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| **Background and Purpose of Activity/Assignment:**  UNICEF Kazakhstan is looking for a consultant to support early childhood monitoring scale up and early childhood interventions conceptualisation and advocacy. This consultancy aims to support evidence generation, adaptation of strategic instructions and guidelines, smooth introduction and scale up of early childhood developmental monitoring, conceptualization of early childhood interventions, capacity development of early childhood development, health and education sector frontline workers, use of applications and parenting programmes.  UNICEF defines Early childhood development (ECD) from pre-conception until entry into primary school. Investing in ECD can improve the lives of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children and their societies, helping to break cycles of poverty, violence and despair. ECD has a prominent role in supporting the quality of formal education and poverty reduction as well as ensuring child rights and efficient human resource development for the nation. ECD is the foundation of human development. A large body of evidence suggests that investment in ECD has a long-lasting impact on later stages of life (UNICEF, 2011). ECD services not only offer a stimulating environment for the holistic development of children today but also contribute to preparing better parents for tomorrow.  When a baby is born, the billions of brain cells are mostly unconnected. To function, these cells must be organized into networks that require trillions of connections, which depend on the interaction between genes and the environment. That optimal environment is created through nurturing environments such as positive parenting (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). These early connections shape the brain circuits and lay the foundation for later developmental outcomes. While genes provide the blueprint for development, it is environment that shapes it (UNICEF, 2014) The early years of life are a critical window of opportunity but also present the risk of vulnerability if neglected. Parents, key caregivers and families have the influencing power to determine a child’s chances for survival and development. Rapid strides made by young children across all domains of development and learning are fostered and supported through parents’ practices, attitudes, knowledge and resources.  The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and recognized scientific evidence acknowledge that parenting is one of the strongest influences on children, particularly during their early childhood years. Scientific evidence has demonstrated that positive parenting in the first years of life can influence brain function and development for the rest of a child’s life, and may even influence future generations (Meaney, 2010). Moreover, the multi-disciplinary and international literature on parenting clearly indicates that parents are one of the most influential factors in children’s development (Bornstein, 2002; Bradley and Corwyn, 2005; Rogoff, 2003; Whiting and Edwards, 1998).  **Early childhood developmental monitoring**  There is an overall consensus that early identification of developmental difficulties is critical to the well-being of children and their families. Processes leading to early identification are seen as an integral function of the primary health care system and understood as an appropriate responsibility of all pediatric health care professionals (AAP, 2006).  Developmental screening can be seen as a systematic activity to search for relevant (risk) indicators concerning the bio-psycho-social development of young children. In the case of child’s development, screening intends to identify (earliest possible) indicators referring to possible developmental delays or developmental concerns.  Development monitoring is defined as the intermittent performance and analysis of routine measurements, aimed at detecting changes in the environment or health status of populations. Monitoring therefore can be understood as an ongoing activity for all children from visit to visit, following how the child is progressing overall and in specific domains (Squires, Nickel and Eisert (1996)) understand “developmental monitoring” as synonymous with “developmental surveillance”. In their review of developmental disabilities in early childhood, the WHO promotes developmental monitoring as a process for the early detection of developmental difficulties. Developmental monitoring provides information about rates of developmental difficulties so that interventions can be appropriately targeted, their effect monitored and the need for further interventions determined. Developmental monitoring observes how the child grows and changes over time and whether the child meets the typical developmental milestones in playing, learning, speaking, behaving, and moving.[[1]](#footnote-2)  Identification of children at risk of developmental difficulties before the age of 3 years is imperative, because timely and adequate support has been shown to improve child functioning and development, leading to better outcomes across the life-span and better quality of life. When delays are detected and addressed early, children have the best chance to achieve progress.  Currently there is no generalizable guidance on best practice approaches for monitoring children’s development in primary care services, despite recommendations for this by professional associations, and the use of developmental milestones in some child health services and in national norms and standards. However, there are different practices and arrangements for developmental monitoring, but the evidence suggests the importance of using validated and reliable tools for monitoring child development and screening.  **Early childhood interventions**  Globally, at least one in six children experience a developmental difficulty. However, developmental screening and monitoring are not always accompanied by accessible, evidence-based assessment, interventions or effective referral pathways. Primary care services due to their regular contact with young children have the greatest potential to monitor child development during the first 3 years of life, identify children at risk of developmental difficulties and refer children and their families to appropriate support. Strengthening early childhood intervention system for adequate child development is an important step in building the continuity of services. Other services, like pre-schools, nurseries and rehabilitation centers play an important role as well. The concept of contemporary early childhood interventions (ECI) included such dimensions as family cantered, as per the social model, provided in natural environment by multi-disciplinary teams and is still relatively new with different understandings of its principles and modes of implementation. It is evident that there is a lot of need and interest among different ministers and actors to engage more in this area of work. Key challenges included lack of awareness and knowledge, lack of common vision, lack of clear leadership from the government. This requires additional advocacy, capacity development and tools to enable policy makers and practitioners to roll out this approach complimenting to early childhood developmental monitoring and inclusion in education.  As far as the early childhood education is concerned, in 2022 Kazakhstan adopted the Concept of pre-primary, secondary and vocational education development for 2022–2026, which focuses on preschool education. All 10,857 preschool organizations (covering almost 900,000 children) must now comply with international quality assurance standards. The Ministry of Education now permits preschools to develop free daily routines, which allows teachers to apply different approaches and tools. Parenting programmes are also emerging in the country and regional contexts. Targeted parenting programs are envisioned within the education system and some internationally validated parenting programs (Parenting for Life Long Health, Mellow parenting, Let’s grow up together, Caring for the Caregiver etc. could be further adapted and implemented in Kazakhstan. The country can also be guided by the newly developed Parenting support conceptual framework to provide guidance on how to plan and support parenting programs based on the SBC insights. Kazakhstan is advancing digital provision and outreach of services and digital solutions like Bebbo app, Ozim platform or others could bring additional value given the size of the country and lack of modern materials in a digital format for professionals and parents/caregivers.  **Social Behavior Change (SBC)** is a behavior-centered approach which aims to empower individuals and communities, and lower structural barriers that hinder people from adopting positive practices and societies from becoming more equitable, inclusive, cohesive and peaceful. It can be applied to facilitate individuals, households, groups, and communities in adopting and sustaining improved health and ECD related practices. It provides a “roadmap” for changing behaviors and social norms and identifies all the behaviors that need to be changed to attain positive health and social impacts. It is a multi-level tool operating through three key strategic dimensions: a planning continuum including advocacy, social mobilization and behavior change communication for promoting and sustaining healthy, risk-reducing behaviors among individuals and communities. It achieves this objective by disseminating tailored key messages to specific audiences through a variety of communication channels, based on evidence driven communication objectives. |

1. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/screening.html#:~:text=Developmental%20monitoring%20observes%20how%20your,can%20participate%20in%20developmental%20monitoring> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)