

## World Blind Union and

## International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment

WBU – ICEVI Joint Position Statement (2024): Early Childhood Development

**The International Council for Education of the Visually Impaired (ICEVI) and World Blind Union (WBU) express deep concern regarding the persistent and pervasive inequities in access to high-quality Early Childhood Development (ECD) programs for children who are blind or partially sighted.**

A note on terminology: in the following statement, the term “blind or partially sighted” encompasses individuals who are blind, partially sighted, or deafblind as well as those who have multiple disabilities including sight loss.

**The Issue**

While international frameworks like the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have significantly advanced the global recognition and promotion of rights of all children to access educational services in non-discriminating settings, a persistent gap remains. Children with disabilities, particularly those who are blind or partially sighted, continue to be disproportionately excluded from quality Early Childhood Development (ECD) programs worldwide. Notably, the CRPD Committee has pinpointed specific areas requiring urgent attention, including the following:

* **Limited support for caregivers and ECD centres,** highlighting that a lack of strategies and resources hinders caregivers and early learning centres in effectively stimulating and teaching children with disabilities.[[1]](#footnote-1)
* **Delayed access to interventions,** noting that inadequate early intervention services, including early stimulation and responsive care,[[2]](#footnote-2) create a critical gap in support for children with disabilities during a crucial developmental period.[[3]](#footnote-3)
* **Disparity in access rates,** as children with disabilities are significantly underrepresented in ECD programs compared to their counterparts.[[4]](#footnote-4)
* **Corporal punishment,** highlighting that the abhorrent practice of corporal punishment against children with disabilities persists in some States parties’ day care settings.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Our position and call to action**

ICEVI and WBU strongly believe that early childhood is a critical period that lays the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour, education and health, as well as participation in all aspects of the community. Therefore, for children who are blind or partially sighted, access to high-quality ECD programs and interventions are particularly crucial. In this regard, believing firmly in a powerful social and economic case for inclusive and accessible ECD, we jointly make the following calls:

1. **Recommendations for governments**
2. Ensure full compliance with international norms, such as the CRPD and CRC, by implementing and enforcing child- and family-friendly policies, in consultation with OPDs including those representing children with disabilities, that mandate inclusive and accessible ECD programs for children who are blind or partially sighted.
3. Allocate sufficient funding to develop and maintain inclusive and accessible ECD programs, including training for educators and caregivers, adaptation of the ECD curriculum and pedagogy, recruitment and retention of qualified ECD personnel, and provision of accessible learning materials and assistive technologies.
4. Establish robust systems for collecting disaggregated data on the participation and outcomes of children with disabilities, particularly those who are blind or partially sighted, in ECD programs to inform policy and practice, including during situations of humanitarian emergencies.
5. Ensure the availability and accessibility of early intervention services (including CRPD compliant early identification and assessments) that provide timely support for children who are blind or partially sighted and their families.
6. Promote policy-oriented research, through funding of and collaborations with research institutions and OPDs, in order to advance evidence-based standards and practices in early childhood intervention and education for children who are blind or partially sighted.
7. Champion public-private partnerships to optimise provision of, training and support in assistive technology tools and devices necessary for improving access to and full participation of children who are blind or partially sighted in ECD programs and interventions.
8. Adopt specific measures to deter corporal punishments in ECD settings, prioritising prevention of such incidences and criminal punishments for perpetrators.
9. **Recommendations for ECD service providers including caregivers**
10. Create safe, nurturing, and stimulating environments that support the holistic development of and positive outcomes for children who are blind or partially sighted.
11. Develop and implement efficient referral and coordination mechanisms to provide integrated community-based services and interventions for children who are blind or partially sighted.
12. **Recommendations for Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs)**
    1. Advocate with local and central governments, ECD service providers, and the private sector to promote access to inclusive ECD programs and interventions, emphasising the importance of early childhood development for children who are blind or partially sighted.
    2. Support capacity building of parents of children who are blind or partially sighted and caregivers through offering training and resources that empower them to effectively advocate for and support their children’s development.
    3. Establish partnerships and actively collaborate with governments, ECD providers, and other stakeholders to ensure that ECD policies and practices are responsive to the needs of children who are blind or partially sighted.
    4. Participate in, and carry out independent, research to highlight prevailing gaps and disseminate best practices in inclusive and accessible ECD for children who are blind or partially sighted – including monitoring their development and learning.

**Background and rationale**

The first eight years of life, a period from prenatal development to age eight, represent a golden window for Early Childhood Development (ECD). During this crucial time, the foundation is laid for a lifetime of learning, academic success, economic participation, social inclusion, health and overall well-being.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, for children with disabilities, particularly those who are blind or partially sighted, significant barriers hinder their ability to fully benefit from ECD programs. These challenges, which include but are not limited to delayed access to early interventions (including CRPD compliant early identification and assessments), insufficient specialized support, and underrepresentation in ECD programs, significantly increase the risk of underdevelopment, limit their potential, and perpetuate inequalities – leading to minimal or no participation in society as they reach adulthood, despite the existence of international commitments under the CRPD, CRC, and the SDGs.

Often, children who are blind or partially sighted are placed in environments ill-equipped to meet their developmental needs, further exacerbating disparities and hindering their full potential. These and several other challenges have a cascading effect, impacting a child's self-esteem, academic achievement, future employment prospects, and overall societal participation. For example, disproportional absence of children who are blind or partially sighted not only limits their access to essential learning opportunities but also hinders crucial social interaction, peer-to-peer learning, and ultimately personal development. However, tailored support and inclusive educational practices can significantly mitigate these obstacles. ICEVI and WBU firmly believe that governments can empower ECD professionals with specialised training and equip programs with resources specifically designed for children who are blind or partially sighted. Additionally, by adopting and implementing child-centred, community-based, and inclusive practices, governments can create and promote ECD programs and interventions that embrace diversity and foster a culture of inclusion and social justice for all. This is grounded in research which has demonstrated that inclusive and accessible ECD programs benefit not only children with disabilities but also promote a culture of acceptance and diversity among all children. As ICEVI and WBU, we reiterate that inclusive settings encourage social integration, reduce stigma, and prepare all children to be part of a more inclusive society. Achieving this, however, requires deliberate collaborative efforts between governments and OPDs as well as the private sector and other relevant stakeholders, sufficient resources, and robust advocacy on the part of OPDs and other civil society organisations as well as parents and caregivers of children who are blind or partially sighted.

About Us

International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI)

ICEVI exists to advance the right of persons who are blind or partially sighted to access inclusive, equitable and quality education. As a global membership-based network, ICEVI discharges its mandate with a firm belief that all persons who are blind or partially sighted together with their families have the right to (1) provision of a full range of educational services and to be included in the educational programs of their respective countries and communities, (2) receive early intervention, early childhood development, care and pre-primary education; (3) support by teachers and other professionals who are properly trained; (4) provision of reasonable accommodation for their needs, including accessible educational materials, enhanced technology, teaching methods and programs that are of a high standard and conform to best practices; (5)live in environments that are free of barriers, social stigmas, and stereotypes; and (6) lead productive lives, according to their aspirations and capabilities, without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity.

World Blind Union

WBU is a global organization representing over 253 million people who are blind or partially sighted. We exist to co-create a future where people who are blind or partially sighted can live with full participation, autonomy and freedom. Our mandate is to advance human rights, empower members, and improve living conditions of all people who are blind or partially sighted worldwide. Our work is based on the deep conviction that full implementation of and compliance with the CRPD will lead to a more inclusive, accessible, and equal society. We are a founding member of the International Disability Alliance (IDA), and we also serve on its board.

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1. CRPD Committee, Zambia Concluding Observations (2024) para 13(c) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. UNICEF, Seen. Counted. Included: Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities (2021) available online at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/children-with-disabilities-report-2021> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. CRPD Committee, Austria Concluding Observations (2023) para 20; Australia Concluding Observations (2019) para 13(b); India Concluding Observations (2019) para 16(a) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. CRPD Concluding Observations, Jamaica Concluding Observations (2022) para 14(b); Mauritania Concluding Observations (2023) para 15(b) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. CRPD Committee, Japan Concluding Observations (2022) para 17(c) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. WHO, *Early Childhood Development: A Powerful Equalizer* (2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)