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BRIEF

Better Start for Better Care

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Introduction

Better Start and Better Care are complementary frameworks that prioritise the wellbeing, care, safety, and development of all children. Better Start supports achieving the Better Care goals by ensuring that families are empowered with skills, resources and knowledge to support the care of young children at home and are able to seek appropriate support from their ecosystem ensuring that children remain in families. Better Start focuses on the critical early years (pregnancy–age 6), with a particular focus on the first 1000 days and preschool years, fostering the nurturing care approach to build cognitive, emotional, social and physical foundations. Better Start focuses on ensuring **universal services for all** young children from birth– age 6 and their caregivers, and the availability of **progressive services for a smaller group of families** that have additional needs starting with referrals to protection, education and social services.

Better Care provides **progressive and intensive** support and addresses needs of children (0-18) who are at risk of family separation or living in alternative care by strengthening the child protection system to ensure family or community-based care is secured when necessary and relevant social services are available and accessible to children and their parents or caregivers. Together, Better Start and Better Care create a critical social safety net designed to ensure that all children (including the very young, those with disabilities or separated from family) benefit from nurturing care, by parents and caregivers that have the skills, knowledge, resources and social connections to provide stable, nurturing environments. In this sense Better Start – quality, integrated early childhood development policies, services and supports – acts as a preventative approach for vulnerable families with young children by fostering the skills knowledge and practice of safe and nurturing care thereby avoiding separation or abandonment and deeper engagement with the child protection system.

Key Linkages Between Better Start and Better Care

BUILDING SAFE AND NURTURING FAMILY ENVIRONMENTS:

Children thrive in stable and nurturing families where they receive consistent, one-to-one caregiving by parents and caregivers committed to and able to provide for their wellbeing. Serve-and-return interactions¹ between caregivers and young children strengthen brain development, language acquisition, and emotional regulation, and form the foundation for social relationships. These interactions are a key aspect of what is known as ‘responsive caregiving’ which is important for bonding and trust between young children and their caregivers. This is why all children, especially in the early years during critical “windows of opportunity” for healthy brain development, benefit from being in family care, in environments where caregivers provide engaged and interactive care. Better Care reflects these principles by promoting family-based alternative care over care in residential facilities, prioritising foster, kinship, and adoptive families over institutional settings, as well as strengthening families to be able to provide an environment of nurturing care, free of violence. Embedding components of quality ECD, such as responsive caregiving, early stimulation and early learning activities and healthy nutrition within every type of family care ensures that all children, in whichever type of family they are raised, benefit from the nurturing relationships and early interactions essential for healthy development. In addition, ensuring that children have access to quality early childhood care and education (ECEC) is a further step forward in supporting nurturing care as well as social inclusion for more vulnerable children, as ECE programmes are often the first places that young children engage with their peers and wider community.

STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE WITHIN FAMILIES TO PREVENT SEPARATION:

Families facing economic hardship, health issues (physical and mental), social isolation, or grief sometimes lack resources, or financial and emotional capacity to provide the stable and nurturing care their children need. All families can benefit from support from time to time. Change, even simply the birth of a new baby, can also destabilize a family’s equilibrium impacting their resilience. In some cases, these factors lead to violence, and separation of children from families. Strengthening families through targeted support — such as parenting

1 / Responsive ‘back and forth’ interactions between a young child and caring adult. See: [Serve and Return: Back-and-forth exchanges](#)

programs, prioritizing access to early childhood care and education, cash transfers or other economic support, support groups, and information about and access to a range of additional social services — reduces the risk of violence and separation. The objectives of Better Start and Better Care align by bolstering family resilience and promoting environments where children are raised by parents or caregivers with the skills and capacity needed to provide nurturing care even in the face of hardship or change. Preventing family separation is a central tenet of the Better Care Strategy and ECD is an important entry point and avenue for strengthening families and facilitating positive child development as early as possible.

ADDRESSING TRAUMA AND TOXIC STRESS:

Children who experience family separation, institutionalisation, violence, addiction, or loss of a caregiver experience stress. They are often exposed to high stress or “**toxic stress**,” that can disrupt brain development and increase risks of long-term health and cognitive challenges. Given the context of almost three years of war, it is likely that everyone in Ukraine has experienced some degree of stress, including children. However, children, especially young children, who have been separated from family and left without responsive and protective relationships with caregivers have most likely experienced toxic stress. Toxic stress is particularly dangerous, having long-term consequences for young children, whose brains are still developing. Studies show that the hormones released during stressful situations can disrupt neuron development and the formation of neuron pathways in young children. Both Better Start and Better Care help address this by promoting key interventions across health, protection and education such as parenting support with both nurturing care and self-care components; access to early childhood services; daycare; respite care; early intervention and detection of delays and disability, trauma informed approaches, and linkages to mental health and social services. Responsive caregiving acts as a key mitigating factor so stress doesn’t become toxic stress. These interactions between a child and a responsive caregiver can help the child feel safe and lower the stress reactions in the body.

STRENGTHENING SYSTEMS:

Better Start aims to strengthen individual systems in health, education and protection as well as catalyse linkages between them, so that they function holistically for children, especially the most vulnerable **who are more involved in child protective and care services**. If it functions well, these inter-linked systems can act as ‘prevention’ for vulnerabilities evolving into something more serious. Better Care aims to strengthen the child protection and alternative care systems to serve the needs of the most vulnerable categories of children, receiving referrals from health and education as well as referring to them. It also aims to consider the principles of nurturing care for those young children involved with social services and . Efforts to update or revise legislation, develop national strategies or standards, strengthen or scale family services, increase the capacity of the social service workforce, or upgrade data systems are all ways to contribute to system strengthening with an eye towards intentional linkages between the family care and other systems involved in delivering ECD.

See Annex 1: Graphic illustrating shared benefits of Better Care and Better Start linkages.

2 / Toxic Stress is prolonged and is unmitigated by a protective caregiver relationship, which can lead to impacts on developing biological systems including the brain. See: [Toxic Stress : What is toxic stress?](#)



Opportunities to Enhance Coordination and Better Results

There are several ways in which Better Start and Better Care can leverage their shared objectives resulting in stronger coordination and better results for both.



JOINT TRAINING INITIATIVES FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS: Provide short, virtual training opportunities, or simple job aids, or key messages delivered by social media. The materials should be designed for social workers, kindergarten and preschool staff, and healthcare providers on working with parents. The content should include: critical periods of child development, trauma-informed care and responsive caregiving techniques, as well as child protection and alternative care. Materials should also help to promote a shared understanding of each others' work and referral pathways between them.



STRONG REFERRAL NETWORKS: Government and civil society organisations engaged in ECD and Better Care should be familiar with all service providers across sectors, and should establish referral mechanisms between them. They should have regular, facilitated service provider meetings at hromada level to ensure coordination, and address any problems or gaps, including to and from early childhood services. Clear, simple information on how referrals work between services should be made available to the community in an accessible platform(s).



DATA AND MONITORING SYSTEMS: Support the design and implementation of robust data collection and monitoring systems, especially at the local level, including ensuring that young children are visible and flagged for ECD services and that children in family-based alternative care, as well as families at high risk for being involved in the child protection system are prioritized and targeted for specific services. Encourage and foster data for strengthen programming and make improvements to social services.



SHARED ADVOCACY AND AWARENESS: Develop a shared advocacy strategy and/or framework and design key messages and advocacy campaigns that highlight the shared vision of quality early childhood care and education for all young Ukrainian children including being raised in safe, and nurturing families. Highlight the interconnected benefits of Better Start and Better Care to mobilise broader support and resources, including the preventative aspects of quality ECD on keeping families together



PRIORITIZE AT RISK FAMILIES AND YOUNG CHILDREN ACROSS SECTOR POLICIES AND STRATEGIES: Work with representatives from different sectors (health, social policy, education, finance, etc.) when developing strategies related to early childhood, parenting, child protection and alternative care, ensuring that young children are considered, and also that other sector's strategies consider the most vulnerable, including children at-risk of separation and placement in alternative care.



INTER-SECTORAL COORDINATION: Establish, strengthen and work with local inter-sectoral groups to integrate the various sectors with child wellbeing and protection responsibilities including health, education, social protection, finance and others to ensure that young children are included in strategies, policies and services, and that the needs of children are considered holistically. This includes supporting the generation of and sharing data for joint analysis and use of findings to improve services for young children. Examples of good practice in hromadas should be documented and collected for monitoring of changes over time and how this approach leads to changes in services.



PUBLIC FINANCING FOR CHILDREN AT HROMADA LEVEL- building off trainings provided on child-centered public finance, support hromada authorities, together with social service providers to identify and address several critical actions related to Better Start (ECD services) and Better Care in their budgeting and planning. This should be linked to decisions taken by the inter-sectoral coordination mechanism.

Suggested Messages to Promote Linkages

Promoting the integration of Better Start and Better Care amongst government actors, civil society organisations, and communities through messages is crucial for enhancing the impact of both initiatives.



Quality ECD services play a pivotal role in supporting the development of all Ukrainian children, but are especially important for the most vulnerable. Ensuring universal access to such services ensures that young children and families who need more support can be identified and helped, with more efficient and effective use of resources available.



Quality ECD that helps build caregiver capacities for nurturing care, self-care and service seeking can prevent family separation, strengthening diverse family structures, and foster the positive development and resilience of young children and their caregivers. Extending quality ECD services to children in family-based alternative care ensures that every child, regardless of their living arrangements, receives the nurturing care necessary for a healthy start in life.



Ensuring access to quality ECD services for families of young children with developmental delays or disabilities helps to keep them in nurturing families and can reduce reliance on residential care for children with disabilities.



Quality ECD is critical in preventing family separation by strengthening families through parenting programs and providing additional support through routine services such as health check ups and preschool programmes. Families equipped with the necessary resources and skills are better able to provide stable, loving environments for their children. Providing parent and caregiver support is essential for fostering safe and nurturing environments for children. Caregivers, including foster parents, guardians, and adoptive families, must also benefit from training in positive parenting, responsive caregiving and trauma-informed approaches.



Strengthening linkages between Better Start and Better Care ensures that all children, particularly the most vulnerable, receive the nurturing care they need to thrive. Aligned and coordinated strategies enhance efficiency and effectiveness of critical services including health-based ECD interventions, parenting programs, inclusive day care, early intervention and early education, psychosocial support, and family-based alternative care as well as preschools. When designed and implemented in a coordinated way, these services function as a holistic 'package' for young, vulnerable children.



Investments in ECD and Better Care yield significant social and economic benefits, including healthier, more resilient children who contribute to the social and economic development of their communities and who rely less on government services, including alternative care, in the future.

Integrating Better Start and Better Care offers a holistic approach to child wellbeing, ensuring that all children grow up in nurturing, developmentally-supportive family-based environments. . By enhancing coordination between these two critical initiatives, government and civil society will foster a healthier, more resilient society, and benefit from the efficiencies and effectiveness of early interventions.

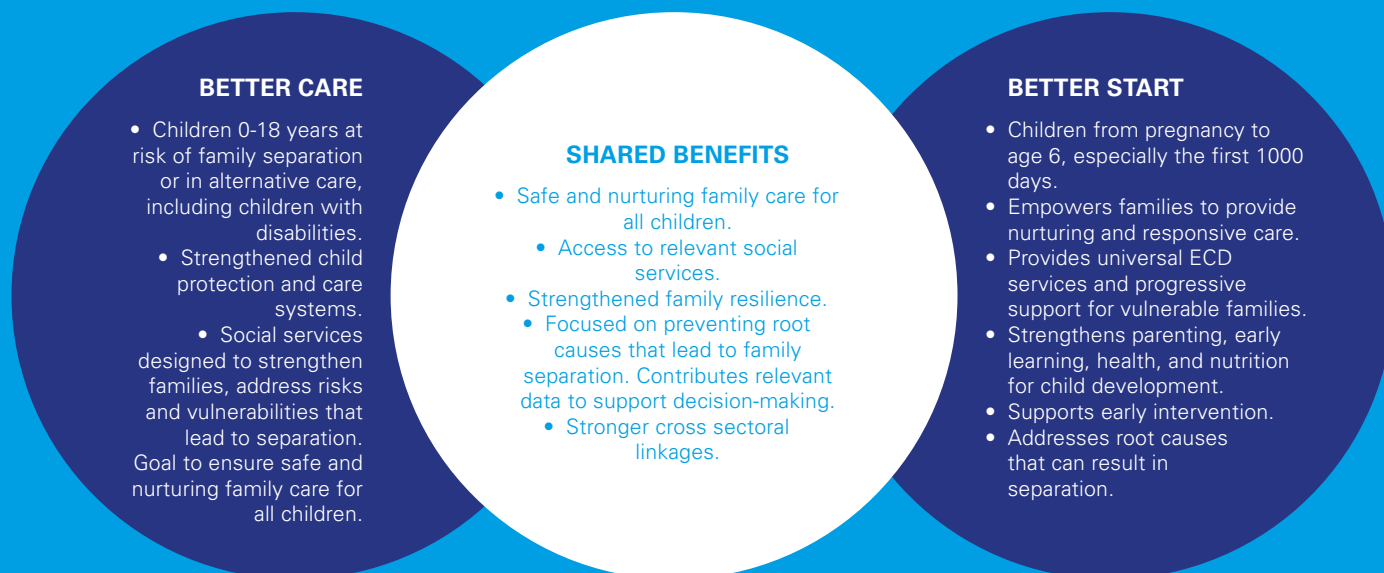
Examples of simple key messages

- Universal quality ECD helps identify and support vulnerable families efficiently.
- ECD builds caregiver capacity and prevents family breakdown, including in alternative care.
- Access to ECD keeps children with disabilities in nurturing families and out of institutions.
- Parenting support and routine services foster safe, stable family environments.
- Linking Better Start and Better Care delivers coordinated support for vulnerable children.
- ECD and Better Care reduce long-term costs associated with separation and institutional and build resilient communities.



Annex 1:

Graphic illustrating shared benefits of Better Care and Better Start linkages



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