



Family Digest 33

July 31st 2020

Early Childhood Education During the Lockdown

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is defined in Section 91 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 as "the process of emotional, cognitive, sensory, spiritual, moral, physical, and social and communication development of children from birth to school-going age."¹ It is a comprehensive approach to programmes and policies for children from birth to nine years of age, with the active participation of their parents and caregivers. Its purpose is to protect the rights of children to develop their full cognitive, emotional, social and physical potential.

The provision of ECD from birth to school-going age is the responsibility of the Department of Social Development (DSD), while the Department of Basic Education (DBE) is responsible for children in Grades R to 3 as part of compulsory schooling.² ECD centres include private nursery schools, day-care centres, playgroups, child minders, toy libraries and other early school groups.

South Africa has about six million children between the ages of birth and four years old, the majority of whom are poor; ECD is a critical part of the government's efforts to alleviate the effects of their poverty. All children have the right to attend an ECD centre, where they can be provided with meals and are properly supervised. The centres provide an important contact point for parents, where staff can advise on parenting issues, identify problem areas, and make referrals to clinics and other social and health services.

ECD centres were closed under Lockdown levels 5 and 4 and become a subject of litigation under Lockdown 3, when it was announced that ECD centres would remain closed. The continued closure of these centres contributed to widespread hunger and the potential malnutrition and stunting of children. Furthermore, once many parents went back to work, thousands of young children were left without proper supervision and unprotected. Also, the livelihoods of ECD workers were at stake.

On 6th July the Gauteng High Court in Pretoria found that the continued closure of ECD centres was unconstitutional and unlawful, and ruled that all private pre-schools and ECD facilities would be able to open with immediate effect. About 2.7 million Grade R and pre-school children who attend non-government institutions could return to their centres that week. In terms of the court order, the sector may now re-open, as long as there is compliance with the COVID-19 health regulations.³ According to the Centre for Early Childhood Development Director, Professor Eric Atmore, the effect of the ruling will be to "exacerbate the gross inequalities that already exist" because few, if any, of the "township centres" have the wherewithal to meet the PPE requirements.⁴

The Minister of Social Development, Lindiwe Zulu, announced in July that "all operators of ECD centres and partial care facilities across the country [must] complete the online self-assessment exercise, which is critical in determining the sector's state of readiness to re-open amid the coronavirus pandemic."⁵ While many ECD centres have completed and submitted the self-assessment, most of the sector remains

closed. The guidelines provided by the DSD can be accessed on the DSD Website, but they are very onerous for centres serving poor communities.

According to the DSD, “if an early childhood development programme or partial care facility receives a child before the date is announced, they will be contravening the provisions of the regulations made in terms of section 27(2) of the Disaster Management Act. To this effect, the Minister of Social Development will publish the directives pertaining the reopening of early childhood development programmes and partial care facilities after she has taken into consideration all requirements to address, prevent and combat the spread of COVID-19”.⁶

This means that a large cohort of small children are not receiving the protection and services that are supposed to be provided by ECD Centres. The seemingly endless delay in the opening of these Centres can be considered neglectful. As Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral reminded us,

“We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the fountain of life. Many things we need can wait. The child cannot. Right now is the time **his** bones are being formed, **his** blood is being made, and **his** senses are being developed. To him we cannot answer 'Tomorrow,' **his name is today.**”⁷

We cannot afford further delays.

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¹ Section 91 of the Children's Act No 38 of 2005

² <https://www.gov.za/about-sa/what-early-childhood-development>

³ https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-07-06-court-order-millions-of-children-can-return-to-pre-school-centres/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Afternoon%20Thing%20Monday%206%20July%202020%20PSG&utm_content=Afternoon%20Thing%20Monday%206%20July%202020%20PSG+CID_dfde7a3410f5ad456f8c4a8accdee007&utm_source=TouchBasePro&utm_term=Private%20preschools%20can%20reopen%20rules%20high%20court#gsc.tab=0

⁴ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-07-07-early-childhood-development-court-order-will-exacerbate-gr>

⁵ <https://www.dsd.gov.za/index.php/21-latest-news/223-social-development-minister-reminds-operators-of-eed-ce>

⁶ <https://www.dsd.gov.za/index.php/21-latest-news/223-social-development-minister-reminds-operators-of-eed-centre>

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