



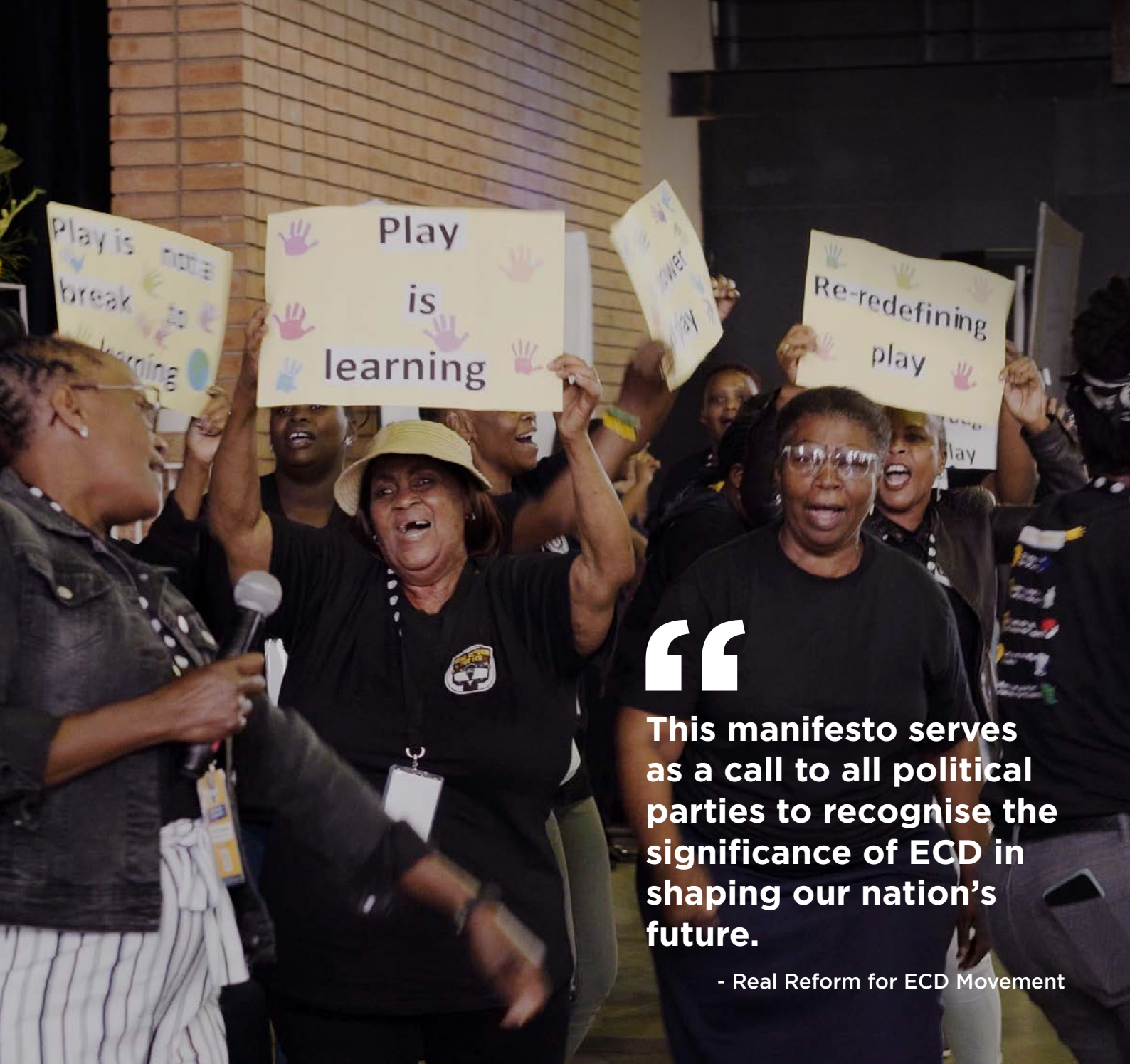
Manifesto for Early Childhood Development in South Africa

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We all know that the country that does not take care of its children is doomed. No house can stand without a proper foundation.

- Gugu Cresicia Nkomo,
Leratong Day Care Centre.

[Sign the manifesto here](#)



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This manifesto serves as a call to all political parties to recognise the significance of ECD in shaping our nation's future.

- Real Reform for ECD Movement

We, the ECD sector, are calling on every political party to stand with us and commit to enacting this Manifesto for Early Childhood Development (ECD) in South Africa!

Thousands of the early learning programmes across the country open their doors to millions of young children on a daily basis. The vast majority of these early learning programmes are run by early childhood development (ECD) practitioners who, without sufficient government support, are struggling to keep their doors open, let alone provide the care and stimulation our young children need to unlock their potential.

Despite parents', practitioners', and healthcare workers' efforts, the lack of government support means that, of the children who attend early learning programmes,

more than half fail to thrive by age five.

A PARTY FOR THE CHILDREN IS A PARTY FOR THE FUTURE

OUR VISION

All young children in South Africa have access to holistic, inclusive, and quality ECD services which will allow them to develop and thrive. Access for young children in poor communities must be prioritised.

Our vision is for

Holistic ECD services

to offer all five key elements of nurturing care – in a coordinated way.



adequate
nutrition



early
learning



safety &
protection



health



caregiving

The future of South Africa depends on the choices we make today, and it begins with investing in our children's early years. An investment in our young children is an investment in the just, equal, and caring society we strive to become.

**No young child
should be left
behind.**

Inclusive ECD services

to be available and accessible to all children, including children with disabilities, and adapted to meet each child's individual needs.

Quality ECD services

of a high standard to allow children to develop and thrive.



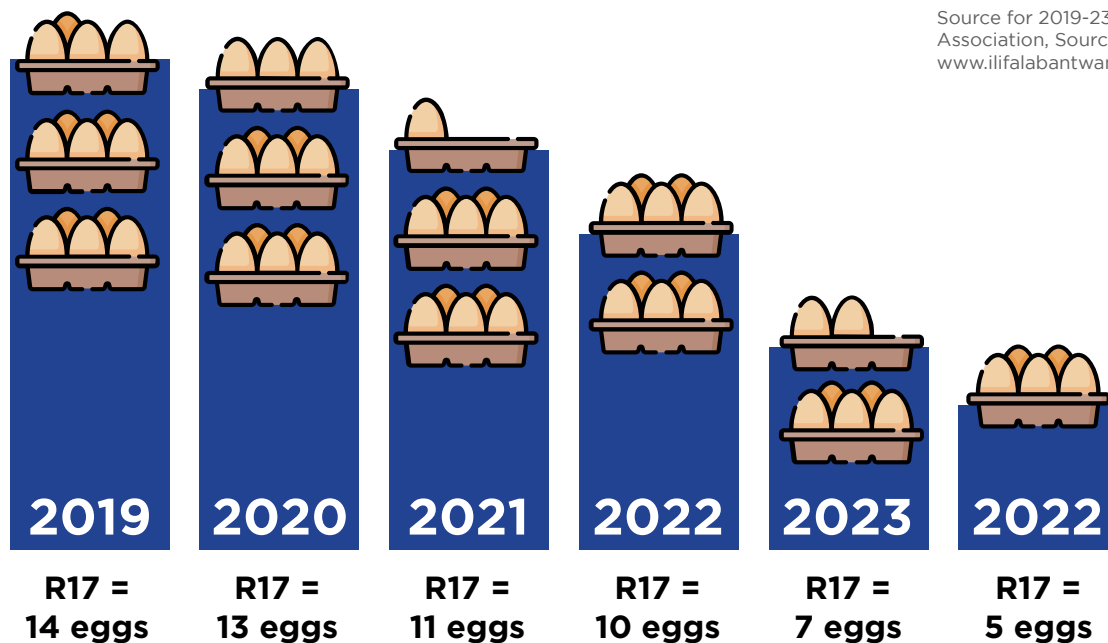
WHY IS THE MANIFESTO FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT SO IMPORTANT?

To unlock young children's full potential, they need nurturing care across these five key areas, as early as the first 1, 000 days of their lives: nutrition; early learning; health; caregiving; and safety and protection. These forms of care lay an essential foundation for lifelong learning, well-being, and success.

All young children have a right to access quality services, whether at home with their families, at early learning programmes, at health clinics, or in other settings. Caring for young children is one of the most [powerful investments](#) the South African government can make. But, for too long, the government has neglected young children, and the parents, caregivers, and ECD practitioners who nurture them.

The amount government spends on young children is disproportionately low: children aged zero to five make up 10% of the population but, in 2021/22, less than [2% of total government spending](#) went to early learning, family support and early nutrition interventions for children in this age group.

Families who take care of children at home do not get proper support. The health sector has not recognised or fulfilled its mandate to enable parents and caregivers to provide nurturing care. The Child Support Grant is not enough to cover nutritious food, let alone other essentials such as clothing. Moreover, many children do not have birth certificates, preventing them from accessing the Child Support Grant at all.



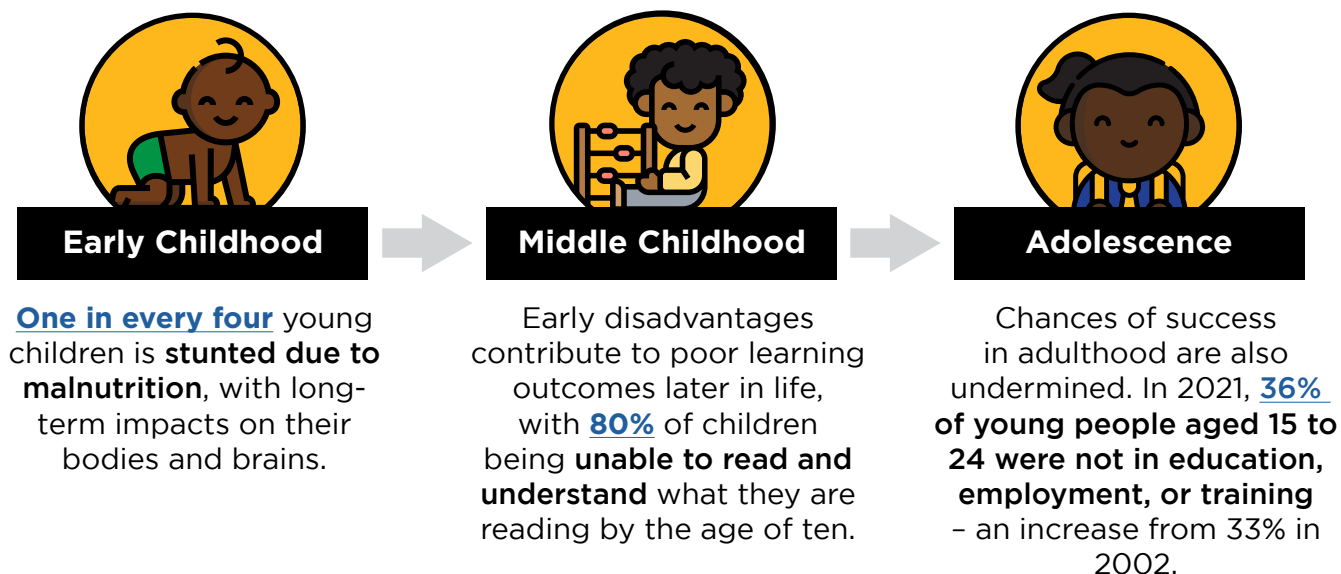
Currently, [only a third of children aged three to five](#) have access to an early learning programme (such as a creche, nursery school, or playgroup). Even where children do access early learning programmes, practitioners often struggle to provide nutritious food, adequate infrastructure, and age-appropriate stimulation for learning,

with the subsidy from the government frozen at just R17 per eligible child per day since 2019.

Worse, registration requirements for early learning programmes are complicated and often unattainable, so many poor children do not have access to the subsidy at all. **There are over one million children in unregistered early learning programmes who are locked out of government support.**

The subsidy is too little, and it reaches too few, leaving early learning programmes in poor areas with limited funds to pay salaries, feed the children in their care, and deliver quality services.

The negative consequences of failing to support young children are severe.



Less than half of children aged four and five are **on track for early learning.**

For the most part, these vulnerable young people are persistently excluded from birth and follow in the footsteps of parents and grandparents who were excluded, too.

The ECD workforce is essential to the South African economy.

200 000
staff work in early learning programmes across South Africa

300 000
new jobs could result from providing nurturing care for all of our children.

However, **90%** of ECD practitioners – most of whom are black women – earn less than minimum wage.

As ECD practitioners, parents, healthcare practitioners, activists, and representatives of the ECD sector, we stand united in our message: under-resourced communities, families and our ECD workforce cannot continue to nurture our youngest children without proper state funding and support.



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It is important for the government to support ECD as it is a necessary foundation in a child's life and that needs to be acknowledged first.

- Mathapelo Portia Ngoma, Isqalo Esihle
Nursery and Early Learning Centre



We call on political parties to implement the following solutions from 2024 to 2029.



Adequate nutrition

When young children have access to a nutritious diet, their bodies and brains can develop well. These positive effects are not just temporary – they extend into adulthood. The first 1,000 days of life are particularly important, with access to quality maternal nutrition, promotion of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months and provision of supplementary foods in food insecure settings being [vital to addressing malnutrition](#). Providing healthy meals at early learning programmes can also help to improve overall nutrition.

To help support adequate nutrition, we call for the following:

- Create a **national nutrition programme** for children in early learning programmes that reaches all children at unregistered programmes.
- Ensure a **comprehensive national food and nutrition strategy** and policy for children under age five.
- Guarantee that **nutrition support aligns with the National Nutrition Guidelines** for early learning programmes.
- **Strengthen the implementation of policies that support mothers to exclusively breastfeed for the first six months**, and develop new policies that further protect and promote breastfeeding.
- **Reduce the cost of nutritious food for vulnerable families** to improve healthy food purchases.
- Ensure the **provision of multi-micronutrient supplementation for pregnant women** to reduce the prevalence of maternal anaemia and the risk of low-birth weight babies, who have an increased risk of suffering developmental delays.
- **Improve vitamin A, zinc and deworming interventions** to reduce the risk of disease and infection induced malnutrition.
- Ensure that **growth monitoring practices are introduced at clinics and ECD programmes** for the timely identification of malnutrition, including stunting.
- **Improve childhood early identification of malnutrition** and referrals to healthcare facilities, and ensure that facilities can reach, manage and treat malnutrition related disease cases, which adversely impacts developmental potential of children.



Good health

Good health and nutrition are fundamental building blocks, especially during early childhood. The first 1,000 days of a child's life are the most important for brain development, shaping lifelong wellbeing.

To help support good health, we call for the following:

- By 2024, develop a **national programme for the provision of centre and non-centre based support for pregnant women, parents, caregivers and young children** in the first two years of the child's life.
- Provide **supportive home visits by community health workers** to vulnerable mothers, other caregivers and their young children, from pregnancy up to nine months.
- Provide **developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for all children from birth**, including home-visiting and health-facility-based programmes designed to stimulate the knowledge, capacity and provision of early learning support in parents and other caregivers.





Opportunities for early learning

Sensitive and responsive stimulation in the early years lays the foundation for schooling and lifelong success. [From conception to age five is when most brain development takes place](#). Children who do not experience opportunities for stimulation and learning at this early age will likely experience more challenges in school and in adulthood.

To help support early learning opportunities, we call for the following:

- Finalise **amendments to the early learning sections of the Children's Act**.
- **Ensure the Bill to amend the Children's Act is tabled before Parliament in 2024 and adopted by 2025**. These amendments must ensure:
 - Simpler registration processes;
 - Simpler and adequate health, safety and programme standards;
 - Support to providers to meet registration requirements; and
 - Infrastructure support for the sector.
- Ensure **all early learning programmes**, including home and community based programmes **are registered or conditionally registered by 2029**.
- Ensure that **local governments** have a coordinated strategy to support the expansion of **access to premises for early learning programmes**.
- **Increase the value of the ECD subsidy** to R46 by 2029 and provide additional amounts to support the inclusion of children with disabilities.
- Put in place a **tailored Presidential employment stimulus for the ECD sector**, which supports new practitioners to start up early learning programmes and existing practitioners to reach the minimum wage.
- Ensure that **all provinces have the budget necessary to provide eligible children in early learning programmes with the subsidy**.
- Increase **budgeting for pre-registration and infrastructure support** for early learning programmes.
- Develop a **policy for investing in infrastructure on privately owned land** for the delivery of early learning programmes.
- Invest in **adequate training for ECD practitioners** and provision of guidelines and materials for quality learning. Training for ECD practitioners must cover early identification of developmental delays and inclusion of children with disabilities in early learning activities.



Funding plays a great part in providing quality early learning. ECD is not recognised as much as it should be, and thus there is minimum to no support to be able to deliver the quality programme.

- Mathapelo Portia Ngoma, Isqalo Esihle Nursery and Early Learning Centre



Responsive caregiving

When children are protected from harm, receive love and care, and have their needs understood and met, this helps their bodies and brains to develop. It also helps them to develop social and emotional skills that they will need later in life.

To help support responsive caregiving, we call for the following:

- Develop an **appropriate child development curriculum to train community health workers** who offer home-based programmes for families.
- Ensure that **health clinics support parents and caregivers to nurture the children in their care**, and offer early learning opportunities and stimulation.
- Ensure that **proactive parent and family support is provided** (not only for children identified as being at risk), with a focus on support for families of children with disabilities.



One of the challenges we have is that children with special needs in my community are sent to stay at home because of the stigma that they cannot learn with the other children.

-Inshaaf Daniels, Smurfs Early Learning Centre



Safety and protection

A safe and secure environment is essential for a child to develop. It is an environment that is free from abuse, neglect, and has access to water, nutrition, and other essentials such as clothing. All children should have their births registered at relevant departments to ensure they can access social support and child protection services, when they need them.

To support children's safety and protection, we call for the following:

- **Increase the value of the Child Support Grant** to the level of the Food Poverty Line for children under six by 2025.
- Ensure that **pregnant mothers are supported with a maternal support grant** to improve their wellbeing and their child's development in this critical period.
- **Reduce the number of undocumented children without birth certificates.** By 2030, the take-up rate for infants on the Child Support Grant should improve to 90% of eligible infants.
- **Increase the budget for Home Affairs service points in hospitals** to increase early birth registration.



Systemic solutions

Delivering on all five key areas of nurturing care – nutrition, early learning, health, caregiving, safety and protection – requires a coordinated effort and systemic solutions.

We call for the following:

Establish **mechanisms for monitoring** and holding all organs of the state and sectors accountable for realising the national ECD goals.

- **Locate responsibility for leadership, coordination, accountability and reporting** on progress in achieving the goals in the Presidency, the Premiers' and Mayoral offices.
- By 2029, **ensure that a stand-alone ECD Act is passed** and put into effect:
 - Recognising ECD as an explicit right;
 - Clearly stating government legal obligations to fund and expand access to holistic ECD services;
 - Ensuring that there is consistency and accountability for state support for the provision of ECD services; and
 - Providing for functional coordination mechanisms to ensure delivery of universal access to holistic, inclusive and quality ECD services.
- Develop a **multi-sectoral guideline to ensure all young children with disabilities enjoy equal access** to inclusive early childhood development services.
- Create a system for collection of disaggregated data to **measure the extent, quality and impact of ECD services for children with disabilities**.
- Create a **national integrated tracking and referral system**, to ensure that children with developmental delays are identified, enrolled in appropriate early learning programmes, have an individualised developmental support and treatment programme, and are referred to other services as necessary.



ECD is important and there is nothing much said or done in support of it and we need the support of the political parties to get to more people.

- Inshaaf Daniels, Smurfs Early Learning Centre

CONCLUSION

This manifesto serves as a rallying cry for holistic, inclusive, and quality ECD services for all children, echoing the belief that our nation's strength and prosperity depend on the well-being of its youngest citizens.

We need the government to stop leaving women and children behind. While we often hear talk of women's economic empowerment, our government and the general public forget about the vital role quality early learning programmes can play in enabling financial independence for women as well as improving children's lives.

The time to prioritise ECD is NOW.

We are thirty years into our democracy; we can't delay any longer. By embracing these calls for legal reform, increased resources, and enhanced coordination, we not only commit to unlocking the full potential of every child and for women, but also demonstrate our unwavering dedication to justice, equality, and the shared promise of a brighter future.

Together, let us forge a path where quality ECD becomes a national priority, a beacon of hope for South Africa's children, and an investment that will provide returns through generations to come.



#ECDManifesto

#ECDNationalPriority





Sign this petition TODAY to advocate for our country's tomorrow! Investing in ECD is investing in our future.

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www.ecdreform.org.za

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