



2024 ANNUAL REPORT



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Executive Summary

The Chief Executive Officer of Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood (PAFEC) is pleased to present the annual report for the year 2024. This narrative report covers the activities undertaken by PAFEC from January 2024 to December 2024.

Key programme activities during this period included:

- Continuing the podcast series on Early Childhood Development (ECD), which was launched in partnership with Ibox Media Network in May 2023.
- Providing technical support to UNICEF to train government counterparts and CSOs on ECD
- Organising Maternal Mental Health roundtable discussion
- Participating in workshops and webinars on different themes of ECD organized by global ECD networks and other key partners such as UNICEF, WHO, ECDAN, and Harvard
- Attending UNICEF Regional Conference: Nourishing South Asia
- Conducting Cohort4 Online Certificate Course on Early Childhood Development

Khadija Khan

Name of the Chief Executive Officer

Signature of the Chief Executive Officer

Date: 21.10.2024



Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood

Introduction

Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood (PAFEC) is a national alliance of Early Childhood Development (ECD) stakeholders in Pakistan. PAFEC is registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP), under section 42 of the Companies Act, 2017. The Alliance is governed by a high-profile Board of Directors which includes serving and retired government officials, representatives of civil society organizations, and academia, who are making a difference in the field of early childhood development, education, health, nutrition, child protection, and community development. The Alliance's secretariat is in Islamabad.

Below is the narrative report for the period January 2024 to December 2024.



Podcast Series on Early Childhood Development in Collaboration with Ibox Media Network

Introduction

Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood (PAFEC), in collaboration with the Ibox Media Network, launched a podcast series titled '*Transforming Society through Early Childhood Development*' in May 2023 and this series continued throughout 2024. So far, 24 episodes have been recorded and broadcasted, featuring renowned experts in various aspects of Early Childhood Development (ECD). These experts include ECD practitioners, pediatricians, psychiatrists, neurodevelopmental specialists, occupational and speech therapists, parental educators, child protection experts, community development professionals, and nutritionists. Below are the details of the podcasts in 2024.

1. Foundational Learning: Building Life Skills Beyond Literacy and Numeracy



In this enriching episode of our podcast series on Early Childhood Development, Ms. Samina Ghafoor delves into the critical aspects of foundational learning and its broader implications beyond just literacy

and numeracy. Emphasizing the significant role of parents in shaping their children's future, Ms. Samina explores how even uneducated parents can profoundly influence their children's social, emotional, functional life skills, and moral development from the home environment.

Ms. Khadija introduces the discussion by highlighting common misconceptions about foundational learning in Pakistan, pointing out that while many associate it only with literacy and numeracy, social-emotional learning is equally vital and often begins at home. She invites Ms. Samina to elaborate on when children start learning and what roles parents, caregivers, and family members play in positively building the foundation for learning from the start. Ms. Samina responds by underscoring that foundational learning indeed starts even before birth, emphasizing the importance of parental engagement during pregnancy. She explains that activities like talking to children, reading, and engaging in cognitive exercises like puzzles or chess can significantly enhance a child's early cognitive development. These interactions help lay the groundwork for later learning and social-emotional skills.



Following up, Ms. Khadija discusses the scientific basis for early sensory development, including hearing in the womb, and how positive or negative experiences can affect a child's cognitive and personality development. She asks Ms. Samina to expand on how specific activities performed by expecting mothers can impact the child. Ms. Samina elaborates on the cognitive benefits of engaging expecting mothers in stimulating activities, noting that such practices not only prepare the child for future learning challenges but also foster early cognitive skills that are crucial once the child begins formal education.

The conversation then shifts to the role of the education system, where Ms. Samina laments that many schools, especially within the public sector, are ill-prepared to meet the early learning needs of children. She stresses the need for schools to integrate cognitive, social-emotional, physical, and language development into their curricula to provide a holistic educational experience from the earliest years.

Concluding the discussion, Ms. Khadija and Ms. Samina emphasize the holistic nature of foundational learning. They advocate for educational approaches that encompass all developmental domains, not just academic ones. Ms. Samina highlights the need for parents, teachers, and caregivers to collaborate closely to ensure that every child receives a balanced and comprehensive early education that supports all aspects of their development.

2. Importance of Nutrition and Child Development



In an enlightening episode of our podcast series on Early Childhood Development, Dr. Nousheen Abbas, a clinical nutritionist with a background in public health, explores the profound impacts of nutrition on early childhood development and societal well-being. Dr. Nousheen shares her journey in the field of nutrition, emphasizing that foundational nutrition practices are crucial not only for filling stomachs but also for determining long-term health outcomes for individuals and future generations.

Ms. Khadija prompts Dr. Nousheen to explain the connection between a mother's nutrition and its impact on her child's health. Dr. Nousheen highlights the deep connection between a mother's well-being and the long-term health of her child. She emphasizes that if the mother is malnourished, anemic, or vitamin-deficient, these deficiencies are likely to be passed on to the child. To address these issues, she advocates for improving young girls' nutrition from



adolescence and providing pregnant women with appropriate care, particularly during critical periods of pregnancy.

Dr. Nousheen further highlights the cycle of malnutrition that often passes from one generation to the next, affecting both physical and cognitive development. She points out that over 40% of children in Pakistan suffer from stunted growth, with malnutrition being particularly severe in rural areas. Dr. Nousheen stresses that addressing nutritional deficiencies early in mothers and children is key to breaking this cycle and building a healthier society. Delving deeper, Ms. Khadija asks about societal norms affecting children's nutrition, such as the preferential treatment of male children in food distribution. Dr. Nousheen confirms that these norms still exist and discusses the detrimental effects they have on female children and mothers, perpetuating malnutrition and poor health outcomes.

On the topic of nutrition during pregnancy, Ms. Khadija inquires about the specific nutrients that are crucial during different stages of pregnancy. Dr. Nousheen emphasizes the importance of iron, calcium, and vitamins in a pregnant woman's diet and advocates for the consumption of local foods like whole wheat, lentils, yogurt, and leafy greens to meet these needs. Addressing the link between poverty and nutrition, Ms. Khadija explores whether economic factors are the sole contributors to malnutrition. Dr. Nousheen argues that while poverty is a significant factor, issues like food wastage and distribution also play critical roles. She calls for better resource management to mitigate the effects of poverty on nutrition.

Exploring the connection between nutrition and mental health, Ms. Khadija seeks Dr. Nousheen's expertise on how poor nutrition affects children's mental well-being. Dr. Nousheen explains that malnutrition can lead to behavioral issues, lack of focus, and low energy, all of which impact a child's mental health and cognitive development. Focusing on post-pregnancy nutrition, Ms. Khadija discusses the often-neglected dietary needs of lactating mothers. Dr. Nousheen stresses the importance of ensuring that lactating mothers receive a balanced diet to support both their health and their baby's development.

In her closing remarks, Dr. Nousheen underscores the importance of consuming fresh, nutritious food and maintaining hydration and physical activity. She leaves the audience with the message, "You are what you eat," encouraging parents to prioritize healthy eating habits to ensure a robust foundation for their children's development.



3. From Early Signs to Empowered Solutions: Navigating Neurodevelopmental Challenges



In a pivotal episode of our podcast series on Early Childhood Development, Dr. Semra Salik, a renowned clinical psychologist and the founder of PsychCare, shares her expertise on neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs) and their significant impact on children. Dr. Semra explains that NDDs affect brain development, influencing a child's ability to communicate, learn, and

perform daily functions. Conditions such as ADHD, communication disorders, and intellectual disabilities are common, and identifying these early signs is crucial for timely intervention.

Ms. Khadija opens the discussion by welcoming Dr. Semra and inviting her to elaborate on her work at PsychCare and its importance in raising awareness about neurodevelopmental challenges. Dr. Semra describes her dual role in providing counseling and education, emphasizing that PsychCare, established to address children's mental health issues, collaborates with schools to enhance understanding and support for children facing these challenges.

Exploring the critical topic of NDDs, Ms. Khadija asks Dr. Semra to delineate what neurodevelopmental disorders entail, their types, and the significance of early detection. Dr. Semra highlights that early intervention is key, as conditions like autism, ADHD, and learning disorders can severely impact a child's development if not addressed promptly. At PsychCare, they focus on early screening and diagnostic assessments to provide children with the necessary support to thrive.

Ms. Khadija further inquires about how early parents can detect potential developmental issues, especially in critical developmental stages. Dr. Semra points out that while some physical developmental issues can be identified during pregnancy, neurodevelopmental disorders are typically observed within the first few years of a child's life. She stresses the importance of parents being vigilant about their child's milestones, such as speech and motor skills, to ensure early detection and intervention.

Addressing language development, Ms. Khadija questions the role of early stimulation in language skills and what interventions can assist children who are lagging. Dr. Semra underscores the essential role of sensory stimulation—such as touch, sight, and sound—in fostering cognitive and linguistic development from a very early age. She criticizes the over-reliance on screens which can impede this natural progression, advising parents to engage more directly with their children through traditional activities that promote speech and communication skills.



Throughout the podcast, Dr. Semra and Ms. Khadija delve into the challenges schools face in supporting children with NDDs, noting that many lack the resources or trained personnel to effectively identify and address these needs. Dr. Semra advocates for comprehensive teacher training and the development of inclusive educational practices to ensure that children with neurodevelopmental disorders receive appropriate support within mainstream educational settings.

Concluding the episode, Dr. Semra calls for enhanced community awareness and proactive involvement from all stakeholders, including parents, educators, and healthcare professionals, to create supportive environments where children with neurodevelopmental challenges can succeed. By fostering early intervention, sensory engagement, and inclusive education, society can empower these children to reach their full potential.

4. Floods and Feeding the Future: A Deep Dive into Climate Change Impact on Children's Nutrition



In a vital episode of our podcast series on Early Childhood Development, Dr. Nousheen Abbas shares profound insights into the impact of climate change and emergency situations, like the 2022 floods in Pakistan, on the nutrition and overall well-being of children. Throughout the discussion, Dr. Nousheen explores how malnutrition, stunted growth, and food insecurity are

exacerbated by environmental disasters, stressing the need for comprehensive community and public health system preparedness for future challenges.

Ms. Khadija introduces the session by reflecting on previous discussions about children's nutrition and its crucial role in their development. She highlights the severe effects of the recent floods on children's health, prompting Dr. Nousheen to discuss the urgency of addressing these ongoing issues.

Dr. Nousheen explains the high rates of stunting and wasting among children in Pakistan, particularly in flood-affected areas like interior Sindh and Balochistan. She details how the floods have not only destroyed local agriculture and water sources but also left many families struggling to secure even basic meals, further intensifying malnutrition issues in these regions.

In response to Ms. Khadija's query about the worsening conditions in these flood-stricken areas and the measures being taken, Dr. Nousheen describes the struggles of families who have lost



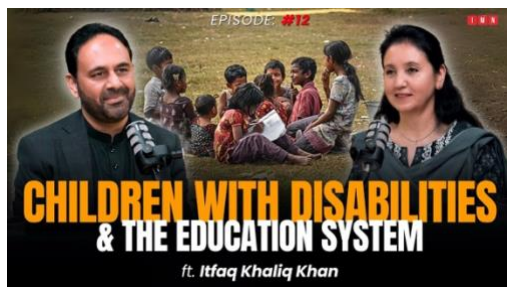
their livelihoods and homes. She emphasizes the long road to recovery, noting that many are still displaced and vulnerable to diseases due to weakened immunity and poor living conditions.

Ms. Khadija then asks about the challenges of nutrient absorption in children during disasters. Dr. Nousheen highlights how diarrheal diseases from contaminated water and unsanitary conditions can prevent children from absorbing the nutrients in relief foods, complicating efforts to address malnutrition effectively. Exploring the broader implications, Ms. Khadija questions how these absorption issues impact children's cognitive and physical development. Dr. Nousheen underscores that frequent illnesses and malnutrition during critical growth phases can significantly impair both cognitive abilities and physical health, setting back a child's developmental progress.

Shifting focus to community-based solutions, Ms. Khadija inquires about the training and role of local "champions" in disaster response. Dr. Nousheen discusses the initiative to train community members, including mothers and local leaders, to act as first responders, providing essential guidance on sanitation, hygiene, and basic nutrition during emergencies. Finally, Ms. Khadija asks about the role of educational institutions in preparing for future disasters. Dr. Nousheen stresses the importance of schools in promoting awareness about environmental conservation and healthy practices. She talks about training teachers and community leaders to educate and prepare children for a more sustainable future, emphasizing the need for long-term planning and action to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

The episode concludes with Dr. Nousheen expressing gratitude for the opportunity to share these insights, and Ms. Khadija thanking her for the enlightening discussion, hoping it will inspire listeners to take proactive steps toward addressing the challenges posed by climate change and ensuring healthier futures for children.

5. Ensuring Inclusive Education and Early Intervention for Children with Disabilities



In this insightful episode of our podcast series on "Early Childhood Development," Mr. Itfaq Khaliq Khan from Sightsavers discusses the critical need for inclusive education and early interventions for children with disabilities. He highlights the interconnectedness of hearing and vocabulary acquisition essential for language development and shares alarming statistics



that about 15% of the global population lives with disabilities, with around 13 million children in Pakistan facing some form of disability or functional difficulty.

The conversation begins with Mr. Itfaq emphasizing the vital role of teachers and caregivers in supporting these children and the pressing need to strengthen their capacity through specialized training and development programmes. Sightsavers has taken proactive steps by developing courses and modules for inclusive education, which have been integrated into teacher training institutions to help teachers identify and support children with disabilities, promoting an inclusive environment where these children can learn alongside their peers.

Discussing the organization's overall objectives and community support, Mr. Itfaq shares his extensive experience in creating equity and inclusion for children and people with disabilities in education, health, and economic empowerment. He details his involvement in major initiatives, particularly focusing on professional development for teachers and inclusive learning assessments.

As the dialogue continues, Mr. Itfaq explains Sightsavers' strategic approach, grounded in the Sustainable Development Goals and the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. The organization works at policy, institutional, and community levels, emphasizing early detection of disabilities to ensure inclusive support from an early age.

Addressing the early detection of visual impairments in children, Mr. Itfaq notes that while vision begins developing during pregnancy, the most common time for detecting visual impairments is between the ages of 8 and 16 years. He stresses the importance of early screening to treat conditions like refractive errors, which can significantly impact a child's learning and participation in class.

On the topic of teachers as secondary caregivers, Mr. Itfaq describes Sightsavers' efforts to strengthen inclusive education systems through professional development, collaborating with educational institutions to develop training modules that help teachers conduct basic screening for learning difficulties and providing individual support to children with disabilities. Responding to concerns about the exclusion of autistic children from classrooms due to behavioral challenges, Mr. Itfaq underscores that such exclusion is often due to stigma and misunderstanding about disabilities. He advocates for inclusive policies and proper teacher training to ensure that all children are adequately supported in their educational environments.

In his final remarks, Mr. Itfaq delivers key messages to parents, communities, and stakeholders on supporting children with disabilities. He urges understanding and acceptance of disability as a natural phenomenon and calls for collaborative efforts, including investment in data systems and resources for inclusive education, to promote a supportive environment where all children have equal opportunities to learn and thrive.



6. Maternal Depression and its Impact on Early Childhood Development



In the 13th episode of our podcast series on "Early Childhood Development," Dr. Abdul Wahab Yousafzai shared deep insights into the profound impact of maternal depression on early childhood development. He highlighted how societal attitudes and domestic violence contribute significantly to maternal depression, which not only affects mothers but also

inflicts long-term psychological damage on children, potentially leading to developmental issues such as stunting.

Throughout the discussion, Dr. Yousafzai emphasized the critical periods of pregnancy and early childhood as essential for development, noting that maternal health during these times is crucial for both the child's physical and psychological well-being. He advocated for a holistic approach to addressing maternal depression, which includes biological, psychological, and social interventions, stressing that emotional support for the child is as vital as nutritional support.

The conversation explored the definition of maternal depression, distinguishing between antenatal depression during pregnancy and postpartum depression after childbirth. Dr. Yousafzai pointed out the social and familial implications of maternal depression, particularly its impact on a child's development. He discussed how a mother's psychological and physical health during pregnancy directly influences the baby's growth, with maternal depression potentially affecting the baby's brain development and physical health. Addressing the connection between maternal depression and stunting, Dr. Yousafzai explained that maternal depression could lead to inadequate nutritional and emotional care for the child, which is crucial for avoiding developmental delays.

The discussion also covered the prevalence of postpartum depression in Pakistan, especially in regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where social factors like domestic violence exacerbate the condition. Dr. Yousafzai shared that awareness about the impact of maternal depression on children's health and development is generally low, particularly among husbands, who may not realize how their actions can induce toxic stress in children, severely affecting their development.

Towards the end of the podcast, the necessity of integrating mental health into the healthcare curriculum was discussed as a critical step towards addressing maternal depression effectively. Dr. Yousafzai called for improved psychiatric care and training for healthcare professionals to



identify and manage mental health issues, which would significantly enhance outcomes for mothers and children.

The podcast concluded with a mutual acknowledgment of the importance of continued dialogue and action to address maternal depression, with hopes that the insights shared would lead to enhanced understanding and better support for affected families.

7. Early Detection, Lifelong Protection: Navigating Child Health from Pregnancy to Parenthood



In the 14th episode of the "Early Childhood Development" podcast series, we were joined by Major General (Retired) Professor Dr. Salman Ali, an esteemed pediatrician with a wealth of experience. Dr. Salman, who has served as Principal at the Army Medical College, Rawalpindi, and Fazaya Medical College, Islamabad, as well as in key advisory roles for the Pakistan Armed

Forces, shares his expertise on the importance of child health, starting from pregnancy through to early childhood.

Ms. Khadija begins the discussion by introducing Dr. Salman and thanking him for joining the podcast. She frames the topic by focusing on the early detection of health issues in children and pregnant women, asking Dr. Salman to elaborate on what the key "danger signs" are during pregnancy and early childhood that parents and healthcare providers should be aware of. Dr. Salman starts the conversation by emphasizing that child development starts from conception, not birth. He explains that the intrauterine period, from conception until birth, is the most critical phase of growth in a human's life. He highlights how this period involves rapid development, where a single cell develops into a fully formed baby in just 40 weeks. This growth is influenced by multiple factors, such as maternal health, nutrition, and environmental conditions, all of which can have long-lasting effects on the child. Ms. Khadija then asks Dr. Salman to explain the role of maternal health in the child's development, particularly how maternal conditions can affect the baby. Dr. Salman responds by stressing that the mother's health directly impacts the baby's development. He mentions that conditions like high blood pressure, diabetes, and anemia in the mother can hinder the baby's growth in the womb. He advocates for routine antenatal check-ups and screenings to detect any health issues early, which is essential for both the mother's and baby's well-being.



Expanding on the topic of prenatal care, Ms. Khadija asks about the screening methods available for expecting mothers, particularly in Pakistan, and how these screenings help detect developmental issues. Dr. Salman explains that advanced countries offer a wide range of prenatal screenings, including tests for genetic conditions like Down syndrome, which can be detected in the first trimester. While some of these tests are available in Pakistan, he notes that samples often need to be sent abroad for more specialized genetic testing. He emphasizes that early detection allows for timely intervention, which can prevent complications during pregnancy and childbirth.

Ms. Khadija raises an important question regarding the healthcare challenges in rural areas, where medical facilities are often lacking. Dr. Salman acknowledges the difficulty but stresses the importance of training traditional birth attendants in rural regions to recognize early danger signs during pregnancy. He explains that these attendants can serve as the first line of defense in identifying high-risk pregnancies and referring women to higher-level healthcare facilities. This, he says, is crucial for reducing maternal and infant mortality rates in underserved areas.

Continuing the conversation, Ms. Khadija asks Dr. Salman to elaborate on specific "danger signs" during pregnancy that should prompt immediate medical attention. Dr. Salman explains that signs such as reduced fetal movement, abnormal fetal growth, or issues like preeclampsia (high blood pressure) are critical warning signals. These require prompt medical intervention to prevent complications for both the mother and the child. Shifting the focus to postnatal care, Ms. Khadija inquires about the practices to ensure newborns are cared for correctly and what harmful traditional practices should be avoided. Dr. Salman responds by emphasizing the importance of proper handling of the newborn right after birth. He explains that outdated practices, such as holding a baby upside down or slapping them to initiate breathing, should be avoided. Instead, newborns should be placed immediately in their mother's arms for skin-to-skin contact, which is essential for comfort, bonding, and proper breathing.

The conversation then turns to the importance of breastfeeding in a child's early development. Ms. Khadija asks Dr. Salman to explain the role of breastfeeding in brain development and overall health. Dr. Salman underscores that breastfeeding is vital for a baby's brain development, particularly during the first six months of life. He highlights that breast milk contains essential nutrients that are irreplaceable by formula, and the first feed, colostrum, is especially rich in antibodies and nutrients crucial for the baby's growth. He emphasizes that exclusive breastfeeding should continue for the first six months to ensure optimal physical and cognitive development.

Ms. Khadija follows up by asking how parents can ensure their child is meeting developmental milestones and how they can provide early stimulation to aid in their child's growth. Dr. Salman explains that early stimulation—talking to the baby, engaging in physical touch, and responding



to their cues—is critical for healthy brain development. He emphasizes that children are highly receptive to their surroundings, even while in the womb, and that early interaction helps build essential cognitive and social skills. He also encourages parents to monitor their child’s growth using developmental charts and to seek medical advice if any delays in reaching milestones are observed.

In the latter part of the discussion, Ms. Khadija raises the issue of parental education, pointing out the lack of awareness among parents about how to nurture their children properly. Dr. Salman agrees and stresses the need for a structured system to educate parents about child-rearing, both at the community level and through formal programmes. He explains that reducing violence against children and fostering positive reinforcement from a young age are critical for raising emotionally healthy individuals.

In his closing remarks, Dr. Salman reiterates the importance of early detection, maternal health, and nurturing environments in ensuring a child's lifelong well-being. He emphasizes that to create a compassionate, healthy society, we must start by caring for mothers and fostering empathy and love in the earliest stages of childhood development.

The podcast concludes with Ms. Khadija thanking Dr. Salman for his valuable insights, expressing hope that this discussion will help parents, educators, and caregivers in their efforts to support children's health and development.

8. Managing Screen Time in Early Childhood: The Impact and Alternatives



In the latest episode of the Early Childhood Development podcast, Ms. Khadija welcomes Dr. Semra, a clinical psychologist, to discuss the increasingly concerning effects of screen time on young children’s development. As digital devices become a central part of modern life, this episode delves into how excessive screen exposure is altering children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Dr. Semra provides expert insights on managing screen time and offers alternative strategies to foster healthier growth in children.

Ms. Khadija begins by introducing the topic and pointing out the challenges parents face as screens become an integral part of their children's daily routines. She highlights the concern that children are often absorbed by digital devices, which affects their development. Ms. Khadija asks



Dr. Semra to explain the harmful effects of excessive screen time on children and suggest alternative ways for parents to manage it.

Dr. Semra explains that while technology has introduced many positive advancements, excessive screen time negatively affects children's routines, learning abilities, physical activity, and social interactions. She stresses that digital device, when used without moderation, can become addictive, leading to deeper problems such as withdrawal symptoms when children are cut off from their screens. She points out that short-form content, such as Reels or short videos, has shortened children's attention spans, making it harder for them to focus on tasks, which is also forcing schools to adapt teaching methods to maintain engagement.

The conversation then moves to the neurological effects of screen time. Dr. Semra discusses how digital content releases neurotransmitters that provide children with a rush of pleasure, similar to the effects of substance addiction. This makes it difficult for children to transition away from screens without displaying emotional or behavioral problems. She also explains how assistive technology, while useful in some cases, can contribute to social isolation by reducing the need for face-to-face interactions, which are crucial for developing social skills.

Ms. Khadija further explores the physical impact of screen time, particularly how it affects children's eating habits and overall health. She asks Dr. Semra about the common practice of using screens during mealtimes to distract children. Dr. Semra responds by emphasizing that this practice disconnects children from the eating experience, affecting both their physical health and their relationship with food. This, combined with prolonged physical inactivity, can lead to childhood obesity and poor motor skills.

Another key concern is the effect of screen time on speech development. Dr. Semra explains that while children exposed to screens may learn a wide vocabulary, they often struggle with real-world communication. Excessive screen use can delay speech development and affect the child's ability to engage in meaningful conversations, as they tend to mimic the one-sided dialogues from cartoons or videos rather than learning to interact with others in a natural, conversational way.

To counteract these issues, Dr. Semra emphasizes the importance of balance and suggests screen-free activities that promote physical, cognitive, and social development. She advises parents to introduce more physical play, reading, interactive family activities, and other engaging alternatives to screen time. Establishing "tech-free zones" in the home, such as during meals or in certain rooms, can help foster a healthier environment for both children and parents.



In response to a question from Ms. Khadija about managing screen time in schools, Dr. Semra stresses the importance of a balanced approach to incorporating technology into education. While audio-visual aids can be beneficial, schools should also emphasize traditional forms of learning, such as reading books and engaging in physical activities. Teachers can help manage children's screen use by keeping lessons interactive without overly relying on digital tools.

As the discussion wraps up, Ms. Khadija asks about the role of policymakers in managing screen time for children. Dr. Semra calls for a collaborative approach between parents, educators, and policymakers to create structured environments where screen time is limited and balanced with other activities. She emphasizes that digital tools should be used in moderation and that more focus should be placed on educating both parents and children about the healthy use of technology.

The episode concludes with a reminder from Dr. Semra that while screen time is an inevitable part of modern life, it is possible to find a healthy balance. By setting clear boundaries and encouraging meaningful, screen-free interactions, parents can help their children develop into well-rounded, socially adept individuals who thrive in both the digital and real world.

9. Nurturing Future Generations: The Power of Maternal Nutrition



In this informative podcast, Ms. Khadija hosts two experts from Nutrition International, Mr. Dawar Adnan Shams, National Manager, and Mr. Shahid Fazal, Technical Advisor. They engage in a deep conversation on the significance of maternal nutrition and its pivotal role in early childhood development, while exploring how malnutrition impacts not only individual families but also the nation.

The episode begins with Ms. Khadija welcoming both guests and introducing the crucial topic of maternal nutrition. She sets the context by explaining the link between maternal health and early childhood development (ECD), emphasizing how malnutrition during pregnancy has both immediate and long-term consequences on the child's physical and cognitive growth.

Ms. Khadija's first question to Mr. Dawar is about the work Nutrition International has been doing in Pakistan. Mr. Dawar shares that Nutrition International, formerly known as the Micronutrient Initiative, has been working for 25 years in Pakistan. Their programmes focus on delivering



proven nutrition interventions, particularly in maternal and newborn health, adolescent nutrition, and micronutrient supplementation. One of their recent initiatives, the "Rishma" campaign, targets maternal nutrition and aims to improve nutrition indicators in collaboration with the government of Pakistan. Mr. Dawar explains that their collaboration with the government is nationwide, offering technical assistance to align with existing policies and strategies, thus strengthening maternal and child health programmes.

Ms. Khadija then turns to Mr. Shahid and asks him to shed light on the current state of maternal nutrition in Pakistan and its broader implications. Mr. Shahid reveals the alarming statistics from the National Nutrition Survey of 2018, where nearly 50% of women in Pakistan are anemic and 15% of mothers of childbearing age are malnourished. He explains that these conditions lead to negative birth outcomes, such as low birth weight and premature births, which result in long-term consequences for children's immune systems and cognitive abilities. He stresses that these are irreversible conditions, underlining the importance of addressing malnutrition at the right time, particularly during pregnancy and adolescence, to ensure better health for future generations.

Ms. Khadija probes further, asking how maternal malnutrition directly impacts children's development and what measures should be taken to address this issue early on. Mr. Shahid responds by emphasizing that addressing adolescent nutrition is crucial because these young girls are the future mothers of the next generation. He advocates for early intervention to break the cycle of malnutrition, ensuring that adolescent girls and pregnant women receive adequate nutrition and care to avoid complications during pregnancy.

Another critical point raised by Ms. Khadija is the connection between maternal nutrition and mental health. She asks Mr. Shahid if malnutrition in mothers is linked to mental health issues and how that affects children. Mr. Shahid explains that malnutrition can indeed lead to mental health problems, both pre- and post-pregnancy. He elaborates that mental health issues in mothers negatively affect the cognitive and emotional development of their children. Proper nutrition, however, helps mothers maintain better mental health, leading to improved outcomes for their children.

Shifting the conversation to the economic impacts of malnutrition, Ms. Khadija asks Mr. Dawar to discuss how maternal malnutrition affects the nation's progress. Mr. Dawar explains that maternal malnutrition places a heavy burden on Pakistan's economy, costing the country an estimated \$7.6 billion annually, which amounts to 3% of the GDP. He breaks down these costs, pointing out that they include healthcare expenses, mortality, and loss of future productivity due to compromised cognitive development in children. The conversation highlights that investing in



maternal health is not just a healthcare issue but also an economic imperative for the country's progress.

Ms. Khadija asks what the primary causes of malnutrition are and where the gaps lie in addressing this issue. Mr. Dawar responds that malnutrition stems from several factors, including poverty, lack of healthcare access, and insufficient nutrition education at the community level. He stresses that while strategies have been developed, the key challenge remains in the implementation of these policies due to resource constraints and limited public awareness.

Ms. Khadija then inquires about successful interventions that have been implemented to combat malnutrition. Mr. Dawar highlights two successful initiatives: the weekly iron-folic acid supplementation programme for adolescent girls, which has been effective in reducing anemia, and the fortification of wheat flour and oil with essential micronutrients. These interventions are helping to combat widespread deficiencies in the population and have already shown promising results.

Finally, Ms. Khadija asks how Nutrition International engages with mothers and their families to ensure they receive the necessary education and services. Mr. Dawar explains their approach, which includes behavior change communication and interpersonal engagement. Through one-on-one counseling sessions, community meetings, and educational campaigns, Nutrition International reaches out to mothers, their families, and healthcare providers. They use media campaigns and educational materials to promote maternal nutrition and antenatal care, ensuring that families are aware of the importance of proper nutrition during pregnancy.

The episode concludes with a call to action from Ms. Khadija, urging all stakeholders—government bodies, civil society, and families—to prioritize maternal nutrition as a key factor in shaping the future of Pakistan. Both Mr. Dawar and Mr. Shahid reinforce the importance of early intervention and comprehensive education in breaking the cycle of poor maternal and child health, ensuring a healthier, more prosperous future for the country.

This discussion underscores the interconnectedness of maternal health, early childhood development, and the economic well-being of Pakistan. Through collaborative efforts between the government, development partners, and civil society, the cycle of malnutrition can be broken, leading to long-lasting benefits for generations to come.

10. Understanding Autism: Embracing Inclusivity, Empowering Parents



In this enlightening episode of our Early Childhood Development podcast, we are joined by Ms. Sadia Atif, a clinical psychologist and director at Step Ahead, an inclusive programme dedicated to supporting children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Ms. Sadia shares her insights on the critical role of inclusion and the collective responsibility of parents, educators, and the government in supporting children with autism to live fulfilling lives.

Ms. Khadija begins the discussion by welcoming Ms. Sadia and asking her to share her journey and the work she does at Step Ahead. Ms. Sadia explains that her motivation comes from a personal connection—her brother's autism—which has deeply influenced her professional path. She emphasizes that autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder with varying symptoms that can include challenges in communication, social interaction, and repetitive behaviors, often noticeable by around 24 months of age.

Discussing the challenges faced by children with autism in mainstream educational settings, Ms. Sadia highlights that many schools and teachers lack adequate training to support these children. They are often misunderstood and excluded from regular activities, which underscores the need for environments that foster inclusion rather than segregation.

In response to Ms. Khadija's question about the signs that parents and teachers should look for to identify autism, Ms. Sadia advises that early signs often involve delays in communication and social interactions, such as failing to respond to their name or make eye contact. She stresses the importance of early intervention and active engagement through play to help develop necessary social and communication skills.

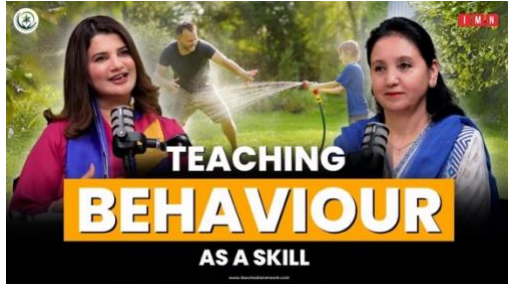
Ms. Sadia also discusses the need for continuous training for both parents and teachers. She explains that while autism has no cure, appropriate educational and behavioral interventions can significantly help children develop essential life skills. She highlights the importance of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that caters to the unique needs of each child, including therapies for speech, behavior, and motor skills. Addressing the role of government in supporting children with autism, Ms. Sadia notes the lack of implementation of inclusive education policies and calls for better training for teachers and facilities that accommodate the needs of autistic children in public spaces.

Concluding the conversation, Ms. Sadia stresses the importance of creating an inclusive environment that recognizes the potential of children with autism. She emphasizes that positive reinforcement and societal acceptance can make a significant difference in the lives of these children.

This episode serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of inclusion and the collective effort required to support children with autism, ensuring they have the opportunities and support needed to reach their full potential.



11. Mastering Social Behaviour: Transforming Habits into Skills



In this enlightening episode of our podcast series on Early Childhood Development, we are joined by Ms. Humaira Latif, an expert in curriculum development and early education. The discussion focuses on the critical role of behavioral skills in child development, emphasizing the need to teach and nurture these skills from a young age.

Ms. Humaira begins by explaining the importance of behavioral skills like empathy, respect for elders, and emotional regulation, which should be cultivated early in life. These skills are foundational for the overall development of a child and are essential for their success both as individuals and in societal interactions.

Ms. Khadija addresses the topic of social behavior by discussing the discrepancy often seen between societal advice and personal practice, which can have a detrimental effect on children. She explores the need for consistent behavior and practicing what we preach to ensure children learn positive behaviors effectively. Ms. Humaira echoes this sentiment, emphasizing that while academic achievement is celebrated, often at the expense of social-emotional skills, a balanced approach that also nurtures behavior is crucial for holistic development. She highlights that the early years, including the first 1000 days of a child's life, are vital for shaping behavior and personality through both parental influence and educational systems.

The discussion also touches on the importance of role modeling. Ms. Humaira stresses that children learn behaviors from their parents, teachers, and the surrounding community, making it essential for adults to demonstrate the behaviors they wish to instill in their children. The conversation delves into the challenges of modern parenting and education systems that overly focus on grades. Ms. Humaira points out that this can lead to a lack of empathy and social skills among children, who may excel academically but struggle in social settings.

Furthermore, Ms. Humaira discusses the impact of digitalization on children's behavior, noting the increasing isolation and lack of empathy among youth. She talks about the need for parents to engage children in activities that teach values like sharing and responsibility from a young age.

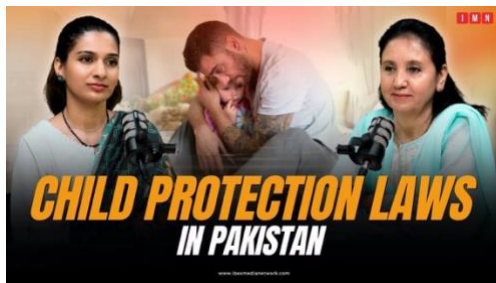
Ms. Khadija queries about the educational system's role in balancing academic success with behavioral development. Ms. Humaira advocates for an educational reform that integrates



social-emotional learning into the curriculum, ensuring that children are not only academically proficient but also capable of handling emotional and social challenges.

The episode concludes with a powerful message from Ms. Humaira on the need for parents and educators to collaborate in fostering environments that support both intellectual and emotional growth. She urges a shift towards a more balanced approach that values behavioral skills alongside academic achievements, preparing children for a well-rounded future.

12. Child Protection Laws | Role of Parents and Schools



In this compelling episode of the "Early Childhood Development" podcast series, Ms. Mehak Naeem, a child rights professional and member of the Punjab National Commission on the Rights of the Child (NCRC), explores the multifaceted subject of child protection. Drawing on her background in psychology and special education, Ms. Mehak discusses the systemic, familial, and societal responsibilities in safeguarding children's rights and well-being.

Ms. Khadija opens the discussion by introducing Ms. Mehak and inviting her to elaborate on the NCRC's purpose. Ms. Mehak explains that the NCRC, established under the 2017 NCRC Act, is tasked with advising the government on child-related legislation and ensuring alignment with international treaties like the UNCRC. The commission also addresses child rights violations, conducts research, and provides evidence-based recommendations to policymakers. A key aspect of its work is advocacy and raising awareness, supported by an online information portal with resources on various child rights topics.

Ms. Khadija highlights common misconceptions around child protection, prompting Ms. Mehak to clarify its broader scope. Child protection is not limited to shielding children from external threats; it also includes preventing emotional neglect, physical abuse, and exploitation within homes, schools, and communities. Harmful practices such as harsh parenting, body shaming, and neglecting a child's emotional needs can have long-term adverse effects. Ms. Mehak emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing these issues early to foster a safe and nurturing environment.

Ms. Mehak underscores the central role of families in child protection. She advocates for educating parents about effective parenting practices, suggesting that parenting programs



should be introduced to guide young couples. These programs can teach non-violent discipline, positive reinforcement, and the importance of fostering emotional bonds. Extended families, especially grandparents, can be instrumental in a child's upbringing, provided they are engaged positively. Initiatives like the Rupani Foundation's Aga Walidain Model highlight the potential of extended family involvement in a child's holistic development.

Moving beyond the home, Ms. Khadija steers the conversation to the responsibilities of schools. Ms. Mehak highlights the critical role schools play in child protection, pointing to issues such as bullying, emotional neglect, and abuse. She stresses the need for child protection policies, teacher training, and the establishment of school-based committees to detect and address abuse. Physical infrastructure should be designed to minimize risks, with open spaces and surveillance ensuring accountability. Ms. Mehak also calls for clear referral pathways to manage cases requiring external intervention.

The discussion turns to the government's role in child protection. Ms. Mehak acknowledges progress in developing child protection policies but notes challenges in implementation and monitoring. Basic measures like birth registration are essential for planning and safeguarding children's rights. She emphasizes that without accurate data, it becomes impossible to address systemic issues effectively. The government must prioritize creating and enforcing policies that support parents and children, including flexible workplace policies for working mothers and daycare centers.

The episode concludes with a mutual acknowledgment of the collective effort required to ensure child protection. Ms. Mehak stresses that safeguarding children involves multiple stakeholders—parents, schools, communities, and the state—working in harmony to address risks and foster secure environments. Ms. Khadija expresses hope that the discussion will inspire listeners to take proactive steps in this direction.

This episode reinforces that child protection is not a singular responsibility but a shared commitment, emphasizing the need for awareness, education, and collaboration at all levels.

13. Early Signs & Solutions: Speech and Language Delays Explained



In this engaging episode of the "Early Childhood Development" podcast series, Ms. Shumaila Bibi, a Speech and Language Pathologist and Director of PediaCare Therapy Clinic in Islamabad, shares her expertise on speech therapy and its critical role in



fostering communication skills in children. Host Ms. Khadija begins the conversation by introducing Ms. Shumaila and inviting her to discuss her journey into speech therapy, her current work, and her future goals. Ms. Shumaila explains that PediaCare Clinic offers specialized services such as physiotherapy, speech therapy, ABA therapy, and occupational therapy, primarily for children with autism, ADHD, and speech or language delays. She emphasizes that her passion for helping children overcome communication challenges inspired her to pursue this profession.

Ms. Khadija then asks why Ms. Shumaila believes screen time has become such a prevalent issue for children today. In response, Ms. Shumaila explains that excessive screen usage has drastically reduced opportunities for two-way communication, which is essential for children to develop pragmatic communication skills like turn-taking, responding to cues, and engaging in conversations. She illustrates this point by noting that when children are glued to screens, they are exposed to one-way communication, which hinders their ability to practice conversational norms and can lead to delays in speech and language development.

Recognizing the need for clarity, Ms. Khadija requests Ms. Shumaila to simplify technical terms like “pragmatic communication” for the audience. Ms. Shumaila uses relatable examples to explain that effective communication requires interaction, such as making eye contact, responding to verbal and non-verbal cues, and engaging in dialogue. She highlights how screens deprive children of these interactions, further compounding developmental delays. Building on this, Ms. Khadija asks about the specific dangers of excessive screen time, to which Ms. Shumaila responds by pointing out that prolonged screen exposure not only disrupts communication skills but also diminishes attention spans and prevents children from engaging in sensory experiences, such as tasting or feeling their food, ultimately leading to behavioral and dependency issues.

The conversation then shifts to speech and language delays, with Ms. Khadija asking Ms. Shumaila to elaborate on how these differ and how they are diagnosed. Ms. Shumaila explains that speech delays involve challenges in producing sounds due to physical or articulatory issues, while language delays pertain to difficulties in understanding or expressing ideas. She categorizes language delays into receptive, expressive, and mixed disorders, giving an example of a child who developed “cartoonish” language due to excessive exposure to animated content. Such cases, she notes, highlight the pressing need for early diagnosis and intervention.

Ms. Khadija raises the critical role of early identification and intervention, asking why it is so essential and what happens if delays are not addressed on time. Ms. Shumaila emphasizes that the early years, particularly from birth to five, are a period of significant brain development, during which timely interventions can prevent long-term challenges like learning difficulties and social anxiety. She also explains that speech therapy assessments always include evaluations of hearing, as auditory processing is foundational to language development.



Addressing a common issue, Ms. Khadija asks how families in rural areas can access speech therapy when specialists are scarce. Ms. Shumaila acknowledges the accessibility gap and shares an example of a family traveling from Chakwal to Islamabad for therapy. She advocates for deploying Speech and Language Pathologists in every city to ensure that children in underserved areas receive the care they need.

As the discussion nears its conclusion, Ms. Khadija invites Ms. Shumaila to share practical advice for parents. Ms. Shumaila recommends engaging in language-rich interactions, narrating daily activities, reading aloud, and involving children in conversations about their day. These small but meaningful steps, she notes, can significantly enhance a child's communication skills. Ms. Khadija wraps up the session by thanking Ms. Shumaila for her valuable insights, expressing hope that the discussion will help parents and caregivers recognize the importance of early intervention and support their children effectively.

14. Gender-based Violence & It's Impact on Child Development



In this enlightening episode of the "Early Childhood Development" podcast series, Ms. Khadija hosts Mr. Saleem Malik, an expert with over 35 years of experience in human rights, particularly focusing on women and children. The discussion explores the often-overlooked intersection between Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and early childhood development,

shedding light on its profound implications for children's emotional and physical well-being.

Ms. Khadija opens the conversation by introducing Mr. Saleem and inviting him to elaborate on his extensive experience in human rights advocacy. Mr. Saleem expresses his gratitude for the opportunity and emphasizes the foundational role of early childhood development in building a healthy society. Reflecting on his work, he highlights how family dynamics and human relationships profoundly shape a child's upbringing.

The conversation shifts to Gender-Based Violence, with Ms. Khadija asking for clarification on its definition and scope. Mr. Saleem explains that while GBV is often perceived as violence against women and girls, it encompasses a broader spectrum of discrimination and abuse rooted in gender bias. In Pakistan, as a male-dominated society, women and girls are the most common victims. However, he notes that GBV also affects men and transgender individuals, albeit in different forms. He delves into the dynamics of domestic violence, which often extends beyond



spousal relationships to include extended family members, creating a ripple effect that impacts children within the household.

Ms. Khadija raises the issue of discrimination against girls, asking how it manifests and whether it qualifies as violence. Mr. Saleem responds that discrimination is indeed a form of violence as it systematically weakens one segment of society. He illustrates this by pointing to the stark differences in family reactions to the birth of a girl versus a boy. Such disparities not only undermine the girl's self-esteem and emotional stability but also perpetuate cycles of inequality and disadvantage.

Building on this, Ms. Khadija asks about the impact of witnessing violence on children's brain development and emotional health. Mr. Saleem draws on scientific research to explain how chronic exposure to adverse conditions, such as abuse or household dysfunction, alters brain structure and leads to long-term psychological and physical health issues. He references the concept of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), highlighting their correlation with health problems, trust issues, and relationship difficulties in adulthood.

The discussion then turns to the role of fathers in mitigating these adverse effects. Ms. Khadija asks how fathers can be more positively involved in their children's upbringing. Mr. Saleem stresses the need for a cultural shift, as only a small percentage of fathers in Pakistan actively participate in caregiving. He advocates for schools and parenting programs to educate fathers on their responsibilities and foster nurturing relationships with their children. Fathers, he emphasizes, should move beyond the role of disciplinarians to become active, engaged, and empathetic caregivers.

Addressing broader societal interventions, Ms. Khadija inquires about the role of other actors, such as religious institutions. Mr. Saleem highlights the potential of mosques and other religious platforms to promote messages of equality, human rights, and positive parenting. He also underscores the importance of schools incorporating life skills, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution into their curriculum. Community initiatives, he adds, should create safe spaces for children experiencing violence, offering counseling and protection where needed.

The episode concludes with Ms. Khadija thanking Mr. Saleem for his valuable insights and emphasizing the importance of collaborative efforts in addressing GBV and its impact on children. She expresses hope that this discussion will inspire the audience to take meaningful action.



15. Mathematical Concepts and Brain Development



In this insightful episode of the podcast series on Early Childhood Development, Dr. Nusrat Rizvi, a renowned expert in mathematics education, joins Ms. Khadija Khan to explore the challenges and opportunities in teaching Mathematics to children, particularly in Pakistan. The conversation delves into why children struggle with Mathematics, how parents and educators

can make the subject more engaging, and the critical role of early childhood development in shaping Mathematical understanding.

Ms. Khadija begins the conversation by welcoming Dr. Nusrat and highlighting her impressive academic background, including her PhD in Mathematics Education from Oxford University and her extensive experience in teacher training in Pakistan. She sets the stage by asking Dr. Nusrat to explain why Mathematics is often perceived as a difficult subject and how this perception can be changed.

Dr. Nusrat responds by emphasizing that Mathematics is deeply connected to everyday life. She explains that children begin learning Mathematical concepts from a very early age, even before they start school. For example, a one-month-old baby can associate clapping with numbers, and toddlers naturally engage with Mathematical ideas like counting, shapes, and patterns through play and daily activities. She stresses that parents and teachers need to recognize and build on this innate curiosity by integrating mathematics into real-life contexts.

Ms. Khadija then asks about the connection between cognitive development and Mathematics. Dr. Nusrat explains that cognitive skills like problem-solving, memory, and attention are closely linked to Mathematical learning. She highlights how activities like solving puzzles, counting objects, and exploring patterns can enhance a child's cognitive abilities while making Mathematics enjoyable.

The discussion shifts to the challenges in Pakistan's education system, particularly the lack of engaging teaching methods in Mathematics. Dr. Nusrat shares her observations from a nationwide study, where she found that many classrooms rely on rote learning and abstract problem-solving, leaving children disconnected from the subject. She advocates for a more hands-on, interactive approach, where children use everyday materials like clay, matchsticks, and household items to explore Mathematical concepts.

Ms. Khadija raises an important question about children with learning difficulties, such as dyscalculia, a condition that affects Mathematical understanding. Dr. Nusrat explains that while



dyscalculia is less understood than dyslexia, it is a real challenge for some children. She shares findings from a study in Lahore, where 45 out of 650 children were identified with Mathematical learning disorders. Dr. Nusrat emphasizes the need for early screening, proper diagnosis, and tailored interventions to support these children, ensuring they can still succeed in other areas.

The conversation then turns to the role of parents in fostering a love for Mathematics. Dr. Nusrat encourages parents to engage their children in meaningful activities, such as cooking, shopping, or even setting the table, where they can naturally apply Mathematical concepts. She also suggests creating a handbook for parents with simple, practical activities to make Mathematics a part of daily life.

Ms. Khadija asks about global best practices that Pakistan can learn from. Dr. Nusrat highlights the importance of professional development for teachers, where they can share best practices and learn new methods to make Mathematics more engaging. She also stresses the need for collaboration between parents, teachers, and experts to create a supportive learning environment for children.

As the episode concludes, Ms. Khadija reflects on the key takeaways: Mathematics is not just a school subject but a life skill that can be taught through everyday experiences. She thanks Dr. Nusrat for her valuable insights and practical advice, hoping that this discussion will inspire parents and educators to rethink how they approach mathematics education.

Dr. Nusrat leaves listeners with a powerful message: every child can learn Mathematics. It's not about innate talent but about creating the right environment, building confidence, and making learning meaningful. With the right support, children can not only overcome their struggles with mathematics but also develop a lifelong love for the subject.

Maternal Mental Health Roundtable Discussion

On July 25, 2024, The Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood (PAFEC), Rupani Foundation, and Allama Iqbal Open University, in collaboration with UNICEF and other relevant partners, organized a half-day session on 'Maternal Mental Health and Its Impact on Early Childhood Development' on July 25, 2024. The purpose of the session was to identify the causes and critical stages of maternal depression, as well as to discuss the gaps and challenges in the services and support systems available for mothers in Pakistan.



The discussion covered various stages of maternal mental health, including pre-pregnancy, during pregnancy, postpartum depression, the lactation period, and beyond. Approximately 40 to 45 experts participated, including psychiatrists, developmental pediatricians, gynecologists, parental educators, child protection experts, nutritionists, and representatives from organizations already working in this area.

Dr. Shelina Bahmani, Assistant Professor & Lead ECD and Parenting Programme, at The Aga Khan University delivered a talk on "**Maternal Mental Health: The Foundation for Early Childhood Development Success**," while Dr. Ikhtlaq Ahmad, Assistant Professor, Public Mental Health at the Health Services Academy, presented on "**Perinatal Mental Health: Insights from Pakistan**."

Ms. Khadija Khan shared the objectives of the session, which was moderated by Dr. Saba, Manager ECD at UNICEF, and Mr. Syed Jalaluddin Shah, Global Director of Rupani Foundation.

The discussion generally focused on maternal mental health issues, their impact on early childhood development, and the need for comprehensive approaches to address these challenges. The participants highlighted gaps in data collection and screening, particularly in low-resource settings, and emphasized the importance of early identification and management of postpartum depression. Speakers also stressed the need for holistic approaches that consider the entire family and address intergenerational trauma and stress. The importance of community-based interventions, teacher training, and potential areas for collaboration among organizations was also emphasized. Additionally, the discussion underscored the need to address



social determinants of health to ensure holistic child development through maternal mental health and family support.

Key Highlights

1. Expert Insights and Presentations:

- Dr. Shelina Bhamani (Aga Khan University) emphasized the profound impact of maternal mental health on children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. She highlighted the need for universal screening, community-based interventions, and the establishment of a national maternal mental health strategy.
- Dr. Ikhlaq Ahmad (Health Services Academy) shared insights on perinatal depression in Pakistan, advocating for task-shifting to non-specialists and scaling up programs like the Thinking Healthy Programme (THP). He also introduced a technology-assisted intervention (Android app) to support mental health care in rural areas.

2. Critical Issues Identified:

- High Prevalence of Postpartum Depression: Experts noted the alarming rates of postpartum depression, exacerbated by factors such as domestic violence, nutritional deficiencies, and societal pressures.
- Service Gaps: Participants highlighted the lack of large-scale data, universal screening mechanisms, and accessible mental health services, particularly in rural and low-resource settings.
- Intergenerational Impact: Maternal mental health issues were linked to developmental delays in children and intergenerational trauma, underscoring the need for holistic, family-centered approaches.

3. Proposed Solutions:

- National Maternal Mental Health Strategy: Experts called for a comprehensive strategy integrating universal screening, community education, and nutritional support.
- Community-Based Interventions: Scaling up programs like THP and leveraging digital health solutions to bridge service gaps.
- Parental Education: Incorporating maternal mental health awareness and parenting skills into school and university curricula.
- Think Tank Formation: Establishing a permanent working group to drive policy advocacy, research, and collaboration among stakeholders.

4. Way Forward:

- It was proposed to form a task force to coordinate efforts across institutions and engage teachers and youth as mental health facilitators in communities.



Key Recommendations

1. Develop and implement a National Maternal Mental Health Strategy with universal screening and community education.
2. Scale up evidence-based programs like the Thinking Healthy Programme (THP) and integrate nutritional support to address the gut-brain connection.
3. Address domestic violence as a critical factor impacting maternal mental health.
4. Introduce parental education programs in schools, colleges, and universities to prepare future parents.
5. Establish a permanent think tank to drive ongoing collaboration, research, and policy advocacy.
6. Promote family-centered mental health awareness campaigns to shift societal attitudes and reduce stigma.
7. Hold regular meetings (both in-person and virtual) to maintain momentum and incorporate international expertise.

Impact and Vision

The roundtable discussion marked a pivotal step toward addressing maternal mental health as a cornerstone of early childhood development in Pakistan. By fostering collaboration among experts, advocating for policy changes, and leveraging community-based solutions, PAFEC and its partners are paving the way for a future where every mother and child has access to the support they need to thrive. We are building a foundation for **healthier families, resilient communities**, and a **brighter future** for Pakistan's children. This roundtable was not just a discussion—it was a call to action, a promise to prioritize maternal mental health as a critical driver of early childhood development and national progress.

UNICEF Regional Conference: Nourishing South Asia

UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA) convened a regional conference titled Nourishing South Asia: Scaling up Nutritional Care and Support for Infants at Risk of Poor Growth and Development in South Asia from September 16-18, 2024, in Kathmandu, Nepal. A delegation of six professionals from Pakistan attended the conference, with Ms. Khadija Khan, CEO of the Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood (PAFEC), representing the organisation at this strategic event. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to UNICEF for providing this valuable opportunity to PAFEC.



The objectives of the regional nutrition conference were:

1. Position the nutritional care and support for infants less than 6 months at risk of poor growth and development and their mothers as an essential component of evidence-based interventions to support optimal nutrition and development in the first years of life in South Asia
2. Share global and regional evidence and guidance on nutritional care and support for infants less than 6 months at risk of poor growth and development and their mothers, and lessons, better practices, challenges and opportunities in the region
3. Identify actions to accelerate improvements in nutritional care and support for infants less than 6 months at risk of poor growth and development and their mothers, in the context of multi sectoral actions to improve newborn and child nutrition and health.

Nutrition, health, and early childhood experts from around the world, along with government representatives, researchers, UN agencies, civil society organisations, professional associations, and other development partners from across South Asia, participated in the conference. The experts provided detailed insights into the conference theme, focusing on the aforementioned objectives. After three days of enriching presentations and insightful discussions, the conference



concluded with a Call to Action, consisting of key messages aimed at achieving the objectives. Country-specific action plans were developed to implement the Call to Action.

Training of Trainers and Key Partners on Early Childhood Development

On behalf of Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood Ms. Khadija Khan, the CEO provided technical support to UNICEF for conducting a series of trainings for government officials on Early Childhood Development in 2023 and 2024.

The third training in this series held in Gilgit from 8 – 10th May 2024. The three-day training was organized by the Planning and Development Department of Gilgit-Baltistan, Scaling up Nutrition, and UNICEF on Early Childhood Development, Nurturing Care Framework and Key Family Care Practices - Parenting Package in Gilgit. Members of the ECD Provincial and District Technical Working Groups, key stakeholders from provincial government line departments, policymakers, civil society representatives, development partners, academia, and ECD professionals working in the private sector participated in the training. The participants actively participated in the various activities carried out during the three days and expressed their appreciation and commitment to replicate the training in their respective areas.





Enhancing Knowledge and Expertise: PAFEC Team's Participation in Global Webinars

Overview

Throughout the year, the PAFEC team actively participated in a series of enlightening webinars hosted by renowned global and regional organizations. These sessions were integral in enhancing understanding of current trends and innovative practices within the fields of parenting, child and adolescent health, and early childhood development.

Key Sessions Attended

- **Global Initiative to Support Parents:** The webinar focused on "Enhancing Disability Inclusivity in Parenting Interventions," offering insights into inclusive practices that accommodate children with disabilities in parenting programs.
- **World Health Organization (WHO):** The session on "Regional Dissemination of the Lancet Series on Optimising Child and Adolescent Health and Development" provided our team with valuable data and strategies to optimize health outcomes in these age groups.
- **Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN):** Two significant webinars included "Revolutionising Early Childhood Education Globally" which highlighted innovative educational practices worldwide, and "Fatherhood and Male Engagement," where Dr. Seema Lasi and her team from AKU-HDP presented their pioneering parenting model.
- **Participatory Development Action Program (PODA) - Rural Women Leaders Network:** Focused on the development issues relevant to women's leadership and empowerment in rural contexts.

Impact on PAFEC

These webinars have been instrumental in broadening the perspective, deepening our scientific understanding, and inspiring the integration of research-backed strategies into our programmes. The knowledge acquired has been crucial in designing culturally and contextually relevant programmes that are tailored to meet the specific needs of the communities we serve.

ECDAN x Harvard: Masterclass Series in Applying Systems Thinking to Early Childhood Development



Certificate Achievement

Ms. Khadija Khan successfully completed the ECDAN Masterclass Series in Systems Thinking for Early Childhood Development. This series, supported by Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, involved 14 sessions led by over 20 global experts, focusing on enhancing ECD systems.

Impact and Application

The Masterclass was designed to deepen the understanding of systems thinking in the context of ECD. Participants, including Ms. Khadija, explored a variety of frameworks, methodologies, and tools through presentations and dialogues tailored to enhance ECD systems. This engagement has equipped our CEO with advanced strategies to drive systemic changes within PAFEC's initiatives, ensuring that our efforts are both innovative and sustainable.

The knowledge gained from this series is set to play a crucial role in strengthening the early childhood development system in Pakistan. Ms. Khan's enhanced expertise will guide PAFEC in crafting programmes that are not only responsive to the needs of children but also aligned with global best practices in ECD.

Early Childhood Development Online Certificate Course (2024)

Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood (PAFEC) successfully conducted its 4th Cohort Online Certificate Course on Early Childhood Development (ECD) from September to October 27th, 2024, reaffirming its commitment to fostering a generation of well-informed educators, caregivers, and advocates. This transformative course, brought together 65 participants from diverse professional backgrounds, including teachers, researchers, healthcare professionals, and representatives of PAFEC Institutional members, all united by a shared goal: to enhance the quality of early childhood care, development and education in Pakistan.



Online Certificate Course
**EARLY CHILDHOOD
DEVELOPMENT**
THE PROMISE OF ENDLESS OPPORTUNITIES





Course Overview

The 7-week course, delivered through a blended learning approach, featured 15 technical sessions and group presentations, each designed to deepen participants' understanding of ECD principles and practices. Facilitated by renowned experts such as Ms. Khadija Khan, Ms. Arooj Malik, Ms. Samina Ghafoor, and Dr. Shahzad Mithani, the curriculum covered critical topics ranging from developmental milestones and play-based learning to child rights and classroom management. The course encompassed early child development, learning and care with a particular focus on discovering connections between theory, research, policy, and professional practice. It provided a clear understanding of the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive, language and physical needs in order to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning, optimal development, and wellbeing.

The course also emphasized the importance of low-cost/no-cost learning materials, positive parenting, and the integration of educational technology (Ed-Tech) in early childhood settings.

Key Achievements

1. **Enhanced Knowledge and Skills:** Pre- and post-test assessments revealed a significant improvement in participants' understanding of ECD concepts. The post-test results showed a narrower score distribution, indicating a more uniform and advanced level of competency across the cohort.
2. **Practical Application:** Participants gained hands-on experience in creating engaging learning environments, developing low-cost teaching aids, and implementing play-based methodologies. These skills are already being applied in classrooms, homes, and community centers, directly benefiting young learners.
3. **Holistic Development Focus:** The course emphasized the holistic development of children, addressing their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical needs. Sessions on language development, emergent numeracy, and positive parenting equipped participants with tools to support children's growth from conception to age eight.
4. **National and Global Alignment:** The curriculum aligned with Pakistan's Single National Curriculum (SNC) and global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Nurturing Care Framework. This ensures that participants are not only grounded in local contexts but also connected to international best practices.
5. **Participant Feedback:** The course received overwhelmingly positive feedback, with participants praising the quality of content, expert facilitation, and practical relevance. One participant noted, *"This course has given me useful skills and knowledge to create a positive learning environment that encourages young children to grow and develop in a balanced way."*



Impact on Early Childhood Development

The 4th Cohort Online Certificate Course has already begun to create ripples of change:

- Educators are now better equipped to design child-centered classrooms and implement activity-based learning.
- Parents and caregivers have gained insights into positive parenting and the importance of nurturing care during the critical first 1,000 days of a child's life.
- Advocates and representatives of PAFEC Institutional members more informed about the legal frameworks and community-based strategies needed to safeguard child rights and promote early learning.

Looking Ahead

As PAFEC continues to expand its reach, the success of this course underscores the importance of investing in early childhood development. By empowering educators, caregivers, and advocates with the knowledge and tools to nurture young minds, we are not only shaping the future of individual children but also building a stronger, more equitable society.

The 4th Cohort Online Certificate Course stands as a testament to PAFEC's unwavering dedication to early childhood development. Together, we are unlocking the promise of endless opportunities for every child, ensuring they have the foundation they need to thrive in an ever-changing world.