



# The Early Childhood Development Systems Evaluation Study

## Policy Brief

### Strengthening Nurturing Care in Kenya: Closing Policy Gaps in National and County Policies for Children under Five

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**Target Audience:** National and County Governments, Development Partners, Civil Society Organizations, and ECD Practitioners.

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## Executive Summary

Kenya has made significant progress in developing policies that support Early Childhood Development (ECD), particularly following the promulgation of the Constitution of Kenya (2010). The constitution devolved key child-related services, including health and pre-primary education, to county governments. This governance reform has provided opportunities for counties to tailor interventions to local needs while advancing national commitments to children's well-being. Kenya has also demonstrated its commitment to the World Health Organization's Nurturing Care Framework (NCF), which recognizes that children require five interconnected components: good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, opportunities for early learning, and safety and security to survive, thrive, and achieve their full developmental potential. Although considerable progress has been made in integrating these components into national and county policy frameworks, important gaps remain. In particular, responsive caregiving and child safety and security receive comparatively limited policy attention, undermining the provision of comprehensive and integrated nurturing care during the critical early years of life. Addressing these gaps is essential to ensure that every child in Kenya has an equitable opportunity to survive, learn, and thrive, while contributing to the country's long term human capital and socio-economic development.

This policy brief synthesizes evidence from a review of 56 policy documents comprising nine national policies and forty-seven County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) developed between 2020 and 2024. The review examined the extent to which these policy documents integrate the five components of nurturing care. The findings demonstrate that good health, adequate nutrition, and early learning receive substantial policy attention at both national and county levels. However,

responsive caregiving and safety and security remain inadequately addressed despite their central role in children's cognitive, emotional, and social development.

At the county level, all 47 counties prioritized child health while every county integrated nutrition and early learning into their CIDPs. In contrast, only 26% of counties incorporated responsive caregiving and only 30% included safety and security interventions. Similar trends were observed within national policies where health and nutrition dominated policy attention while early learning, responsive caregiving, and child protection received comparatively limited emphasis. These findings suggest that although Kenya possesses a strong policy foundation for improving child survival, considerably greater effort is needed to ensure that children experience nurturing environments that support their full developmental potential.

The brief recommends strengthening multisectoral policy coordination, integrating all five nurturing care components into future policy revisions, establishing dedicated budget lines for nurturing care at county level, strengthening parenting programs, and institutionalizing monitoring systems that measure progress across all domains of nurturing care.

## Introduction

Early childhood, from conception to five years of age, represents the most critical period of human development. During these years, children's brains develop more rapidly than at any other stage of life, laying the foundation for lifelong learning, health, behavior, and productivity. Investments made during early childhood therefore generate substantial social and economic returns, contributing to improved educational achievement, healthier populations, increased labor productivity, and reduced inequalities across generations.

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Recognizing the importance of this developmental period, the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, and the World Bank jointly introduced the Nurturing Care Framework in 2018. The framework identifies five interrelated components that every young child requires: good health, adequate nutrition, and responsive caregiving, opportunities for early learning, and safety and security. These components reinforce one another, meaning that deficiencies in one area can limit gains achieved in another. Consequently, effective nurturing care requires coordinated implementation and action across the health, education, nutrition, child protection, and social welfare sectors.

Kenya has embraced this global agenda through numerous national policies, legislative reforms, and county planning processes. The Constitution of Kenya (2010), the Children Act (2022), the Early Childhood Education Act (2021), the Kenya Community Health Policy (2020), the National Care Policy (2024), and the Draft Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy collectively demonstrate increasing political commitment towards supporting young children. At county level, the County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) provide the principal planning instruments through which counties allocate resources and prioritize development interventions for children and families.

Despite this progress, little evidence has been available regarding the extent to which these policies comprehensively incorporate all dimensions of nurturing care. This review therefore assessed how national policies and county development plans integrate the five components of the Nurturing Care Framework, identifying policy strengths, implementation gaps, and opportunities for strengthening multisectoral action.

## Background

Kenya's policy environment for early childhood development has evolved considerably over the past decade. Devolution transferred responsibility for many child-focused services including pre-

primary education, healthcare services, nutrition interventions, childcare services, and selected social protection functions to county governments. This shift created new opportunities for locally responsive programming while simultaneously increasing the importance of coherent policy coordination between national and county governments.

The Nurturing Care Framework provides an appropriate lens through which to assess this policy landscape because it recognizes that children's development depends upon integrated support across multiple sectors rather than isolated interventions. Children require adequate nutrition to support brain development, quality healthcare to survive and grow, responsive caregiving to establish secure relationships, stimulating environments that promote early learning, and safe communities that protect them from violence, neglect, and environmental hazards.

Understanding how these five components are represented within Kenya's policy landscape is essential for informing future policy reforms, strengthening county planning, improving resource allocation, and ensuring that every child has an opportunity to survive, thrive, and realize their developmental potential.

## Methodology

This policy brief is based on findings from a systematic desk review undertaken to assess the extent to which Kenya's national and county policy frameworks integrate the five components of the World Health Organization's Nurturing Care Framework (NCF): good health, adequate nutrition, and responsive caregiving, opportunities for early learning, and safety and security. The review focused on policy and planning documents developed or updated between 2020 and 2024, reflecting the most recent policy environment influencing early childhood development in Kenya.

Policy documents were identified through a structured search of official government

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websites, including those of the Ministries of Health, Education, Labour and Social Protection, Gender, county governments, and the Council of Governors. Additional documents were obtained from relevant government repositories and publicly available policy databases. Search terms included early childhood development, nurturing care, early learning, childcare, parenting, pre-primary education, County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs), nutrition, and child protection.

To ensure consistency and relevance, the review applied predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Documents were included if they were: (i) national legislation, policies, strategies, guidelines, or reports developed or revised between 2020 and 2024; (ii) County Integrated Development Plans (2023–2027); (iii) directly related to children from conception to five years of age; and (iv) available in English. Documents were excluded if they were published before 2020 (with the exception of legal frameworks referenced for contextual purposes), focused primarily on children older than five years, were unrelated to one or more components of the Nurturing Care Framework, or were duplicate or superseded versions of policy documents.

A total of 94 policy documents were initially identified, comprising 47 County Integrated Development Plans (2023–2027), 24 national legal and policy documents, and additional reports and sector documents. Following screening against the eligibility criteria, 56 documents were included in the final review, consisting of 47 County Integrated Development Plans, two Acts of Parliament, six national policy documents, and one national report.

The analysis was guided by the policy assessment framework developed by Abboah et al. (2022), which operationalizes the five nurturing care domains into measurable policy subcomponents. Each document was systematically reviewed to determine whether it: (i) referenced a nurturing care subcomponent; (ii) referenced the subcomponent without an accompanying

implementation plan or budget; or (iii) included both a policy commitment and a corresponding implementation plan and/or budget allocation. Findings were synthesized using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis, enabling comparison across national and county policies and identification of policy strengths, gaps, and opportunities for strengthening the integration of nurturing care within Kenya's policy landscape.

## Findings

### National sectoral policies

The review of national sectoral policies demonstrates that Kenya has established a strong policy foundation for several components of the Nurturing Care Framework, although important gaps remain. Among the nine national policy documents reviewed, adequate nutrition (89%) emerged as the most comprehensively integrated component, followed closely by good health (78%) and responsive caregiving (78%). These findings reflect the country's long standing commitment to improving maternal, newborn, and child health and nutrition through policies that promote breastfeeding, maternal nutrition, immunization, growth monitoring, and community health services. The prominence of these components indicates recognition of the critical role that health and nutrition play in ensuring child survival and optimal development during the first five years of life.

In contrast, the review identified substantial weaknesses in the integration of opportunities for early learning (33%) and safety and security (44%), making them the least represented components across national policies. Although Kenya has enacted legislation and policies supporting early childhood education, the emphasis remains largely on pre-primary education rather than comprehensive early childhood development beginning at birth. Similarly, policies addressing child protection, violence prevention, environmental safety, and secure caregiving environments remain fragmented and insufficiently integrated within broader nurturing care initiatives.

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A particularly important finding concerns the education sector. The Early Childhood Education Act (2021) primarily focuses on children aged four to five years enrolled in pre-primary education, effectively excluding children aged 0–3 years, who experience the most rapid period of brain development. Consequently, the Act provides limited guidance on interventions that promote nurturing care during infancy and toddlerhood. Furthermore, the legislation does not explicitly incorporate the good health component of the Nurturing Care Framework, thereby limiting opportunities for stronger integration between the education and health sectors during children's earliest years.

The review also revealed important gaps within nutrition policies. While breastfeeding promotion, maternal nutrition, micronutrient supplementation, and management of malnutrition are well represented, feeding during illness was absent from all national policy documents reviewed. This omission is significant because appropriate feeding practices during illness are essential for preventing malnutrition, supporting recovery, and promoting healthy growth among young children. Addressing this gap would strengthen Kenya's commitment to providing comprehensive nutrition interventions across the continuum of early childhood care.

Overall, the findings indicate that although national policies demonstrate strong commitment to child health and nutrition, greater efforts are required to strengthen policy integration of early learning, child safety and protection, and comprehensive nurturing care for children from birth to three years of age.

### **County-Level County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs), 2023–2027**

Analysis of the 47 County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) for the period 2023–2027 demonstrates widespread recognition among county governments of the importance of investing in early childhood development. Good health and opportunities for early learning were prioritized by all 47 counties (100%), reflecting

strong commitment to expanding health services, strengthening primary healthcare, supporting immunization programs, improving maternal and child health services, and investing in Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) infrastructure and learning opportunities. Similarly, adequate nutrition was incorporated in 96% of county plans, underscoring counties' continued investment in nutrition-sensitive interventions such as breastfeeding promotion, school feeding programs, growth monitoring, and management of childhood malnutrition.

Despite these encouraging findings, the review identified substantial weaknesses in the integration of responsive caregiving (26%) and safety and security (30%), making them the least prioritized nurturing care components within county planning. Few counties explicitly included interventions aimed at strengthening parenting skills, promoting caregiver-child interaction, supporting caregiver mental health, encouraging father involvement, or expanding community-based parenting programs. Likewise, child protection interventions, violence prevention, injury prevention, safe play environments, and environmental safety were inconsistently incorporated into county development plans despite their importance for children's overall well-being.

The review further revealed significant gaps in the inclusion of evidence-based newborn care interventions. Only 9% of County Integrated Development Plans included implementation plans or budget allocations for Kangaroo Mother Care, a proven intervention that substantially improves survival among low birth weight and premature infants. Similarly, only 26% of counties incorporated interventions aimed at preventing preterm births, despite prematurity remaining a leading cause of neonatal mortality in Kenya. These findings suggest missed opportunities for counties to strengthen newborn survival and improve developmental outcomes through cost-effective maternal and newborn health interventions.

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Another critical policy gap relates to services for children with disabilities and developmental delays. Between 60% and 68% of County Integrated Development Plans did not include strategies for early identification, developmental screening, referral services, or specialized care for children with disabilities. Early detection of developmental delays and timely intervention are fundamental components of nurturing care because they improve developmental outcomes, enhance school readiness, and reduce long-term disability. The limited attention given to these services indicates that many counties have yet to adopt inclusive approaches that ensure all

children, regardless of ability, have equitable opportunities to survive, learn, and thrive.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while county governments have made commendable progress in integrating health, nutrition, and early learning within their development plans, considerably greater attention is needed to strengthen responsive caregiving, child protection, newborn care, and disability-inclusive services. Addressing these gaps will be critical to achieving a truly comprehensive and integrated nurturing care system capable of supporting the holistic development of every child in Kenya.

### Policy Messages

| Policy Message                                                                                                     | Evidence from the Review                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Implication for Policy                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1. Kenya has established a strong foundation for nurturing care.</b>                                            | All 47 County Integrated Development Plans (100%) prioritize good health, opportunities for early learning, and 96% include adequate nutrition, demonstrating strong commitment to improving child well-being.                                                                       | Government should build on this momentum by ensuring that all components of nurturing care receive equal policy attention and investment.                      |
| <b>2. Responsive caregiving requires greater policy attention to achieve a balanced nurturing care agenda.</b>     | Only 26% of County Integrated Development Plans include responsive caregiving interventions such as parenting support, caregiver mental health, father engagement, and early stimulation programs.                                                                                   | Counties should integrate responsive caregiving into future CIDPs, establish parenting programs, and allocate dedicated budgets for caregiver support.         |
| <b>3. Child safety and security require greater policy prioritization to support comprehensive nurturing care.</b> | Only 30% of County Integrated Development Plans and fewer than half of the national policies incorporate comprehensive safety and security interventions, including violence prevention, safe play environments, and environmental protection.                                       | National and county governments should strengthen child protection systems and mainstream safety and security across all child-related policies.               |
| <b>4. Early learning should extend beyond ECDE classrooms.</b>                                                     | While 100% of counties support ECDE, very few policies promote book sharing, storytelling, toy libraries, caregiver-child interaction, or the use of local languages during the early years.                                                                                         | Policy should recognize that learning begins at birth and support home and community based early stimulation alongside formal pre-primary education.           |
| <b>5. Nutrition policies are relatively strong but important gaps persist.</b>                                     | National and county policies strongly support breastfeeding, maternal nutrition, micronutrient supplementation, and management of malnutrition. However, complementary feeding, child feeding during illness, food fortification, and growth monitoring receive much less attention. | Nutrition policies should be expanded to include the full continuum of child feeding and nutrition interventions required during the first five years of life. |

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|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>6. Multisectoral coordination is essential for effective nurturing care.</b> | The review revealed that health, nutrition, education, social protection, and child protection policies often operate independently, leading to uneven integration of nurturing care components.               | Strengthening coordination among ministries, county departments, development partners, and civil society will improve efficiency, policy coherence, and service delivery. |
| <b>7. Investing in nurturing care is investing in Kenya's human capital.</b>    | Evidence consistently demonstrates that investments during the first five years of life improve school readiness, educational attainment, health outcomes, employability, and long-term economic productivity. | National and county governments should prioritize nurturing care within development planning and budgeting as a strategic investment in Kenya's future.                   |

## Policy Recommendations

1. Institutionalize the Nurturing Care Framework across all national and county policy and planning processes

The Ministry of Health, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the State Department for Children Services, the Council of Governors, and other relevant ministries, should institutionalize the World Health Organization's Nurturing Care Framework as the guiding framework for early childhood development in Kenya. This should include revising national sectoral policies and developing county planning guidelines to ensure that all five nurturing care components good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, opportunities for early learning, and safety and security are comprehensively integrated into future policies, County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs), and annual development plans.

2. Strengthen policy and investment in responsive caregiving and parenting support

The State Department for Children Services, Ministry of Health, and County Governments should prioritize responsive caregiving by scaling up evidence-based parenting programs, caregiver mental health services, father engagement initiatives, community-based parenting education, and quality childcare services. Dedicated budget allocations should be established to support these interventions,

particularly given that only 26% of County Integrated Development Plans currently address responsive caregiving.

3. Expand integrated services for newborn care and children with developmental disabilities

The Ministry of Health, working closely with county health departments, should strengthen maternal, newborn, and child health policies by ensuring universal implementation of high-impact interventions such as Kangaroo Mother Care, prevention of preterm births, developmental screening, early identification of disabilities, and timely referral services. Counties should incorporate these interventions into their health plans and budgets to improve child survival and developmental outcomes.

4. Promote comprehensive early learning from birth through integrated multisectoral interventions

The Ministry of Education, together with county governments, should expand the concept of early learning beyond pre-primary education by promoting home-based stimulation, caregiver-child play, book-sharing initiatives, storytelling, toy libraries, and the use of local languages during the first three years of life. The Early Childhood Education Act (2021) should be reviewed to ensure that children from birth to three years are explicitly included within Kenya's early childhood policy framework.

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5. Strengthen governance, financing, and accountability for nurturing care

The National Treasury, Council of Governors, County Treasuries, and County Assemblies should establish dedicated financing mechanisms and accountability systems for nurturing care. This should include creating budget lines for integrated nurturing care interventions,

incorporating nurturing care indicators into national and county monitoring systems, and requiring annual reporting on progress in implementing all five components of the Nurturing Care Framework. Strengthened governance and sustainable financing will improve multisectoral coordination and ensure that policy commitments translate into effective service delivery for young children.

## Conclusion

Kenya has established a strong policy foundation for improving the health, nutrition, and early learning of young children. The review demonstrates that national and county governments have made commendable progress in prioritizing these components within policy and planning frameworks. However, significant gaps remain in the integration of responsive caregiving, child safety and security, newborn care, and services for children with developmental disabilities. These shortcomings limit the country's ability to deliver comprehensive nurturing care during the critical early years of life. Achieving equitable and holistic early childhood development will require stronger multisectoral coordination, sustained political commitment, and increased investment across all five components of the Nurturing Care Framework. National and county governments, together with development partners, civil society, and the private sector, should work collaboratively to strengthen policy coherence, financing, implementation, and accountability. By addressing the identified policy gaps, Kenya will be better positioned to ensure that every child not only survives but also thrives, reaches their full developmental potential, and contributes to the country's long-term social and economic development.

## Reference

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