



Integrating Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development into Primary Health Care: The Tanzania Experience

Early Childhood Development

More than 275 million children in low- and middle-income countries are at risk of suboptimal development, including over 66% of children in sub-Saharan Africa. ¹ In Tanzania 43% of children are at high risk of not achieving their full potential for growth and development. ² Risk factors for suboptimal development include poverty, nutritional deficiencies, maternal depression, family stress, inadequate stimulation, violence, and maltreatment. Children of adolescent mothers are also at increased risk of developmental delay. Early childhood provides a critical window of opportunity to support a child's healthy development and to build a foundation for

wellbeing across the life course. This brief describes the Malezi project, implemented by the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation in Tanzania to support the sustainable integration of nurturing care interventions to support optimal early childhood development (ECD) into maternal and child health (MNCH) services in health facilities and communities in Tanzania.

Why is investing in early childhood development important?

Children facing challenges such as poverty, poor nutrition, violence, or neglect, are at risk of not reaching their full developmental potential. ³ These challenges impact not just their early development but also affect cognitive capacity, long-term health, schooling outcomes, and future participation in the labor market. ^{4 5}

A child's first 1000 days – from conception until age two, when 80 percent of brain development occurs – are particularly critical for healthy child development. Interactions between young children and their environment have profound impacts on their development. Nurturing care including adequate nutrition and good health, security and safety, responsive caregiving and early learning opportunities, is critical for a child's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive growth. (See Fig 1)

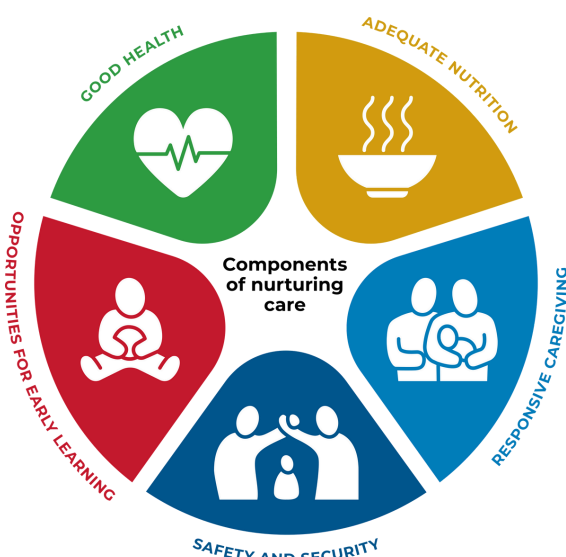


Figure 1: Components of Nurturing Care, Nuturing-care.org

Nurturing care interventions, particularly through health and community care systems, can mitigate risk factors and support optimal child development. Programs that engage caregivers increase the likelihood of children reaching their full potential, fostering better health and social outcomes across generations.

Primary health care services, including those provided at the community level, provide a key entry point for reaching young children and their caregivers with nurturing care interventions. Integrating these interventions into primary health care helps to identify vulnerable children and to provide them with appropriate care and comprehensive support essential for their development. Embedding nurturing care interventions into the existing health infrastructure, in particular primary care, which provides regular contact with children and families during the critical first 1,000 days, has proven both effective and scalable, including in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁶

The MALEZI Project

The Malezi Project (Malezi) means ‘caring for young children’ in Swahili, which is funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, supports integrating nurturing care interventions into MNCH services in Tanzania’s Tabora and Arusha regions. The project targets children under five, including those affected by HIV, with the aim of helping them reach their full potential by building the capacity of caregivers, health care providers, and the health system to respond to their needs. Recognizing the need for strong collaboration across sectors to sustainably integrate quality nurturing care for early childhood interventions in health facilities and communities, the project works closely with the Ministry of Health (MoH), the Ministry of Community Development, Gender, Women and Special Groups (MCDGWSG) and the President’s Office of Regional Administration and Local Government (PORALG).



The Malezi project, started in 2016, is currently in its third phase. The first phase focused on the integration of early childhood interventions into routine MNCH services in 47 health facilities in the Tabora region. Health Care Providers (HCPs) and Community Health Workers (CHWs) were trained in UNICEF’s evidence-based Care for Child Development (CCD) approach, designed to promote responsive caregiving and early learning through integration into existing health services (See Box), which was adapted for the Tanzania context.

Phase two focused on expansion of the integrated intervention and establishing a foundation for sustainability by building the capacity of the regional and council health management teams to oversee integrated services, including mentorship, supportive supervision, and data review, training of CCD trainers, and developing monitoring systems. The national growth monitoring tool was adapted to include developmental milestones and messages to caregivers on responsive caregiving and early learning. Additionally, a nurturing care communication strategy was developed and evaluated. Now in its third phase, Malezi focuses on sustainable, nationwide scale up by developing national standards for integration of nurturing care into health services and building capacity for national scale up and ownership.

Integration of nurturing care interventions into existing MNCH services has been expanded from the initial 47 health facilities to 225 health facilities and their surrounding communities across the two regions.

Integration of Nurturing Care Interventions into MNCH Services

Integration of nurturing care interventions into existing services is optimal for reaching children during the critical early childhood period. HCPs and community volunteers have been trained and supported to provide nurturing care interventions as part of routine MNCH services. Trained HCP support nurturing care in labor wards, in reproductive and child health (RCH) clinics as part of well-child visits and prevention of mother-to-child transmission services, and in pediatric wards. Using the CCD package, they provide health talks and group counselling sessions to all caregivers with children under five years as well as one-on-one counselling sessions to caregivers of at-risk children,

Care for Child Development (CCD)

Is an evidence-based approach developed by UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO). It aims to promote early learning and responsive caregiving by integrating stimulation and communication activities into existing services across sectors, including the health sector.

CCD supports the development of motor, cognitive-language, and social-emotional skill in young children by guiding parents and caregivers to engage in age-appropriate play and communication. It also enhances responsive caregiving by coaching adults to observe, interpret, and respond appropriately to their child's play cues during interactive play.

The CCD package provides practical guidance for health workers and other frontline counselors to support families in strengthening their relationships with young children.

Malezi I [2016-2018]:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adaptation of UNICEF's CCD package to the Tanzania context and training of 141 HCPs and 304 CHWs trained to counsel caregivers on early learning and responsive caregiving ● Demonstrate the feasibility of integrating nurturing care interventions in MNCH services in 47 health facilities and their surrounding communities in Tabora region
Malezi II [2019-2021]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expansion of the integration of nurturing care interventions to 86 health facilities ● Introduce and evaluate multimedia components of the nurturing care package to enhance caregivers' knowledge and practices related to ECD ● Support the development of the National Multi-Sectoral Early Childhood Development Programme (NM- ECDP) ● Strengthen the capacity of regional and council health management teams to oversee and support the nurturing care interventions ● National-level system strengthening activities including training of 30 national trainers of trainers and developing monitoring tools and reporting systems ● Development of the child health booklet including ECD messaging in partnership with MoH
Malezi III [2022-2025]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide technical assistance for the implementation of the National Multi-Sectoral Early Childhood Development Programme (NM-ECDP) ● Provide technical assistance to local government authorities to include nurturing care interventions into council health plans and budgets to 12 councils in Tabor and Arusha regions and 1 CSO in Arusha ● Evaluate the use of child health booklet and work with MoH to support its nationwide implementation ● Expansion of the integration of nurturing care interventions to 225 health facilities ● Integration of ECD content into the Unified Community System (UCS), and training of 196 CHWs to use the UCS to deliver nurturing care interventions through home visits and reporting

including children who are malnourished, HIV exposed or HIV infected, and children with developmental delays.

To mitigate the risk of developmental delay in children of adolescent mothers and support young mother's parenting skills, nurturing care support was integrated into group ANC and postnatal care for pregnant adolescent girls and young mothers (AGYM). To support their parenting, pregnant and breastfeeding AGYM at same gestational age meet regularly throughout their pregnancy and after delivery, while also receiving pre- and postnatal care during the same clinic visits, and learn about all nurturing care components, including responsive caregiving and early stimulation.

Promoting Nurturing Care in the Community

In Tanzania, CHWs are crucial front-line health workers, bridging the gap between communities and formal health services. They offer essential health promotion, basic curative care, data collection, and identify patients who require referrals. Nurturing care has been integrated into the existing community-based services provided by CHW. Community volunteers have been trained to incorporate nurturing care counseling into home visits for children under five years, which the frequency of home visits adapted to the child's age and specific needs. During home visits, CHWs assess nutritional status, monitor developmental milestones, and provide counseling to promote retention in child health services, including HIV services, as applicable. They also demonstrate and support caregivers to engage in early stimulation and play activities that support the child's development. CHWs and members of the Most Vulnerable Children's Committees. These committees assist in identifying vulnerable children in their communities and providing referrals to social services. The nurturing care for ECD orientation sessions catalyze participation in community dialogues, which raise awareness of

advise caregivers on creating a safe and stimulating home environment, recommending age-appropriate play and communication activities. They help caregivers to observe the child's developmental milestones and offer guidance on identifying possible delays. If concerns arise regarding nutrition, illness, HIV status or developmental milestones, the CHW refers the caregivers to the health facility for further evaluation and support. The CHW conducts follow-up visits for ongoing support, including assessing play and communication activities by caregivers and the creation of locally made play materials at the home.

To foster community awareness of the importance of nurturing care and engagement in promoting nurturing care, the Malezi project organizes a one-day orientation for village leaders



Naike Chawachi/EGPAF, 2025

nurturing care activities, help identify gaps in child development and emphasize the importance of involving fathers in nurturing children's development.

Strengthening National Policy and Guidelines for Early Childhood Development

The Malezi Project aims to build sustainable capacity for integrating nurturing care interventions across Tanzania's health system ensuring all children are reached and supported to thrive and achieve their full potential. To advance this goal, the Malezi project works closely with key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Community Development, Gender, Women and Special Groups

(MCDGWSG) and the President's Office of Regional Administration and Local Government (PORALG) as well as the Pediatric Association of Tanzania (PAT) and the Tanzania Early Childhood Development Network (TECDEN). Using a health system strengthening approach, the Malezi project provides technical assistance to connect diverse stakeholders within the health system, facilitating the effective integration of nurturing care into government systems and enhancing the quality of implementation. The Malezi project worked with MCDGWSG to develop Tanzania's National Multi-Sectoral Early Childhood Development Programme (NM- ECDP), which guides a coordinated approach to putting existing ECD related laws and policies into practice. The project also supports the integration of nurturing care into the essential health care package. The Malezi project provides continuous support for implementing the NM-ECDP at national, regional, and council levels.

This includes supporting the nationwide scale-up nurturing care integration into MNCH services, the incorporation of nurturing care into health education curricula, and the national adoption and rollout of the updated child health booklet. To support nationwide scale up, the Malezi project engaged and strengthened the capacity of the local government authorities to plan, manage and oversee the delivery of integrated nurturing care interventions within health services both in health facilities and through community-based services.

At the community level, the project worked with civil society organizations (CSOs) to integrate nurturing care into their programs. The project has provided training and support for Regional Health Management Teams and Council Health Management Teams to mentor and supervise HCPs and CHWs and reinforce best practices.

Assessing the impact of the integrated nurturing care interventions into health services

To inform evidence-based scale up, several components of the Malezi Project were evaluated. In Phase II the Malezi Project introduced multimedia to promote awareness of ECD and the importance of nurturing care, including responsive caregiving and early stimulation. Radio messages were broadcast on popular local stations, and CHW trained in the CCD package used video job aids during home visits to demonstrate and counsel caregivers on responsive caregiving and early stimulation. The evaluation compared the effect of radio messages alone with the full intervention package, comprising radio messaging, home visits by CCD-trained CHWs, and video-based counseling. Results showed that caregivers who received the full package were five times more likely to score well in ECD knowledge and twice as likely to demonstrate early stimulation practices and father engagement.⁷ The integrated ECD interventions in both community and health facility settings were found to improve caregiver knowledge and behaviors at a relatively modest cost, supporting the case for broader scale-up.⁸ A separate evaluation of the video tools on responsive caregiving and early stimulation, supervision and mentorship of CHW showed that these strategies significantly improved CHWs' capacity to deliver quality counseling on nurturing care practices.⁹ Given their pivotal role in providing health-related services in under-resourced communities, strengthening CHWs performance through these approaches is critical to sustaining high-quality counseling and support for caregivers.

In the third phase of Malezi, the integration of nurturing care interventions into existing services was further assessed by comparing CHW and caregiver knowledge and practices across four Malezi-supported districts and four non-Malezi districts. In Malezi districts, 59% of CHWs scored well on knowledge of child growth, development, and learning, compared to 33% in non-Malezi areas. Similarly, 77% of CHWs demonstrated appropriate practices, versus only 30% in districts without the intervention. Caregiver outcomes followed the same trend: 73% of caregivers in Malezi districts performed well in knowledge assessments, and 59% demonstrated appropriate practices, compared to 27% and 49% respectively in non-Malezi districts. These findings underscore the impact of the integrated nurturing care interventions into health services in enhancing CHW and caregiver knowledge and practices that support early childhood development.

The Malezi project developed tools to monitor the integration of nurturing care services in both facility and community-based settings and is advocating for the inclusion of key ECD indicators in facility data collection tools and the District Health Information System (DHIS). This will support data-driven decision-making and reinforces nurturing care as a core component of child health services in Tanzania.

Use of digital health and multimedia to improve caregiver ECD knowledge and behavior

Recognizing the growing role of digital health in improving access to health services and health information, the Malezi project leverages digital Tools to support CHW in educating and counseling caregivers on nurturing care, as well as monitoring nurturing care service delivery in the community. In collaboration with partner D-tree, the Malezi project incorporated nurturing care content into the antenatal care, postnatal care, and child modules of the unified community system (UCS). This digital decision-support and reporting tool, used by CHW during their home visits, is designed to enhance the quality of community-based service delivery, and is currently being piloted.

In addition, the project has developed [short educational videos](#) that demonstrate nurturing care practices. CHWs use electronic tablets or mobile smartphones to share and discuss the content of the videos with caregivers, as part of the facility- and home-based counseling. They help CHW to provide consistent, high-quality counselling on responsive caregiving and early stimulation and ensure that caregivers have the knowledge, skills and support they need to promote healthy child development.

The Way Forward

The Malezi Project in Tanzania has demonstrated the feasibility of integrating nurturing care interventions into primary health care. The project has shown that primary health care can play a vital role in providing caregivers with appropriate guidance and resources to support their child's development, particularly for caregivers of children at increased risk of developmental delays. Expanding access to these interventions requires strategic investments to build the capacity of health managers and service providers. Strengthening their knowledge and skills is essential for the effective and sustainable integration of nurturing care into the health system. Achieving this



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Malezi Project Key Achievements

- Integration of nurturing care into routine MNCH services in 225 health facilities and their surrounding community.
- 450 HCPs trained to provide nurturing care interventions within MNCH services.
- 416 CHWs trained to promote nurturing care in the community through scheduled home visits.
- Oriented 286 Most Vulnerable Children's Committees members, and village leaders on the importance of nurturing care for ECD.
- Approximately 110,000 parents counseled and supported annually.
- On average, 45,000 children screened for developmental delays; with approximately 400 referred to specialized support annually.
- Revision of the child growth monitoring booklet.
- Developed monitoring tools for facility and community-based ECD services.
- Integration of ECD content and indicators into the Unified Community System and the national DHIS system.
- Integration of multimedia components, including radio messages and educational videos, to improve caregiver ECD knowledge and behavior and to increase the quality of provider-led counseling.

also depends on strong commitment from the Ministry of Health, in coordination with other ministries and key stakeholders. The project's current scope focused primarily on responsive caregiving and early learning. Key components such as nutrition, safety, and security received limited attention, and remain underdeveloped even within the National Multi-Sectoral Early Childhood Development Programme (NM-ECDP).

Moving forward, the Malezi Project aims to strengthen the capacity of the health system at national, regional, and council levels to scale up the integration of comprehensive nurturing care interventions supporting early childhood development into primary health care across Tanzania.

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