



ARNEC

Asia-Pacific Regional Network
for Early Childhood

ARNEC Response Strategy

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Young children amidst COVID-19

Contents

Acronyms	iii
COVID-19 in our midst.....	1
Young children and COVID-19.....	1
The pandemic’s impact on young children.....	2
ARNEC’s role	3
Target audience	3
Key Interventions	4
Determining the baseline conditions of young children in the region	4
Collecting learning resources from partners for the ECD community	5
Holding webinars to facilitate learning	5
Fostering communities of practice	7
Undertaking research	7
Documenting good practices and developing policy briefs.....	8
Rethinking ARNEC conferences and learning forums.....	8
Developing country pages.....	8
Resources required	9
M&E and learning	11
References.....	13

Acronyms

ARNEC	Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood
BOD	Board of Directors
COP	Community of Practice
COVID	Corona Virus Disease
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECDAN	Early Childhood Development Action Network
NatRep	ARNEC National Representative
NSCDC	National Scientific Council on the Developing Child
SC	ARNEC Steering Committee
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

COVID-19 in our midst

The World Health Organization (WHO), on 17 March 2020, declared COVID-19¹ as a global pandemic having by then infected 118,000 people in 114 countries and claiming 4,291 lives.²

On the strength of this WHO announcement and with the rapid transmission of the corona virus around the world, most governments started to enforce measures to contain the geographical spread of the virus, such as but not limited to:

- closing down national borders;
- imposing travel bans;
- enforcing home stay through individual quarantines and community lockdowns; and
- observing physical distancing.

These containment measures are having direct and indirect impacts on young children and their families, especially for the most vulnerable communities both in the region and in the rest of the world. In fact, within a month after WHO's declaration of a global pandemic, 2.6 million infection cases and more than 180,000 deaths had been recorded affecting 213 countries worldwide (WHO, 2020).

Young children and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented, and its impact is far-reaching and long-term. The containment and mitigation measures enforced by governments to stop the spread of the virus are having a huge impact on the well-being of children and their families, especially those who are already vulnerable and disadvantaged as a result, among others, of poverty, disability, location, gender, ethnicity and language, and migrant/refugee status.

According to UNICEF, children risk being the most-affected victims of the pandemic, arising from the socio-economic impacts of this crisis and the mitigation measures that unintentionally bring more harm than good, thereby increasing the risk for children not reaching their full development potential (Guterres, 2020). UNICEF articulated how children are adversely affected in multiple ways:

- the possibility of their families falling (back) into extreme poverty;
- exacerbation of the learning crisis;
- threats to child survival and health; and

¹ COVID-19 stands for corona virus disease of 2019. In medical terms, it refers to novel corona virus SARS-CoV-2.

² For more information, see the opening message of the WHO Director-General on 11 March 2020. Available in <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>.

- risks for child safety, particularly heightened for children witnessing or suffering violence and abuse (Guterres, 2020).

COVID-19 is a real emergency

lives of young children are disrupted

1.5B

children are out of school
or 87%, according to UNESCO

180 COUNTRIES
with **SCHOOL CLOSURES**
for weeks or months



Disparity, exclusion and
inequity to increase

COVID-19 will have long-term and far-reaching impact on vulnerable, disadvantage families and children.

Photo source: UNICEF, n.d.



Source: Shaeffer, 2020

UNESCO estimates that about 1.5 billion children are out of school or childcare arising from unprecedented school closures and the ‘stay-at-home’ directive by most governments to halt the spread of the corona virus (Shaeffer, 2020). This situation has elevated the critical role of parents and caregivers to support their children’s learning at home, apart from ensuring that they are healthy and protected from the various risks posed by COVID-19.

For some children, the situation will also cause stress, fear, and anxiety. According to the Center on the Developing Child of Harvard University, exposure to circumstances that produce persistent fear and chronic anxiety can have lifelong consequences by disrupting the developing architecture of the brain (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child [NSCDC], 2010).

In this regard, there is compelling need to pay particular attention to young children in disadvantaged groups who were already experiencing numerous stress factors prior to COVID-19. The ability of young children to cope with anxiety and stress largely depends on their caregivers, who help transform toxic stress to tolerable stress for young children. But the pandemic can also increase the disparities more disadvantage children already face – in terms of health, nutrition, learning, and protection – in comparison to more advantaged children.

The pandemic’s impact on young children

Overall, the impact of COVID-19 on young children is significant in terms of child protection, exposure to domestic violence, challenges to health and nutrition, as well as limited early learning opportunities, all of

which affect their social-emotional development. There is a need to look at both short- and long-term impacts on early childhood development.

ARNEC is in solidarity with the whole ECD community in prioritising the needs of young children and their families in responding to this crisis. There is a need to amplify the role of ECD in the multi-sectoral and whole-of-society response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to develop context-specific advocacies and interventions for young children and their families and caregivers at the sub-regional and regional levels.

ARNEC's role

ARNEC connects partners and stakeholders in the ECD community in the region and provides a platform for ECD professionals and practitioners to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on young children and their families, and share practical approaches and strategies that might be adapted or replicated to scale in response to the COVID-19 crisis.



Target audience

The primary audience is the Early Childhood Development (ECD) community in the Asia-Pacific region – a community which comprises a rich mixture of different persons, agencies, stakeholders, and partners working directly for and with young children and their families in the region. These include:

- Policy makers and government officials, who have influence over the shaping of public investments, allocation decisions, and programmes for young children and their families and communities and will have a major role to play in designing the post-pandemic world in ways which not only resemble “normalcy” but also reduce the disparities that have increased as a result of the pandemic
- ECD practitioners, including implementing agencies and organisations, whether international or local NGOs and CSO who have suffered great harm as a result of the pandemic but will be essential in recovery from it;

- ECE/ECD professionals and workforce who have been and will be at the core of any effective response to the pandemic;
- Research-based or academic institutions focusing on ECD which will need to assess more exactly the impacts of the pandemic on young children and assess efforts to mitigate them; and
- Development partners/agencies who will need to support the countries not only in their current response initiative but more so for their recovery efforts.

By the very nature of ARNEC as a network for early childhood, it does not directly interface with young children and their families at the country level. The intermediaries for bringing about ARNEC's intended results are the members of the ECD community at the country level, who are the primary audience of ARNEC. Parents, families and other caregivers, and young children comprise ARNEC's secondary audience. They may have direct access to our learning and advocacy platforms through our website and social media presence.

Key Interventions

ARNEC believes that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young children and their families varies from one community to another in different contexts at the country level. Yet governments are either too busy focusing on containing the spread of the virus or managing this pandemic as a public health emergency to find the opportunity for multisectoral and whole-of-society response.

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' formula for ECD interventions to address children-specific consequences of the corona virus crisis, but there are approaches and efforts by partners that are noteworthy for replication or innovation depending on the needs or circumstances of young children and their families. It is also important to generate quick information and resources from the ECD community in the region to support informed ECD decisions or actions during the COVID pandemic and after societies have settled in under the new "normal" post-COVID-19.

Determining the baseline conditions of young children in the region

ARNEC will conduct a rapid survey with the ECD community in the Asia-Pacific region (e.g., policymakers, ministries and government agencies, CSOs/NGOs, foundations, donors, the academe, practitioners, and advocates, among others) who are involved in the ECD sector concerned with the wellbeing of children 0-8 years, such as, but not limited to, health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, early learning, and safety and security, either at the policy, program, or activity levels.

The objective of the survey is for the ECD community to share experiences and insights on the situation of children and the status of ECD as a result of COVID-19 and the resulting containment and risk mitigation measures being implemented in countries in the region. The results of the survey will be used to:

- raise awareness on the situation of young children and the status of ECD in the region amidst COVID-19;
- inform ARNEC's ECD advocacy efforts at the country, regional, and global levels;
- identify priority interventions to support young children and their families; and
- signify areas for research in support of new or enhanced ECD policies, programs, and/or activities.

ARNEC will also join UNESCO in the conduct of a survey on the situation of the ECCE workforce/teachers, the results of which can inform policy recommendations.

Collecting learning resources from partners for the ECD community

Providing timely access to ECD expertise and knowledge from partners, such as guidance notes, practical tips, and other learning resources, is important for the ECD community in the region.

ARNEC will generate, consolidate, and share resources supporting young children and families during COVID-19, such as but not limited to:

- talking to children about COVID-19;
- coping with family and child stress;
- caring for parents and caregivers;
- exploring all forms of technology to facilitate both child development and learning and parent-child interaction;
- signifying the importance of play in creating learning opportunities and building resilience; and
- protecting children from domestic violence, while families are under prolonged home quarantine periods.

ARNEC will make these knowledge and learning resources available in the website and social media (Facebook and twitter) to facilitate access by the ECD community.

Holding webinars to facilitate learning

In order to create learning spaces for children-specific interventions and resources, ARNEC will host a webinar series to mobilise and connect the ECD community with partners in the region who are implementing practical strategies and innovations for young children, their families, and other caregivers.

Entitled *Young Children amidst COVID-19*, the webinar series aims to mobilise the ECD community in the region, particularly practitioners, policy makers, and advocates at the country level. The objectives of the webinar series are, as follows:

- highlight how young children, parents and caregivers are affected directly or indirectly by the COVID-19 crisis including by government containment measures;
- share COVID-19 response initiatives at the country level encompassing diverse and practical ECD-specific interventions by partners; and
- connect and engage the ECD community in the region in meaningful conversations in order to diffuse knowledge on practical ECD strategies and innovations that might be replicated to scale or modified in response to local circumstances in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and to

begin planning how best to re-open and manage ECD programs in ways that enhance their impact and also mitigate the increased disparities among children arising from the pandemic.

Topics for the webinar series focus on the issues that young children and their families and caregivers are facing at a time when governments enforce strict measures to stop the spread of the corona virus and what the ECD community might learn from partners implementing practical strategies and innovations at the country level. Topics will include but are not limited to the following:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The impact of COVID 19 on the most vulnerable young children and their families (children with special needs, urban migrants, ethnic minorities)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Supporting families and caregivers (encompassing parenting strategies, responsive caregiving, and psychosocial support)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understanding how young children cope with stress, fear and anxiety during crises such as COVID-19
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Distance learning approaches for young children, especially for those most disadvantaged
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exploring the power of play in building resilience of young children and families at home
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Protecting young children against abuse and violence at home
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Protecting the most vulnerable children including refugees, the displaced, the homeless, street children, children in institutions, etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The impact of Covid-19 on childcare - what emergency measures have been taken? What lessons are emerging from the region? What are the implications for the future in the re-design of childcare, particularly on networks of home-based providers?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Situation of the ECD workforce, strategies and practices to support them
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The situation of young children in the Asia-Pacific region: results of the ARNEC rapid assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Addressing the current and future impact of COVID-19 on young children—especially those most disadvantaged -- through better policies and strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recovering into the 'new normal': the role of ECD in building preparedness and resilience among young children and families

Fostering communities of practice

ARNEC will support the formation of learning groups or communities of practice (COP) either along priority ECD needs or geographical nuances on issues affecting young children and their families during this crisis. Learning topics can come from the webinar discussions or from the results of the rapid survey mentioned above.

The COPs will bring together lessons learned from countries at different stages of the pandemic and innovations they evolved to respond to the challenges. Some questions or learning topics which may be considered are:

- Distance learning and ECD: what policy-based and practical arrangements can we explore for more effective early learning for young children, especially those with least access to online technology?
- COVID-19 response and ECD: what can we learn from the experiences and insights of selected countries (e.g. The Republic of Korea, China, Singapore, and Viet Nam)?
- ECD and recovering into the new normal: What preparedness and mitigation measures need to be put in place as ECD centres and pre-schools welcome back young children and caregivers into their fold? What targeted measures need to be taken to help children who have fallen behind in their development and learning in comparison to more advantaged peers?

Knowledge generated from these communities of practice can be developed into learning resources and evidence-based advocacies for the ECD community in the region and beyond.

Undertaking research

The rapid survey on the impact of COVID-19 on young children and their families will generate a snapshot of the situation of young children and the status of ECD in the region. But it may also signify research areas in support of new or enhanced ECD policies, programs, and/or activities.

How the pandemic is affecting young children and families in vulnerable and disadvantaged contexts might be a good research entry point. Compelling research projects should study how the pandemic has reinforced or worsened the condition of the following groups of young children and their families:

- girls;
- those who are living in poverty;
- those with delays and disabilities;
- those “left behind” in home communities by migrating parents and those who have returned (in the millions) with their migrant parents to their home communities;
- those in refugee camps;
- those living in slums and informal settlements and rural and remote communities; and
- those from migrant families
- those from ethnic and linguistic minorities

Equally important will be research on the extent to which the impact of the pandemic on these vulnerable groups will exacerbate the disparities they face in relation to more advantaged peers when ECD programmes and schools re-open – and possible means to mitigate these increased disparities.

Results may help influence policy instruments and strategic choices for new or enhanced ECD programmes, including whole-of-society plans and behavior change for family-level and community-based preparedness, response, and recovery. The ARNEC Board of Directors (BOD) and Steering Committee (SC) may also draw up a research call on ECD and the pandemic to support evidence-based learning and advocacy in the Asia-Pacific region.

Documenting good practices and developing policy briefs

Following the regional webinar series, ARNEC will undertake case studies focusing on innovative practices of partners in support of ECD during COVID-19. Drawing insights from challenges, lessons, and successes will create new knowledge to support the field and practice of ECD. Knowledge products will be produced in collaboration with ARNEC's institutional members.

ARNEC will also craft policy or advocacy briefs on ECD and COVID-19 for decision makers arising from the results of the rapid survey of the ECD community in the region or insights and innovations from the webinar series that could inform new or enhanced ECD policies and programmes. ARNEC will seize the opportunity to target parliaments and ministries responsible for ECD to influence investments in young children at the country level post-COVID.

These briefs will help inform the country-level advocacies of ARNEC National Representatives and institutional members on prioritising ECD in the COVID-19 response and recovery plans of governments.

Rethinking ARNEC conferences and learning forums

ARNEC can provide a learning platform on ECD and the corona pandemic in partnership with other institutions such as UNESCO, UNICEF, ECDAN and other regional ECD networks. Virtual conferences and forums can be jointly convened to discuss the long-term impact of COVID-19 on young children and the policy, program, and investment decisions necessary to address shortfalls and vulnerabilities arising from the pandemic and to meet the full development potential of young children.

These conferences can bring together government agencies, policy-makers, practitioners and the academe to share insights and recommendations on investing in young children and the multisectoral interlinkages of ECD in post-COVID-19 national recovery and resilience plans and budgets.

Developing country pages

ARNEC can develop COVID-19 and ECD country pages in our website where practitioners can talk about what they are doing in relation to COVID-19 to facilitate coordination, collaboration and learning. Thought leaders at the country level will be encouraged to share their expertise and views to advance the well-being of young children at the local and national levels.

M&E and learning

The M&E and Learning (MEL) Plan in support of the ARNEC Response Strategy is provided below.

Intervention	Partner or stakeholder-led statements of results	Success and learning indicators	MEL verification reference
Determining baseline conditions of young children (rapid survey)	<p>Partners of ARNEC from the ECD community participate in the rapid survey.</p> <p>The ECD community in the region provides perspectives on the conditions of young children and the status of ECD in the Asia-Pacific region.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptable turnout and retrieval at the sub-regional and regional levels • ARNEC report on the conditions of young children and the status of ECD in the Asia-Pacific region (including sub-regional and country reports) 	ARNEC Final Activity Report on the rapid survey
Collecting learning resources from partners for the ECD community	<p>Partners of ARNEC and other ECD organisations develop learning resources for young children and caregivers.</p> <p>ARNEC consolidates these and shares them as wide as possible to the ECD community in the region.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning resources systematised in the ARNEC website • Learning resources shared in social media 	ARNEC Activity Report on ECD learning resources
Holding regional webinars	<p>ECD experts and practitioners are engaged as speakers, presenters or moderators for the ARNEC webinars.</p> <p>ARNEC members and the ECD community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High attendance ratio • Positive feedback from attendees, experts, speakers, and moderators 	ARNEC Activity Report on each ARNEC webinar, including evaluation results

Intervention	Partner or stakeholder-led statements of results	Success and learning indicators	MEL verification reference
	participate in the ARNEC webinars.		
Fostering Communities of Practice	ARNEC members and other experts and practitioners form part of Communities of Practice on young children and COVID-19.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COP formed along special topics, priority ECD themes, or geographical needs/interests 	ARNEC Activity Report documenting COP meetings and engagement
Undertaking research	Academic partners, institutional members, experts, and/or NatReps undertake research on priority areas of inquiry arising from the results of the rapid survey and/or from important emerging needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research studies completed and shared publicly • Advocacy and other knowledge products produced from the results of research 	ARNEC Activity Report, including downstream outputs from the research conducted
Documenting good practices and developing policy briefs	Academic partners, institutional members, experts, and/or NatReps document cases and/or prepare policy briefs on ECD and the pandemic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case studies and policy briefs completed and shared publicly 	ARNEC Activity Report, including copies of case studies and policy briefs
Rethinking ARNEC conferences and learning forums	Partners of ARNEC participate in joint conferences or learning forums on ECD and the pandemic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-sponsorship or co-delivery of learning forums or conferences • Participation of the ECD community in these joint learning forums or conferences 	ARNEC Activity Report, including evaluation results from co-sponsors and participants from the ECD community
Developing country pages	Partners of ARNEC, including institutional members and NatReps. participate in developing country-level resources on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiative of partners to provide country-level information or insights 	ARNEC Activity Report on updated country pages and authors or

Intervention	Partner or stakeholder-led statements of results	Success and learning indicators	MEL verification reference
	young children and the pandemic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Updated country pages 	sources of new info or insights

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