

The forgotten key: ECD for children with disabilities

As stated by Unicef, the first 1,000 days of a child's life are vital in establishing the foundation for the rest of the child's development going forward. The importance of correct care and stimulation during this period is therefore crucial, and especially so for children with disabilities, who are often overlooked when it comes to Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes.



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For many parents of children with disabilities, this formative period is often clouded by uncertainty. Partly due to a lack of knowledge about the support available to the child, especially with regards to access to a stimulating ECD phase, which the government is obligated to provide. Children with disabilities often fall through the cracks in the education system because they are denied access to a proper ECD experience.

ECD facilities crucial yet inaccessible

With both parents often working, access to ECD facilities, such as creches and day care facilities, is a necessity. These centres are responsible for laying the numerical and verbal foundation required for primary school and is as important for children with disabilities as for those without.

According to André Kalis, Specialist: Advocacy, Policy and Children's Matters at the National Council of & for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD), "Children with disabilities absolutely have the right to an inclusive education. This means that children with disabilities should be able to attend the same mainstream schools, and ECD facilities, to receive education on an equal level."

However, as the NCPD has found, the majority of ECD facilities blatantly reject access for children with disabilities based on the grounds that the centres cannot accommodate them. "Reasons for these centres rejecting children with disabilities include a number of factors such as the inaccessibility of the structures for children in wheelchairs or crutches, a lack of an inclusive curriculum, as well as a shortage of teachers and supporting personnel with the correct skills required to educate these children," says Kalis.



A chance for change

South Africa now has an opportunity to affect change in favour of children with disabilities – the nation’s most vulnerable and marginalised group. During 2019, the responsibility for ECD has moved out of the hands of the Department of Social Development to the Department of Basic Education (DoBE).

Following the handover to DoBE, the NCPD is calling on the Department to enforce the following recommendation in order to ensure a more inclusive ECD policy for all:

Set in motion strategic action plans to secure the implementation of an inclusive ECD policy, for children with disabilities to receive access to mainstream ECD facilities. The DoBE already has a policy of Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) in place, which is meant to manage and assist teaching and learning processes of those with barriers to learning. The SIAS policy is mandated to provide support teams at schools to ensure that children with disabilities have equal access to education.

These teams are supposed to assess the physical environment, the curriculum as well as teachers’ capabilities in working with learners with disabilities. These teams should look at how the physical environment as well as the learning material has to be adapted to the learners’ needs at each and every mainstream education facility, including ECD centres. The SIAS policy also looks at what additional support the learners require, such as a teacher’s assistant.

“The SIAS policy is highly commendable, however, the NCPD pleads with the DoBE to ensure proper implementation of this policy on an ECD level too. If the SIAS policy can indeed be implemented at ECD level, it will allow for children with disabilities to receive the formative education that they rightfully deserve. Sound ECD exposure is not only reserved for children without disabilities, but for all,” notes Kalis.

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