmes and NGO training in 7 provinces	Experience in integrated ECD programming across 5 provinces, M&E & Advocacy	Network of 21 ECD organisations. Over 40 years of experience in curriculum development, programming & networking in 7 provinces	Experience in evidence-based Curriculum development, Parenting and Play programmes in 2 provinces

PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP

Caregiver Learning Through Play

Year 4 of Implementation (2024)

1. Programme running in 7 provinces
2. Third outcomes research reports confirm improvement in knowledge, skills and practices as well as improvements in caregiver self-esteem and depression indicators
3. Digital version of programme made available
4. Co-host in presenting the 2024 South African Play Conference
5. Host Community International Day of Play Celebrations with support from ChangeX
6. Partner in Reggio Emilia PER Conference
7. Presentations at the SANECD conference hosted by AFECD in Tanzania
8. Member representation at:

- Real Reform for ECD Campaign
- Social Protection Sub-Committee
- Intersectoral Forum on ECD

Year 2 of Implementation (2022)

1. Programme running in 7 provinces
2. First outcomes research reports show improvement in knowledge, skills and practices as well as improvements in caregiver self-esteem and depression indicators
3. CLTP embedded in the DBE National Parenting Programme Modules 3 and 7
4. Implementation partner of the SiyaDlala SiyaFunda Play Campaign
5. Member representation at:

- Real Reform for ECD Campaign
- Social Protection Sub-Committee
- Intersectoral Forum on ECD

2023

CAREGIVERS 156930   ECD PRACTITIONERS 2403   CHILDREN 178 898

2024   December '24

CAREGIVERS 256 346   ECD PRACTITIONERS 1707   CHILDREN 319 235   DIGITAL 2247

2021 Inception Phase (Mar – Dec 2021)

1. Institutional agreement and contracting as a consortium
2. Evidence-based curriculum design and testing
3. Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning systems building and testing
4. Staffing recruitment, capacity building and deployment
5. Project management, systems, procedures and protocols
6. Community-level stakeholder engagement and advocacy

2021

CAREGIVERS 7286   ECD PRACTITIONERS 582   CHILDREN 7286

2020

Project Conceptualisation

1. Needs analysis
2. High-level stakeholder engagement and buy-in (DSD, UNICEF)
3. Forming a consortium
4. Fundraising (LEGO Foundation)
5. Evidence-based Programme Model

2021

Year 1 of Implementation (Sept – Dec 2021)

1. Programme model testing and adjustment in response to community feedback, logistical challenges and attrition factors
2. Implementation in 7 provinces

2022

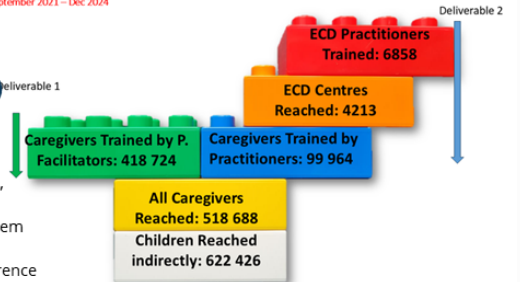CAREGIVERS 97506   ECD PRACTITIONERS 2165   CHILDREN 117007

Year 3 of Implementation (2023)

1. Programme running in 7 provinces
2. Second outcomes research reports confirm improvement in knowledge, skills and practices as well as improvements in caregiver self-esteem and depression indicators
3. Presentations at the SANECD conference hosted by AFECD in Zambia
4. Member representation at:

- Real Reform for ECD Campaign
- Social Protection Sub-Committee
- Intersectoral Forum on ECD

CLTP: Reach to Date
September 2021 – Dec 2024

Deliverable 1   Deliverable 2

- ECD Practitioners Trained: 6858
- ECD Centres Reached: 4213
- Caregivers Trained by P. Facilitators: 418 724
- Caregivers Trained by Practitioners: 99 964
- All Caregivers Reached: 518 688
- Children Reached indirectly: 622 426

HOPE worldwide SOUTH AFRICA   Save the Children   NTATAISE   elru Building Tomorrow, Today   The LEGO Foundation

3. Key Lessons Learned for Scaling Up

Evidence-Based, Locally Contextualised Design

KEY LEARNING

A well-structured ECD parenting programme must be grounded in evidence, drawing from international frameworks like the WHO's **Nurturing Care Framework** and national policies. These frameworks recognise the importance of both parenting and play as key elements in child development, which CLTP incorporates through a clear Theory of Change.

RECOMMENDED

To scale effectively, ensure that programme content is adaptable to the local context, engaging parents and caregivers with materials that respect cultural values while delivering evidence-based insights.

Securing Early Buy-In from Key Stakeholders

KEY LEARNING

Early involvement of government agencies, such as the **Department of Basic Education (DBE)** and the **Department of Social Development (DSD)**, as well as international stakeholders like **UNICEF**, is essential. CLTP aligns with national ECD priorities, strengthening its acceptance and integration within existing frameworks.

RECOMMENDED

Actively pursue early engagement with government and influential stakeholders, ensuring alignment with national ECD policies to support widespread adoption and sustainability.

Strong, Trust-Based Implementing Partnerships

KEY LEARNING

HOPE worldwide South Africa selected 3 national NGO partners with diverse strengths, extensive ECD experience and community connections. Effective partnership formation still requires a significant investment in time and effort. Effective partnerships with clear, shared goals and mutual trust are foundational. CLTP's partners have established steering committees for different aspects of the programme, meet regularly, and maintain frequent communication to ensure alignment and cohesion.

RECOMMENDED

Build partnerships grounded in a common vision, transparency, and trust, with regular alignment meetings to keep all partners engaged and informed.

Value of Stakeholder and Community Engagement

KEY LEARNING

Engaging community organisations and local stakeholders help root programmes in the communities they serve, fostering trust and ownership. Community involvement boosts programme reach, relevance, and long-term sustainability.

RECOMMENDED

Prioritise community partnerships that address families' specific needs enhance cultural relevance, and increase parental engagement through locally driven support structures.

Maintaining Programme Fidelity with Flexibility

KEY LEARNING

Fidelity to the programme model is critical for scaling, but so is adaptability. CLTP uses **Rapid Learning Loops** to respond to emerging challenges, along with refresher courses for field staff. Digital and in-person delivery options also increase accessibility for diverse participants.

RECOMMENDED

Ensure and assess programme fidelity but allow room for learning and adaptation. Consider offering both face-to-face and digital delivery methods to reach a wider audience effectively.

Addressing Critical Enablers in Low-Resource Settings

KEY LEARNING

For many families, basic needs such as food security and adequate resources can impact programme participation. CLTP addresses these by providing adequate refreshments during sessions, targeted nutritional support, and materials for participants.

RECOMMENDED

Identify and address critical enablers, such as nutritional support and training materials, to ensure programmes are accessible and effective for participants in low-resource settings.

Delivering Parenting Support through Short, Focused Sessions

KEY LEARNING

In CLTP, concise sessions are highly effective, helping parents engage without overwhelming them. Short sessions improve engagement and attrition rates and allow parents to apply what they've learned immediately.

RECOMMENDED

Design sessions to be brief and focused, covering practical content that parents can implement right away, which reduces dropout rates and enhances sustained involvement.

Power of Peer Support and Social Networks

KEY LEARNING

Peer support, created through interactive parenting group sessions, is a cornerstone of CLTP, creating a collaborative environment where parents and caregivers can safely share experiences, build community, and learn from one another.

RECOMMENDED

Incorporate group training sessions to foster peer networks that provide emotional support and promote lasting social connections among parents.

Ongoing Skills and Capacity Building

KEY LEARNING

Effective scaling requires skilled facilitators who understand the local culture and context. CLTP invests in continuous training, ensuring facilitators can deliver high-quality support.

RECOMMENDED

Prioritise capacity building by training facilitators to be both content experts and culturally competent, with ongoing professional development to maintain programme quality.

Addressing Parental Mental Health for Nurturing Care

KEY LEARNING

Programmes must support caregivers' mental well-being, as stress and emotional health impact caregiving quality. CLTP's group sessions start with a wellness check-in and provide a safe space for parents to discuss challenges and build resilience.

RECOMMENDED

Incorporate mental health screening and support and opportunities for parents to share experiences, fostering a nurturing environment that promotes positive caregiving.

Amplifying Voices of Parents and Practitioners

KEY LEARNING

Regular feedback from parents and ECD practitioners helps shape and improve the programme. CLTP actively seeks participant insights, ensuring the programme remains relevant and impactful.

RECOMMENDED

Implement structured feedback mechanisms, such as focus groups and surveys, to continuously gather input from parents and practitioners.

Public-Private Partnerships for Resource Mobilisation

KEY LEARNING

Public-private partnerships are instrumental in providing resources beyond what the programme may directly fund, such as nutrition support and a referral network.

RECOMMENDED

Engage private sector partners to mobilise additional resources, which can expand the programme's reach and support essential components like nutrition and health services.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Strategies

KEY LEARNING

Robust MEL strategies are critical for assessing impact and driving continuous improvement. Large-scale programs such as CLTP often require bespoke data management systems. CLTP's MEL approach tracks metrics on Caregiver profiles and Reach, Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices as well as wellness indicators. CLTP also conducts regular Data Quality Audits. These allow for timely adjustments.

RECOMMENDED

Embed MEL systems from the start, using data to refine the programme continuously and ensure its effectiveness in meeting community needs.

Clear Communication and Advocacy Strategy

KEY LEARNING

Raising awareness through traditional and social media increases programme visibility and enrollment. CLTP promotes responsive parenting and learning through play across national and community levels.

RECOMMENDED

Develop a comprehensive communication strategy to advocate for the programme, using media at all levels to highlight the benefits of responsive parenting and learning through play.

4. Non-Negotiable Elements of Impactful Parenting Programmes at Scale

When scaling parenting support programmes, several non-negotiable focus areas must be prioritised to ensure maximum impact:

1	**Promoting Learning through Play Practices**	Play-based learning encourages curiosity, problem-solving, and bonding, all essential to child development. By engaging in these activities, parents and caregivers support their children's growth and learning naturally and enjoyably.
2	**Responsive Parenting Practices**	Coaching parents to be attentive and nurturing helps create secure, supportive environments essential for healthy development.
3	**Early Learning Activities**	Guiding parents to create stimulating environments supports cognitive and social development, laying a foundation for future learning and success.
4	**Parental Mental Health and Well-being**	Supporting parents with stress, depression, or other mental health challenges equips them to care for their children effectively, leading to improved child outcomes.

Focusing on these key areas ensures that parenting programmes are holistic and impactful, supporting the comprehensive well-being of both caregivers and children.

5. Conclusion

The Caregiver Learning Through Play programme offers a scalable, impactful model for ECD parenting support in low-resource settings. By emphasising community engagement, evidence-based practices, flexible delivery, and strong partnerships, CLTP has created a sustainable, culturally relevant approach to early learning. These lessons provide a roadmap for expanding ECD programmes nationally and globally, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive through nurturing, play-centred parenting.