

WED MOVEMENT INNOVATION AND OUTPUTS

**BUILDING THRIVING COMMUNITIES
THROUGH EARLY YEARS INNOVATION**

October 2024

ABOUT ECA

The Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority (ECA) is a government entity, based in Abu Dhabi, that supports holistic early childhood development. We do this by developing policies and laws, informing decision-making through research and transforming behavior.

The ECA promotes optimal child development and well-being through four sectors—Health and Nutrition, Child Protection, Family Support, and Education and Early Care—from the early stages of pregnancy to the age of eight. We influence policies, inform decision-making through research, incubate innovative ideas, all while enabling the Early Childhood Sector and navigating the impact it's making.

Our vision is that every young child can flourish to their full potential in a safe and family-friendly environment.

ABOUT WED MOVEMENT

World Early Childhood Development (WED) Movement is redefining the global perspective on early childhood development starting with the child and extending to their community and the entire ecosystem.

WED Movement is a flagship initiative by the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority, which unites together global experts, partners, and disruptors for innovation to advance Early Childhood Development in Abu Dhabi and beyond.

Through WED Movement we are curating, developing and inspiring solutions that positively impact young children's lives and enhance early childhood outcomes.

Future challenges and opportunities faced by young children in Abu Dhabi and around the world are tackled through the creation and implementation of innovative outputs and knowledge co-creation led by WED's multi-disciplinary experts.



Published by Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority Download PDF version at eca.gov.ae

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report describes the 13 months of early years innovation activities between September 2023 and October 2024, as part of the World Early Childhood Development (WED) Movement, initiated by the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority (ECA) to generate disruptive outputs and advance the early childhood development agenda in the emirate and around the world. This process engaged multi-disciplinary experts from over 15 countries, as well as numerous public and private sector partners, working together to solve critical challenges faced by young children and families through innovative, practical and impactful outputs.

ECA selected three interconnected themes to focus the WED innovation process on the most pressing challenges—Intentional Parenting, Culture and Identity, and Sustainable and Family-Friendly Cities—starting with the child and extending the impact to the community and the whole ecosystem.

Over 30 local and global experts from a diverse range of disciplines and sectors were invited to join the innovation process, which began with a week-long Innovation Lab, hosted by ECA in Abu Dhabi. This dynamic and inspiring week became the springboard for disruptive, child-centric ideas, culminating in a rigorous selection process to determine the most promising outputs for further development and piloting.

The selected outputs are:

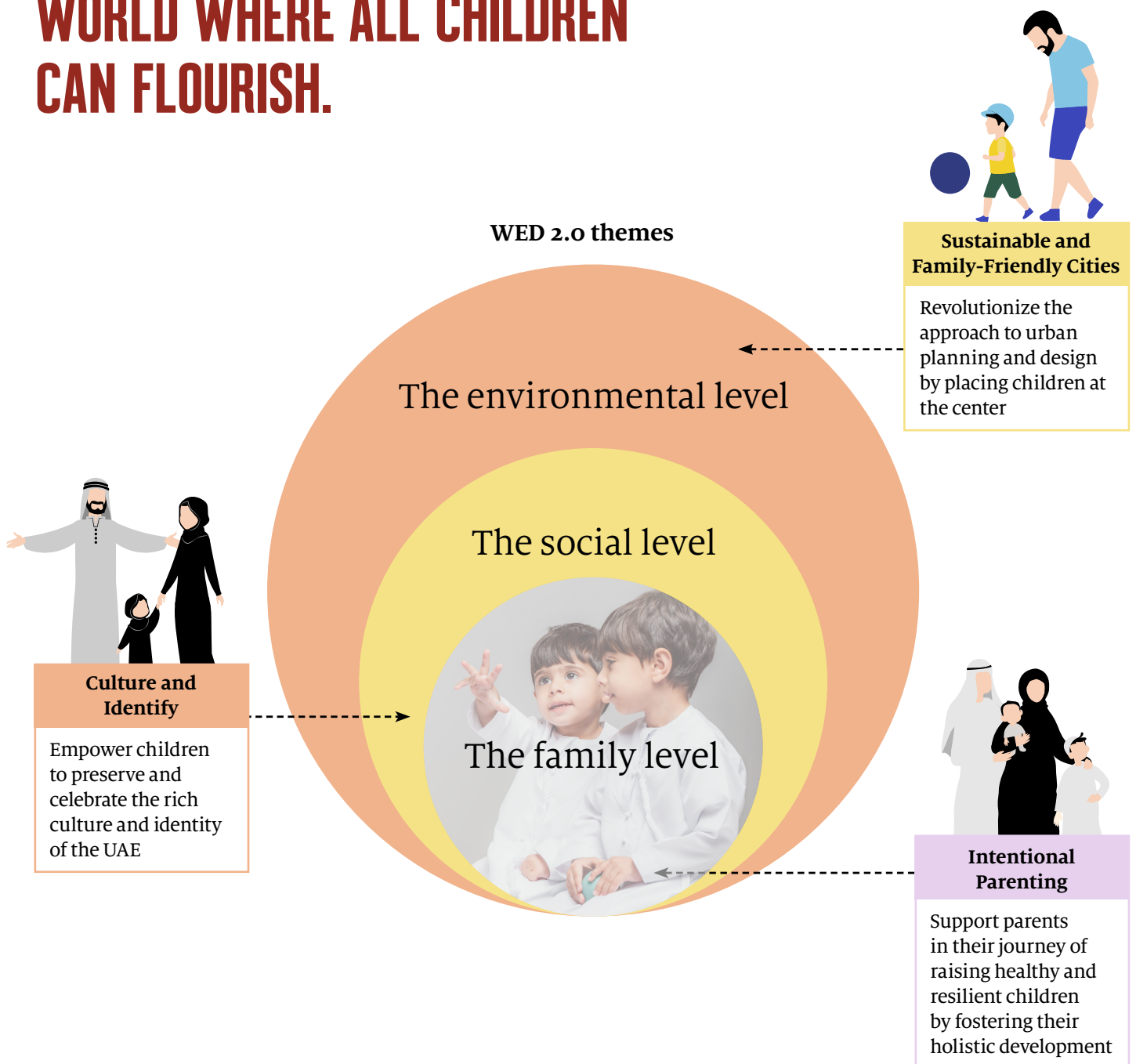
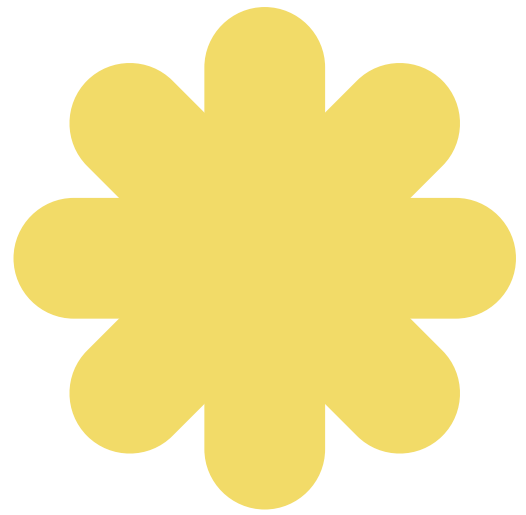
- **Majlisna**, a play-focused, experiential concept which aims to transform public spaces and encourage intergenerational connection. Inspired by the Emirati concept of Majlis, these dynamic, multi-use spaces will incorporate culturally relevant games and activities, celebrating local history and heritage.

- **Hikayatna**, a digitally enabled archive that facilitates the collection, preservation and sharing of precious stories from the older generations to the youngest. Activated through an easy-to-use app, Hikayatna will use the power of storytelling to strengthen intergenerational bonds and preserve local traditions and customs.
- **Parent Connect**, a multi-channel platform to support parents during the crucial early years, bringing best-in-class scientific evidence to guide them through the development journey of their child. From monitoring charts and practical tools to interactive prompts and games, every family will receive tailored guidance to feel informed and prepared.
- **National Center for Children and Families**, a visionary initiative to create a collaborative, multi-sectoral space for ECD-focused research, education and solutions development. Designed to reshape the future of learning, the Center will develop a new model of education and knowledge sharing to foster cross-sectoral collaboration, engage stakeholders and the public, and advance early years innovation.

This process is just the beginning of an exciting and meaningful journey towards creating a world where children are placed at heart of every decision. Together, we aim to redefine the global perspective on early childhood development and build a movement for change.



**WED MOVEMENT IS REDEFINING
THE GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE ON
EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT
(ECD) BY STARTING WITH THE
CHILD AND EXTENDING TO THEIR
COMMUNITY AND THE ENTIRE
ECOSYSTEM TO CREATE A
WORLD WHERE ALL CHILDREN
CAN FLOURISH.**



ACCELERATING EARLY YEARS INNOVATION

One of the key pillars of the WED Movement is our focus on **developing and scaling innovative outputs** and solutions to improve the lives of children and families in Abu Dhabi. We act as a facilitator and connector, **uniting global multi-disciplinary experts and local partners to unlock disruptive ideas and pilot them in the real world.**

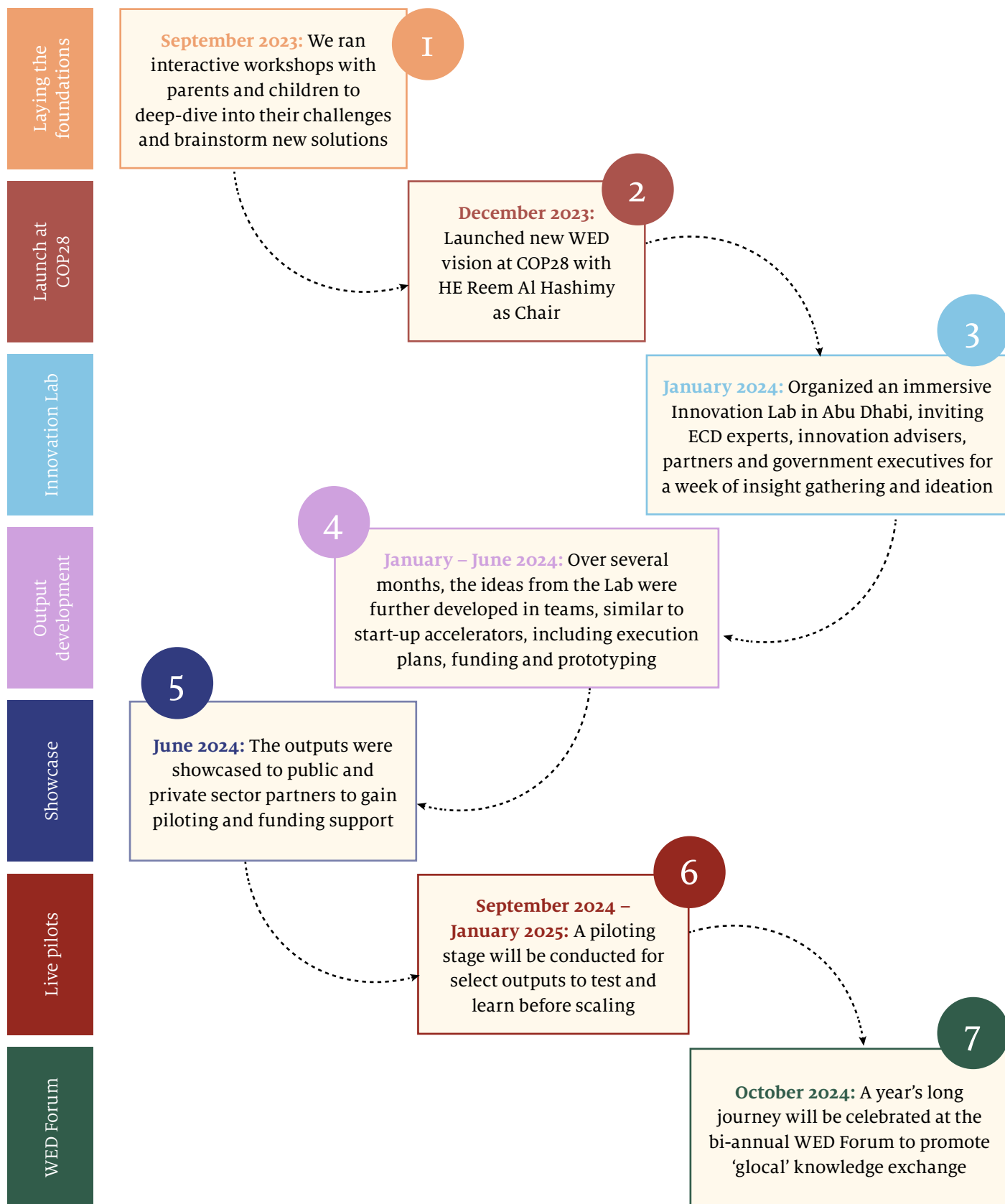


01

CHAPTER

WED 2.0

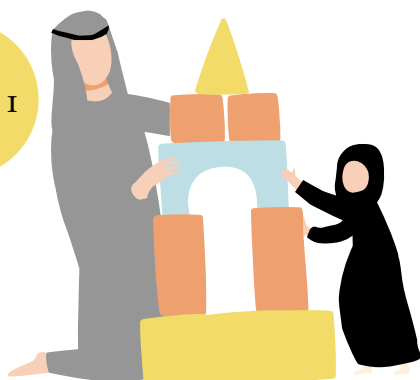
WED 2.0 PROCESS AT A GLANCE



WE BEGAN BY CONDUCTING DISCOVERY AND IDEATION WORKSHOPS WITH ABU DHABI PARENTS AND YOUNG CHILDREN

In partnership with Designathon, we began our journey with field research at local schools and community centers. The voices of parents and children allowed us to better understand their challenges and focus our efforts on the issues where we could make a difference today and in the future.

Theme 1



Intentional Parenting

Main challenges: Need for quality parenting guidance and limited access to specialized services

Ideas: Parenting awareness sessions at schools and universities; easy access to credible information via social media, apps or chatbot

Theme 2



Culture and Identity

Main challenges: Children are familiar with Emirati heritage and traditions, but their day-to-day routines don't always reflect them

Ideas: Innovative toys that would preserve oral traditions of storytelling; shared spaces for community activities and opportunities for volunteering to teach compassion and family values

Sustainable and Family-Friendly Cities

Main challenges: Limited outdoor play and access to nature affects biodiversity, family well-being and city attractiveness

Ideas: Sustainable play areas and public parks powered by green energy; social spaces that use local materials and foods

Theme 3





AT COP28, WE ADVANCED THE CONVERSATION ON THE CENTRAL ROLE OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN CLIMATE DISCUSSIONS

Hosted by the UAE, COP28 – the annual United Nations Climate Change Conference – offered an ideal platform for WED Movement to engage the global community of policymakers and sustainability experts in early childhood development (ECD). Her Excellency Reem Al Hashimy, UAE Minister of State for International Cooperation and WED Chair, launched WED 2.0 to prioritize early childhood development at the forefront of the global climate agenda.



Our collective responsibility to improve the lives of children compels us to take collaborative action. As someone deeply devoted to creating meaningful change, I am very excited about what can be achieved by shifting the narrative to prioritize putting early childhood development at the forefront of the global agenda.



HE Reem Al Hashimy
UAE Minister of State for International
Cooperation and WED Chair



02

CHAPTER

WED Innovation Lab
and Solutioning

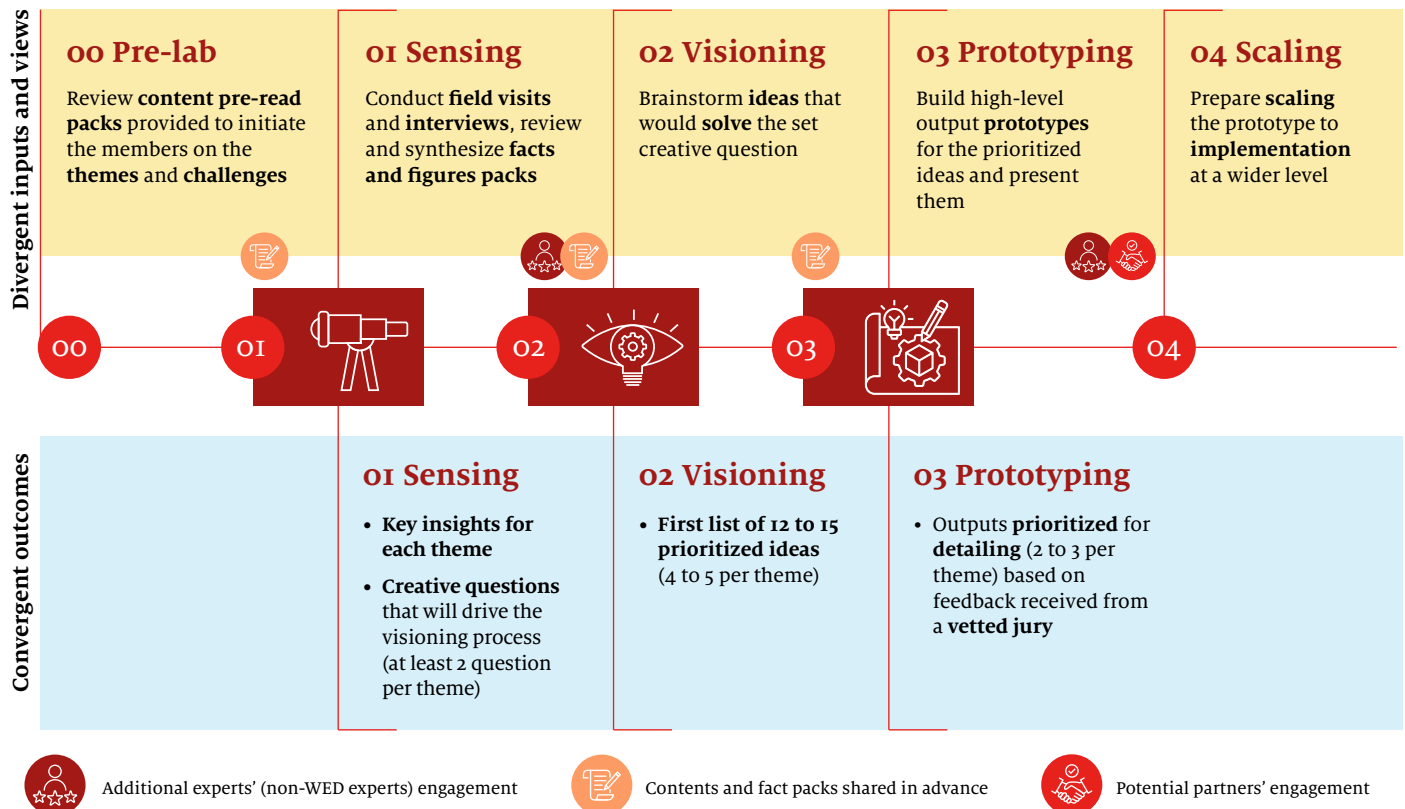
WE INVITED 30+ EXPERTS TO JOIN THE WED INNOVATION PROCESS

At the beginning of 2024, over 30 multi-disciplinary experts from the UAE and around the world joined forces to develop innovative outputs for young children and families living in Abu Dhabi. Coming from 15 countries, the experts were selected based on their multi-disciplinary expertise, reputation for excellence, and disruptive approaches to their work.



THE EXPERTS CONVENED IN ABU DHABI FOR THE WED INNOVATION LAB

The Innovation Lab, hosted by ECA in Abu Dhabi and facilitated by THNK School of Leadership, was designed as an immersive experience, running over the course of 5 days:



To get started, the ECA team arranged field visits ('sensing'), so our WED experts could understand the city, explore its facilities, and engage in its culture. Then, the experts participated in a range of team brainstorming and solutioning activities, facilitated by THNK School of Leadership. From talking to family doctors in children's hospitals, to visiting public parks, to prototyping in theme-focused teams, the Lab was a creative and insightful process of discovery and ideation.

During the week, they also engaged a diverse set of multi-sectoral stakeholders from the local ecosystem to get valuable insight and explore potential implementation partnerships; some examples of engaged partners include Miral, Purehealth, and the Emirates Foundation.

AT THE END OF THE WEEK, THE EXPERTS WERE PROVIDED WITH A CATEGORIZATION FRAMEWORK


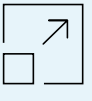
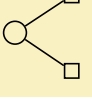




1. **Direct services and offerings:** Outputs focused on interactive, hands-on experiences (e.g., science-based toys, games promoting better parenting practices).
2. **Digital tools:** Outputs that leverage or adapt technological innovations for early childhood development (e.g., user-friendly mobile apps, digital platforms for early learning).
3. **Evidence and knowledge creation:** Outputs aimed at generating or utilizing qualitative and quantitative data (e.g., parent support groups, educational workshops, behavioral interventions, surveys, and research studies).
4. **Incentives and disincentives:** Outputs designed to motivate stakeholders to adopt best practices (e.g., incentives for firms to implement family-friendly policies, childcare subsidies).

5. **Policies and regulations:** Outputs driven by policymaking or regulatory initiatives (e.g., regulations limiting junk food advertisements, mandates for stroller-friendly public transport).

6. **Physical infrastructure:** Outputs requiring the development of physical spaces or structures (e.g., improved sidewalks, public parks).

The experts presented their ideas to a jury of local officials and partners to gather valuable feedback and inform their future work. The jury assessed these outputs based on pre-defined criteria that allowed to align the impact of the outputs with the WED KPIs.

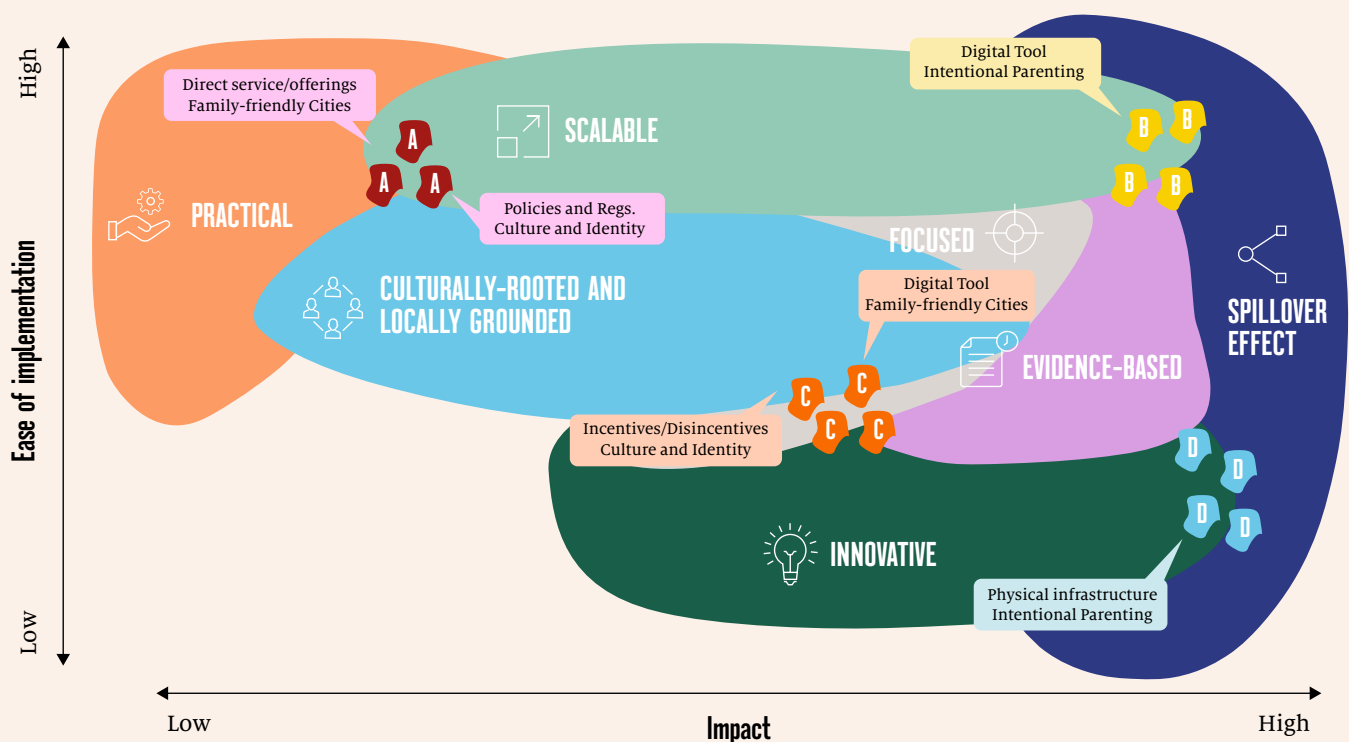
Spectrum of each guideline

Spectrum of each guideline				
Output ideation guidelines		Limited	Innovative	Highly Innovative
		Limited	Scalable	Can be scaled to broader user base
		Limited	Spillover effect	Address other challenges
		Not culturally applicable	Culturally-rooted	Highly infused with the Emirati culture
Output detailing guidelines		Hard to implement	Practical	Low hanging fruit
		Driven by theory	Evidence-based	Data-driven solution
		Focuses on multiple things	Focused	Focused on a single objective

HOW WERE THE INNOVATION LAB IDEAS ASSESSED?

The jury used a comprehensive, multi-step scorecard to assess the Innovation Lab outputs in an objective way.

To help select the outputs for further development, the scores of the jury were mapped across a multi-step scorecard, followed by a prioritization chart:



Portfolio of outputs

12 to 15 ideas to be prioritized, 6 to 9 outputs to be detailed

- A** More than 1 output per theme can be practical, scalable and adheres to local culture with high impact
- B** More than 1 output per theme can take a scalable and evidence-based approach yielding high impact results
- C** More than 1 output per theme can be innovative and based on evidence easing the implementation of innovative ideas
- D** More than 1 output per theme can be aspirational, solving key challenges that might be hard to implement but with a high impact

The ECA team consequently completed a second round of analysis based on the below factors, to prioritize outputs for design and implementation:

- Relevance to the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Development Strategy and ECA's strategic programs (such as improving children's physical and mental health, increasing caregivers' knowledge and abilities, and enabling private sector engagement in ECD)
- Alignment with other strategic initiatives in the emirate to ensure efficiencies in resource allocation through project synergies and cross-sectoral collaboration
- Potential for impact, to solve for specific challenges or opportunities (for example, educational outcomes or active time spent outdoors), as well as longer-term ripple effects (social cohesion, increased happiness levels etc.)
- Ease of implementation, including investment requirements, timelines and technical complexity of output piloting and pathways to scale

WED INNOVATION LAB IN NUMBERS

9

Innovative outputs

30⁺

Global and local experts

12

Partners engaged

6

Field visits and cultural trips

21

Media interviews

405,000⁺

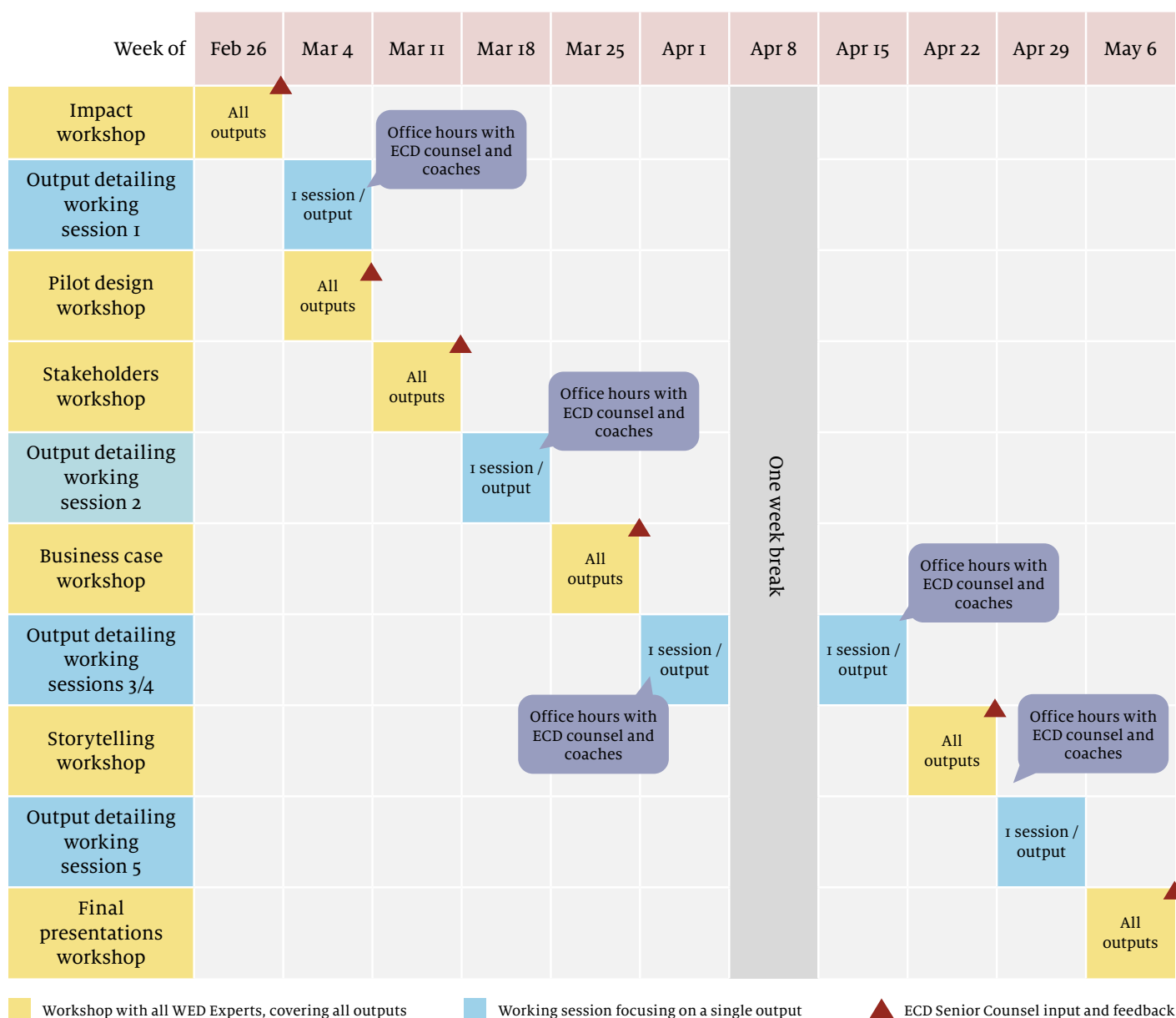
Social media reach



THE OUTPUT DEVELOPMENT PHASE INVOLVED OVER 500 HOURS OF COLLECTIVE WORK

The experts teamed up in smaller groups of four to six people, selected based on their areas of expertise and interest, to fully develop the outputs which received the highest scores.

Over the following four months, a comprehensive and structured approach was used to guide the experts in taking their ideas from concept to viable prototypes:



The experts were provided all the support needed, depending on the stage and skillset required. These included engaging, on a needs basis, the ECA's innovation team, piloting partners, and subject-matter advisers (creative designers, storytelling experts, technologists, app developers and financial accountants, to name a few).

The phase culminated in a competitive pitch process, where the teams' prototypes and activation plans were assessed for pilot readiness.

WHAT WERE THE KEY LEARNINGS FROM OUR INNOVATION JOURNEY?

The WED innovation process engaged hundreds of people, including internal teams at the ECA, external partners, other public entities and the multi-disciplinary experts without whom we would not succeed.

Key learnings from the WED Innovation Process

- 1 Outputs generated during ideation sessions will vary in scale and effort**

It is important to either be open to accommodating a wider range of options, or help guide teams towards the parameters which are acceptable. For example, an idea involving improvements to urban environments might be piloted as fast as developing a new smartphone app, but will likely involve a wider range of city-level stakeholders to comply with regulations and requirements.
- 2 Different expertise and skill sets are required at different stages of the process**

At the idea generation stage, it is essential to involve multi-sectoral experts and researchers. During the prototype development and piloting, niche specialists are required including finance, prototype design, storytelling and creative. This helps ensure the core team stays focused and can progress at pace.
- 3 Engage partners and investors early on**

Involving potential collaborators and partners from the start of the process, such as inviting them to participate in the Innovation Lab, ensured co-creation of outputs and increased the likelihood of successful implementation, by making the outputs more viable for piloting in the real world.
- 4 Sometimes an idea will flourish elsewhere, so be flexible**

When it comes to public-private partnerships and innovation, ideas will move at varied speeds, and the way they evolve in the process will not always be linear. Some of the Innovation Lab ideas were developed up to a certain point and then handed over to a different entity for further advancement. The goal of innovation is to transform and improve, so do not be afraid to merge ideas, reshape them, or find them a better suited home.
- 5 Collect robust data to inform your decisions at every stage**

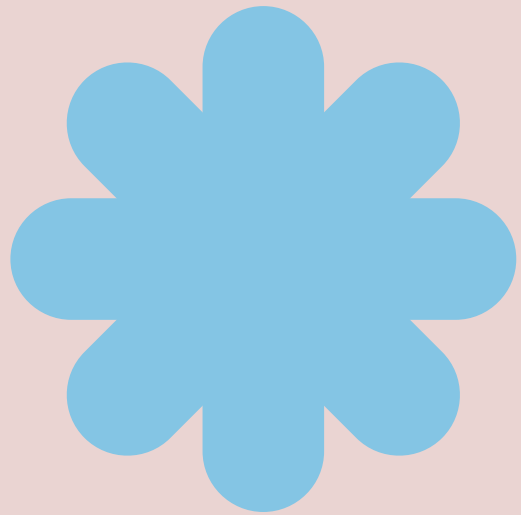
To do so, you will need to align your strategic objectives with output KPIs in a straightforward way. Make sure that at every stage you can validate your progress with data and evidence, utilizing different methodologies such as observation, user interviews, behavioral insights, or surveys.

03

CHAPTER

Innovation Outputs

DISCOVER THE WED 2.0 INNOVATION OUTPUTS

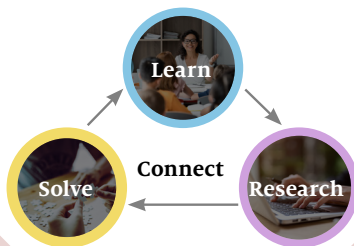


Click on each icon to discover more

Majlisna



National Center
for Children
and Families




Hikayatna



Parent Connect



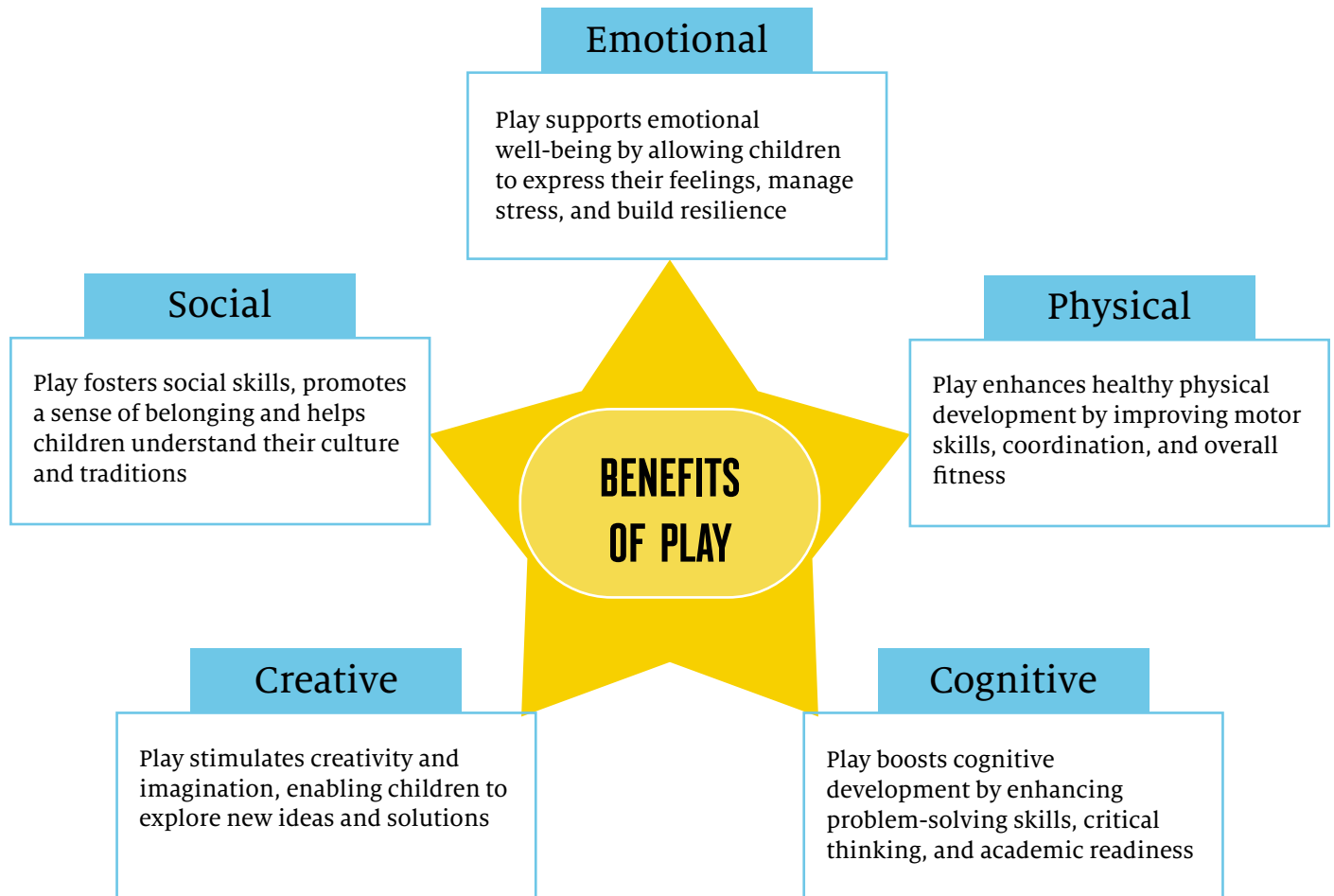


INNOVATION OUTPUT #1

Majlisna

PLAY IS A POWERFUL CATALYST FOR CHILDREN'S HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

Play is more than just a leisure activity — it is serious business! Play is a fundamental component of children's development and well-being and serves as a cornerstone for building strong, cohesive families and communities.

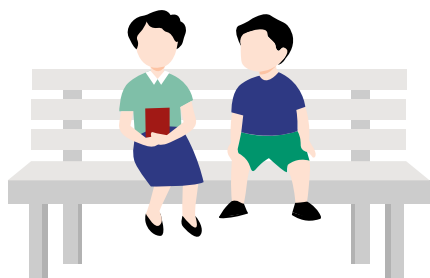


BUT CHILDREN IN ABU DHABI HAVE LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE IN OUTDOOR PLAY

Evidence collected in Abu Dhabi shows that children are spending too little time outdoors or playing with family, and favourite leisure activities often involve smartphones. Living away from their grandparents, few Emirati children get to experience the joy of connection to their cultural roots.

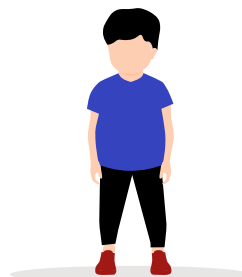
Screen time has replaced physical play for children

73% of children's leisure time is represented by **screen time**¹, with children in the UAE being **the most tech-addicted globally**²



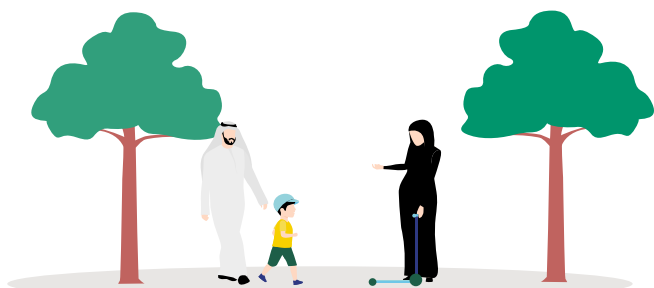
Few opportunities to engage in active play

Less than 1 in 5 children in the UAE spend 60 minutes or more on daily physical activity, and obesity is on the rise³



Limited access to family-friendly public spaces

Only 14% of UAE residents visit green community spaces several times a week, citing lack of access⁴



Intergenerational play is not common, especially outdoors

Grandparents often stay indoors, limiting opportunities for outdoor play and bonding with their grandchildren⁵



¹ Pew Research (2021)

² Lenstore (2021)

³ UAE Report Card (2022)

⁴ World Future Energy Summit (2021)

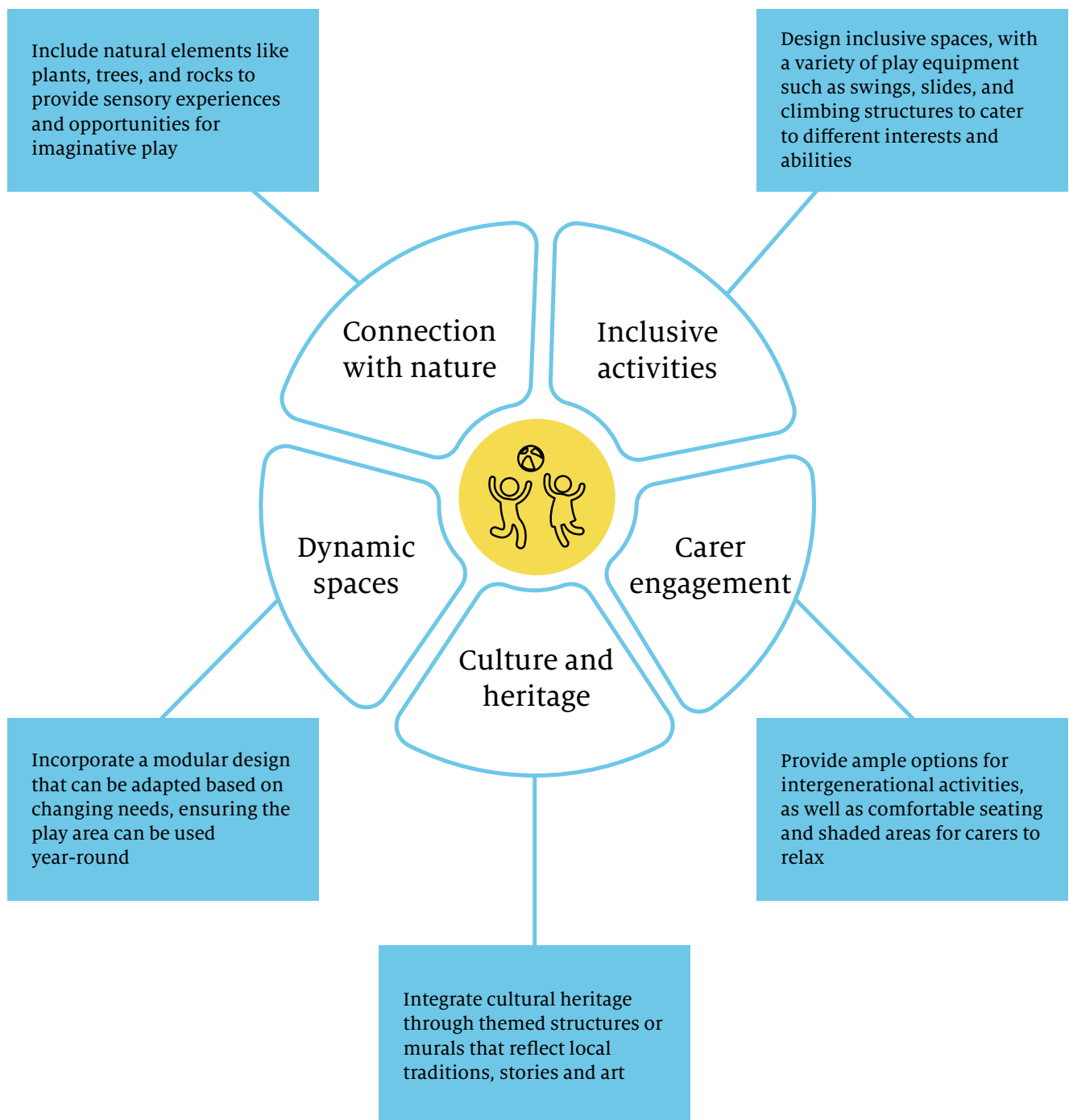
⁵ ECA and GEHL research (2024)

DURING THE INNOVATION LAB, WE DECIDED TO TURN THESE CHALLENGES INTO AN OPPORTUNITY

We asked ourselves: What if we introduced active play into the daily lives of Abu Dhabi families in a seamless way?

Five design principles for play-friendly city spaces guided our ideation. The goal was to transform Abu Dhabi's outdoors into vibrant, accessible, and engaging

environments that facilitate the holistic development of children and improve the well-being of families and communities.



WELCOME TO MAJLISNA

The concept is founded on the Emirati idea of a Majlis, a social space open to all, using PLAY as the key to unlocking opportunities for intergenerational connections and meaningful play experiences.

Majlisna will activate public spaces through play, promoting healthy outdoor activity and celebrating Emirati culture.



LET'S EXPLORE THE DETAILS...

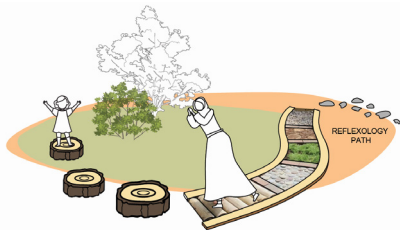
Majlisna is made up of five components, which work together to create an immersive experience for all family members. We developed Majlisna for easy customization, detailed in our Majlisna catalogue, so each space could be modified to enhance its neighboring environment and celebrate the local heritage.



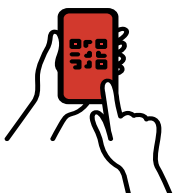
The Play Hub is the main structure and the social heart of Majlisna, built from sustainable and locally sourced materials in harmony with the environment. It is an inclusive space where children can connect with their parents and grandparents, learn about their cultural heritage, and make friends through active play, promoting family well-being. Acting as a landmark within each community, the Hub will proudly display local artworks and artifacts.



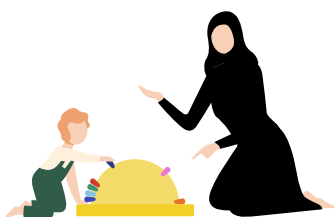
Loose Play Parts, stored at the Hub, will include a variety of interactive objects such as toys, traditional Emirati games, art supplies, bikes, and musical instruments, all designed to engage children of various age groups and their caregivers in intergenerational play. These items will be managed by a combination of dedicated 'play facilitators' and community volunteers, including teenagers and the elderly.



Play Extensions will creatively utilize the space around the Hub to inspire curiosity and attract families passing by. These may include colourful pedestrian crossings, green walls, swings, cognitive challenges, and playful artworks that display local Emirati knowledge, all designed to weave play into the surrounding urban environment. Each play element will be uniquely crafted to suit the specific needs of the site and its user groups, extending play opportunities beyond the Play Hub itself.



Play Prompts will use smartphones to transition children seamlessly from screen play to active play, with QR codes and geo-location prompts engaging the entire family in playful moments through Majlisna activities. These programmatic and digital activations will bring the physical infrastructure to life, curated to suit the needs of each Majlisna and stimulating intergenerational play.



Play Facilitators will bring life to Majlisna by running playful activations and assisting visitors, ensuring every family has an enjoyable and safe experience. Both paid professional playworkers and trained volunteers, all facilitators will complete mandatory training and safety screening to ensure their suitability for the role. They will curate and facilitate play events and workshops, creating a joyful rhythm of daily, weekly, and monthly activities that target specific interests or age groups.

MAKING EVERY CORNER OF ABU DHABI A CELEBRATION, ONE PLAYFUL INITIATIVE AT A TIME

One of Majlisna pilots will entail the creation of a sensory park near a medical center, in partnership with PureHealth.

Selected for its proximity to a busy hospital, this small park provides an opportunity to support healing through intergenerational play in a therapeutic and joyful environment.

When scoping the locations for the pilot, our teams went the extra mile by collecting observation data to help inform the Majlisna designs. While the park was busy with passers-by using its central path, fewer people stayed longer—out of those who stayed at the park for a longer

amount of time only 8% were children and only 6% were elderly. These observations signalled that we needed to add new features to attract more intergenerational visitors, such as building shaded rest areas, improving accessibility, and providing more options for quality activities.

During the consultation and refinement process, the concept design went through several iterations in close collaboration with multiple stakeholders.

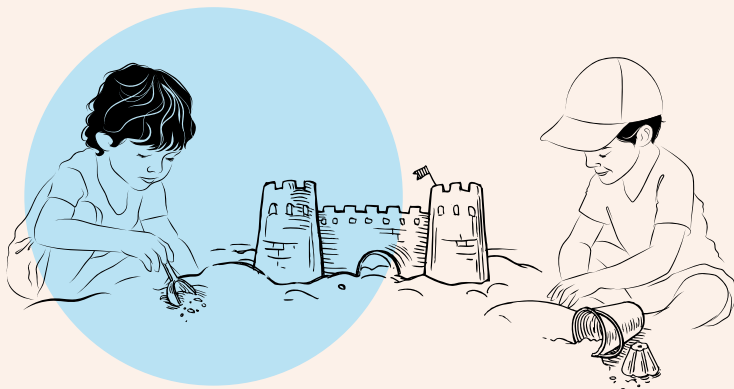
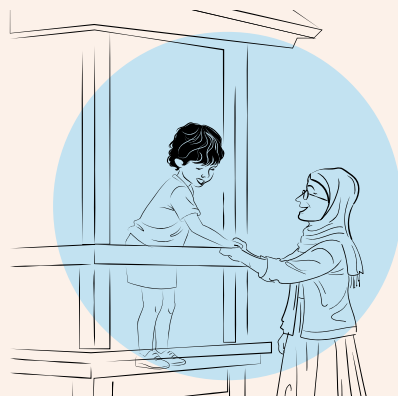


Concept design, final design might be subject to change.

LAYLA AND AMNA'S VISIT

Layla, a 4-year-old Emirati girl, and her grandmother Amna went to the hospital for Amna's weekly check-up, but today something exciting happened.

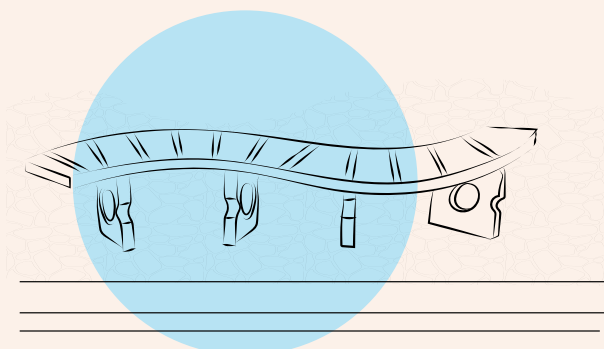
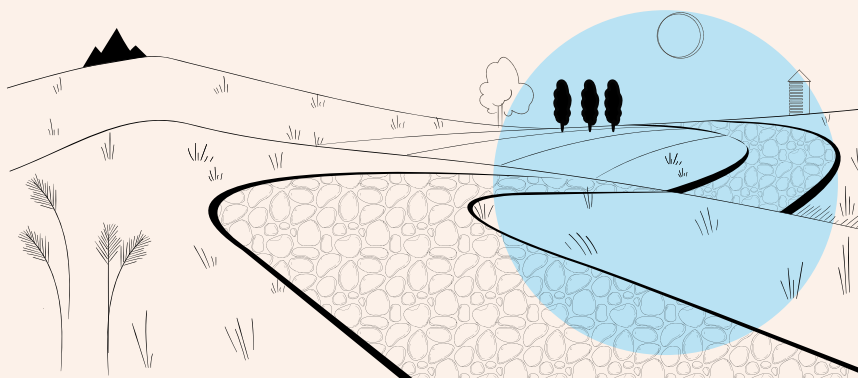
After the appointment, they discovered that the nearby park had been transformed. Following colorful leaves on the path, Layla found wooden towers to climb and felt like she was in a castle, seeing the whole park from the top.



The park was full of activities—kids drawing, playing hopscotch, and building sandcastles around the play container.

Layla made new friends, while Amna enjoyed a juice from the food truck and chatted with neighbours.

Layla even rode a bike on a painted path and walked on a reflexology path made from rough stones, pretending she was on the moon.



After exploring, they sat on a bench shaped like giant snakes in front of the play container and listened to a story about the Ghaf tree, where Layla learned its importance in Emirati culture. The park, with its artistic touches and cozy atmosphere, turned their hospital visit into a fun-filled adventure.

AN ENABLING ECOSYSTEM TO DRIVE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

ECA and WED Movement were instrumental in the development of the Majlisna concept, but we are thinking ahead. To achieve our ambitious goals of having 100+ Majlisna spaces by 2035, we will be adopting a collaborative, cross-sectoral approach.

We envision Majlisna will be run as a collaborative entity with a dedicated multi-stakeholder Task Force for key decisions, supported by public and private

organizations, as well as volunteer partners who share our purpose and values.

1

Task Force

There will be a Task Force to make key decisions and provide strategic oversight

2

Strategic Partners

Various strategic partners and collaborators will provide resources, expertise, and support

3

Execution Team

A small, dedicated team will be responsible for day-to-day operations and implementation of Majlisna

4

Community Leaders

Volunteer and community organizations will represent resident needs and offer guidance on the impact

This agile structure will allow to create a clear pathway to scale. Starting from the Task Force led initiatives and strategic partnerships, the bigger scale will be made possible through local grassroots collaborations and community organizations. Eventually, the initiative will be supported by a much smaller team of experts, setting the standards across the Majlisna network through:

- A regularly updated Majlisna catalogue, where location managers and partners can select from an approved range of components

- Educational materials, selection guidelines and training for Majlisna volunteers and play facilitators
- Implementation guidelines for new Majlisna locations
- Case studies and best practice knowledge exchange, locally and globally

HOW WE WILL MEASURE AND TRACK THE IMPACT OF MAJLISNA

Starting from the baseline numbers from a range of data sources, we have selected the most relevant ones for regular assessment – ranging from bi-yearly data collected through Abu Dhabi resident surveys to more specialized studies involving mixed-method data collection.



MORE TO COME...

We are currently developing our strategic 5-year plan to enable future teams to take the Majlisna vision forward...

We have several confirmed pilot locations, including AI Falah Village, local parks, and a children's hospital

A training program for community “play facilitators” in partnership with the Emirates Foundation

Research collaborators to measure our progress and enhance scientific knowledge about play

...and support Abu Dhabi in becoming the most playful, child-friendly city in the world!



WED EXPERTS FOR MAJLISNA



Natalia Krysiak

Architect, Play Consultant, and
Founder of Cities for Play



Ondine Bullo

Founder and CEO of Better Kids



Sara Candiracci

PhD, Associate Director,
Global Leader Social Value and
Equity at Arup



Fatima Al Awadi


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With a special 'Thank You' to Cecilia Vaca Jones and the Family-Friendly team at the ECA for their guidance.



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INNOVATION OUTPUT #2

Hikayatna

THE IMPORTANCE OF STORYTELLING FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The advancements of the modern world have made our lives more comfortable than ever—entertainment at our fingertips, abundance of multicultural experiences, accessible travel, and affordable technologies, to name a few. Yet, many feel that something quite fundamental has been lost, too. Connection to heritage, cultural values, and sense of belonging.

The UAE, a young, rapidly advancing country of over 200 nationalities, has been grappling with the challenges of preserving its cultural richness while remaining welcoming to all. With younger and older generations no longer living in close proximity and leading different lifestyles, it has become harder for grandparents to pass on the Emirati culture to their grandchildren, resulting in the fading away of precious traditions and unique local dialects.

The art of storytelling is an important part of Emirati culture and heritage and can provide an answer to these

complex challenges. Storytelling is more than just an age-old tradition—it is a timeless bridge that links generations, connecting the wisdom of the past with the curiosity of the present. It is a powerful tool that fosters cognitive, emotional, and social growth in young children, helping them develop the right behaviors and reinforcing the importance of intergenerational connection, culture and heritage.



A NEED TO PRESERVE HERITAGE AND FOSTER CONNECTION

For the community of Abu Dhabi, there is a pressing need to develop ways of fostering a stronger connection between the younger and older generations of Emiratis, preserve cultural narratives and integrate them into the lives of the younger generation.



Less than 2% of Abu Dhabi population is over 65 years old, while children under 14 make up almost 16% of the population⁷



Children don't spend enough time with their grandparents, with more families choosing to live independently rather than maintaining an intergenerational home⁸



Emirati children are surrounded by a diversity of over 200 cultures, and English is often the preferred language for daily interactions⁹

Every Emirati child should have the right to access their own unique cultural heritage stories

91%

of people in 23 countries believe speaking the national language is crucial to national belonging¹⁰

80%

of UAE public school students feel a stronger national connection when Arabic is promoted¹¹

40%

increase in cultural engagement through Arabic language programs¹²



⁷ SCAD Abu Dhabi Census (2023)

⁸ The National (2014)

⁹ The Arabic Language Center for Children (2017)

¹⁰ Pew Research Center (2024).

¹¹ Al-Issa, A. (2013). "National Identity and Language Policy in the United Arab Emirates."

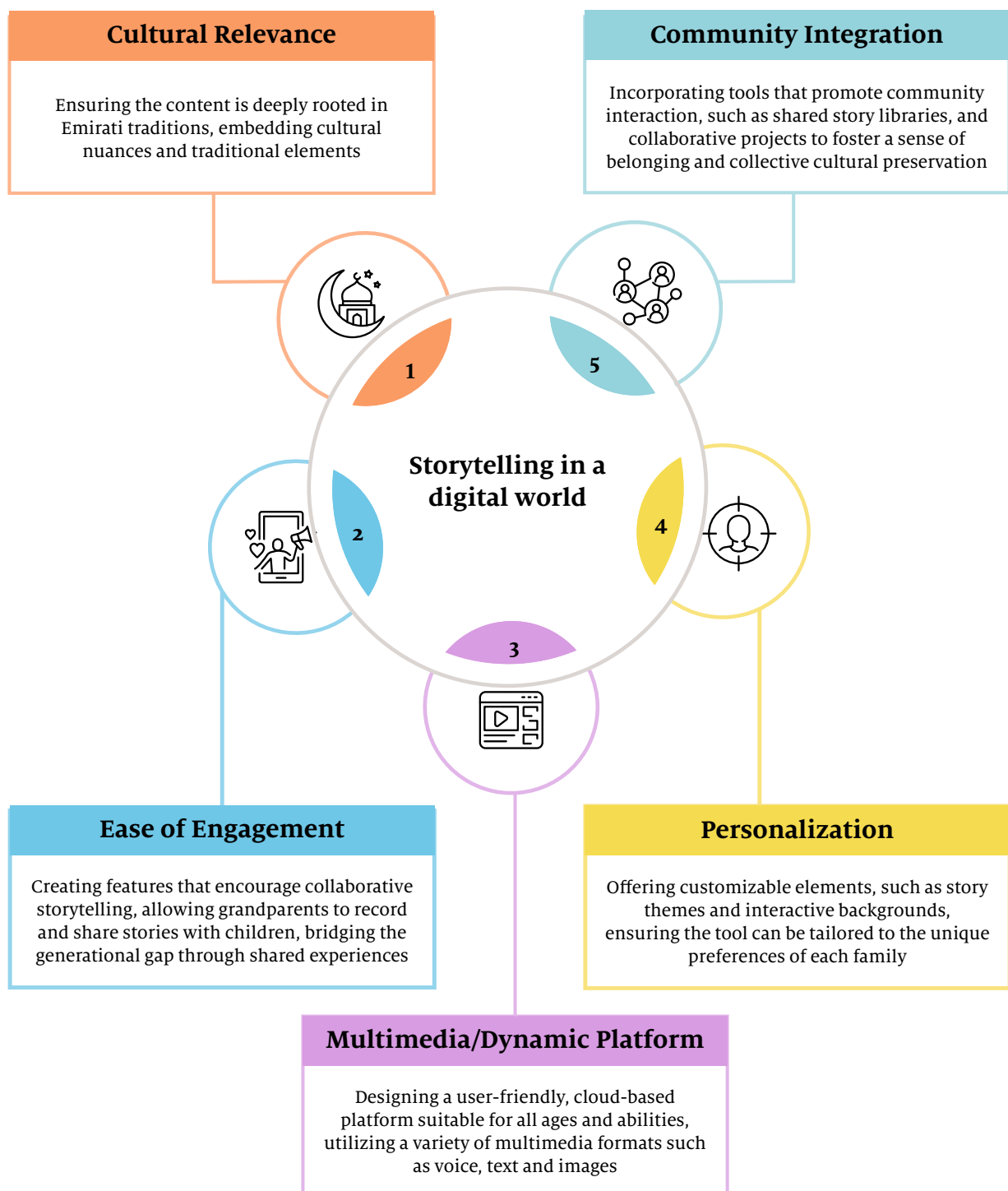
¹² Abu-Rabia, S. (2016). "The Impact of Arabic Language Instruction on Cultural Engagement."

THE FRAMEWORK BEHIND HIKAYATNA

WED experts set out to turn these challenges into an opportunity, bringing a technology-enabled solution to increase quality family time and make it easier for grandparents to find new ways to interact and connect with their grandchildren.

They developed a five-element framework that guided the development process. The aim was to seamlessly integrate the rich heritage and vibrancy of the Emirati culture into the daily lives of Abu Dhabi families through the timeless art of storytelling.

Guided by these five design principles, their ideation centered around creating a digital platform that would unite generations in an engaging, intuitive and educational way.



IMMERSE YOURSELF IN THE WORLD OF HIKAYATNA

An archive that can become a public good of cultural heritage, our stories, Hikayatna.

Hikayatna aims to strengthen the bond between the younger generation and their grandparents, parents, and relatives through the transformative power of storytelling,

offering a deeper connection to the rich heritage and cultural narratives of the UAE.



MEET AMINA, THURAYA AND HAMDAN

Meet one of the Emirati families we have designed Hikayatna for: Amina, Thuraya and little Hamdan. For Amina, we have created an intuitive, easy-to-use tool to orally record her stories. For Thuraya, we have made family time more engaging, helping her connect with her child through storytelling activities. And for little Hamdan, we developed a fun digital learning experience that teaches him a variety of useful skills with heritage and culture at the core.



Hamdan, 6



**Hamdan's grandmother,
Amina, 70**



**Hamdan's mother,
Thuraya, 36**

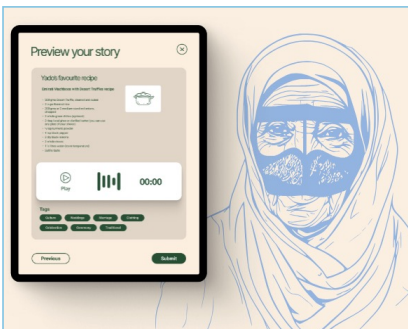
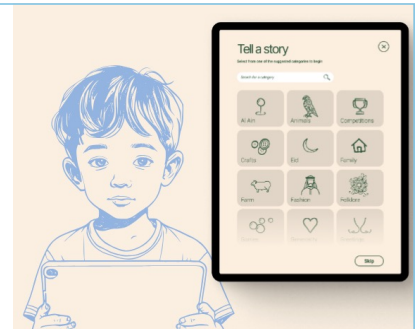
A DAY IN THE LIFE OF HAMDAN AND HIS FAMILY...



While at school, Hamdan's teacher gives him a new project to interview one of his older relatives, asking them to share a unique story of their childhood linked to Emirati heritage.

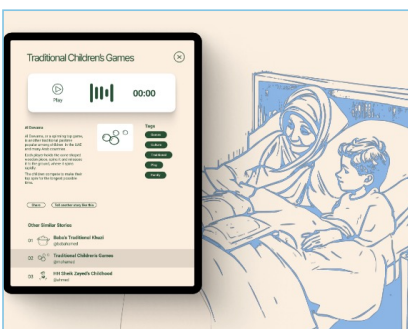
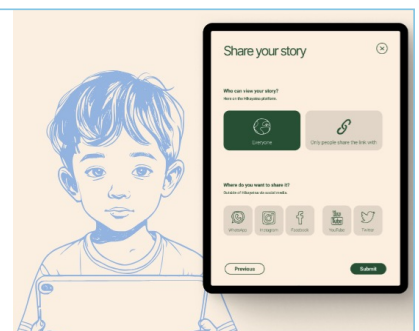
To do this, the teacher shares a link to download the Hikayatna app.

Thuraya helps Hamdan set up the app. After thinking about it, he tells her that he would like to ask his grandmother about her childhood adventures when she was his age.



They send a message to Amina to record a voice note with the story in her local Emirati dialect. It is easy for Amina to make the recording, and she sends it back that same evening.

The recording is automatically saved in the Hikayatna app as a story with a title and description. He decides to share this story with everyone on the platform, connecting their family heritage with those of others.



On the weekend, Thuraya and Hamdan spend time together listening to the story and bonding over their cherished family heritage.

HOW WE WILL MEASURE AND TRACK THE IMPACT OF HIKAYATNA

The app will directly and indirectly support the strategic priorities of early childhood development in Abu Dhabi, such as securing the mental health of children and their caregivers, nurturing positive cultural identity and social cohesion, and fostering intergenerational connections.

The ripple effect of Hikayatna will begin with individual families, scaling to schools, and ultimately reaching and connecting the Emirati community in the UAE and around the world.

For the first 2 years (short-term), the focus will be Abu Dhabi, with content partners and marketing activities

prioritizing family engagement in the emirate while the technology behind the app and its features is being enhanced. Partnerships with cultural sites will provide additional opportunities to promote the app through live experiential activations, such as Hikayatna recording booths and storytelling spaces.

Content partners:	Marketing channels:	
 Cultural experts	 Museums	 Nurseries
 Local publishers	 Heritage sites	 Schools
 Digital platform experts	 Cultural attractions	 Social media
 Media	 Family events	

In the medium-term, we will expand across the UAE, targeting all Emirati families and forming larger public-private partnerships to gain scale and momentum.

Our long-term vision is to connect all Emirati families living around the world through the interactive Hikayatna

experience, providing an important cultural bond and making it easier for them to stay connected to their heritage, wherever they are.

WED EXPERTS FOR HIKAYATNA



Anieke Lamers

Co-founder of TELL, CEO of Peek-a-bond, and Venture Partner at Borski Fund



Reem al Mansoori

Co-founder and Partner at Bani and Al Culture



Sherina AlSowaidi

Social Impact Strategist at Emirates Foundation, and Founder of Interlace Ventures



Hanan AlDarmaki

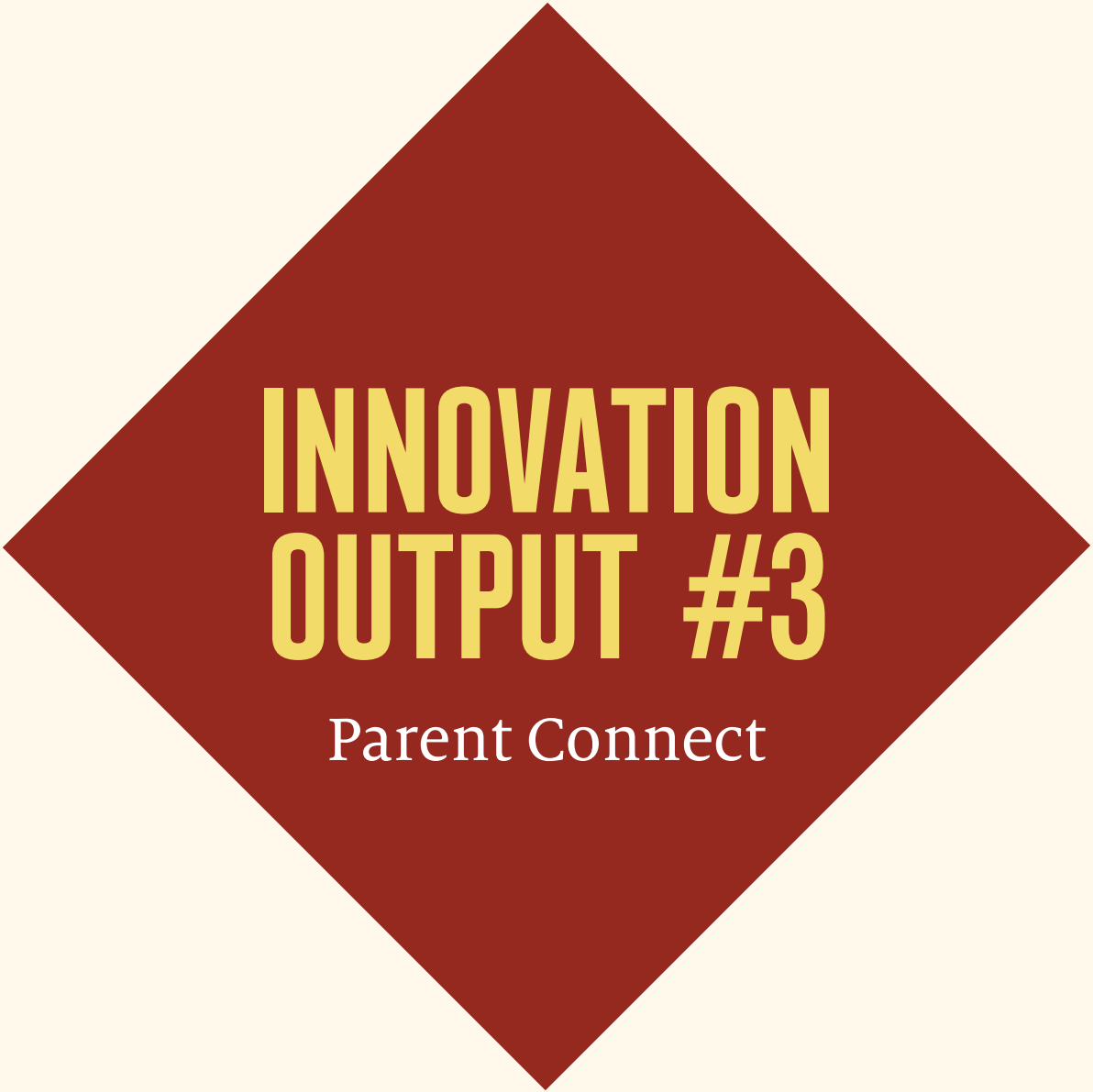
PhD, Assistant Professor of Natural Language Processing at Mohamed Bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence (MBZUAI)

With a special 'Thank You' to Cecilia Vaca Jones for the support and guidance.



Cecilia Vaca Jones

Senior Advisor to the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority and ECD Senior Council



INNOVATION OUTPUT #3

Parent Connect

POSITIVE PARENT-CHILD CONNECTIONS ARE CRUCIAL FOR HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

A child's healthy development thrives on the nurturing bond between parent and child. This positive connection shapes a child's emotional, cognitive and social growth, turning everyday moments into powerful opportunities for learning and connection.

When parents are engaged, responsive and attuned to their child's needs, they create a supportive environment that fosters resilience, confidence and lifelong well-being.

The quality of this relationship lays the foundation for a child's ability to navigate the world, build meaningful relationships, and reach their full potential.



THE FIRST
1,000
DAYS LAST A LIFETIME

TODAY, NOT ALL CHILDREN ARE GETTING AN OPTIMAL PARENTING EXPERIENCE

In today's fast-paced world, many parents in the GCC face challenges that impact their ability to engage fully in their children's early development. A significant number rely on nannies to handle daily activities, with children spending up to 70% of their week with hired caregivers. With so little time together, families often miss out on those crucial bonding moments that shape emotional and cognitive growth.

Compounding this issue, parents frequently lack essential knowledge about child development and their own role in influencing it. They are overwhelmed by information they find online, unsure what and whom to trust.

Additionally, with increasing cultural shifts, including more women joining the workforce, young mothers and fathers often struggle to define and balance their roles within the family, leading to stress and uncertainty.



60%

of parents feel stressed
due to their role as
parents⁶



48%

report a poor
knowledge of child
development⁶

This context highlights a critical need. **Parents require guidance on how to spend quality time with their children, manage stress, and access practical information that supports their child's functional**

and emotional development. Addressing these needs is vital to empowering parents to foster strong, positive connections with their children, laying the groundwork for healthier, happier futures.

⁶ ECPS Strategy (2021)

DURING THE INNOVATION LAB, WE DECIDED TO TURN THESE CHALLENGES INTO AN OPPORTUNITY

We asked ourselves, how can we empower Abu Dhabi parents to be fully engaged, through a seamless, science-backed and enjoyable experience?

Parent Connect envisions a future where everyday moments are used to connect and build strong parent-child bonds.

The multi-channel platform aims to:

- Empower parents with the confidence, skills and culturally relevant practices to meaningfully engage with their children.
- Help children thrive by supporting their functional development across key early stages.
- Foster a culture in the UAE that prioritizes happy and healthy child development, creating a supportive environment for the next generation.



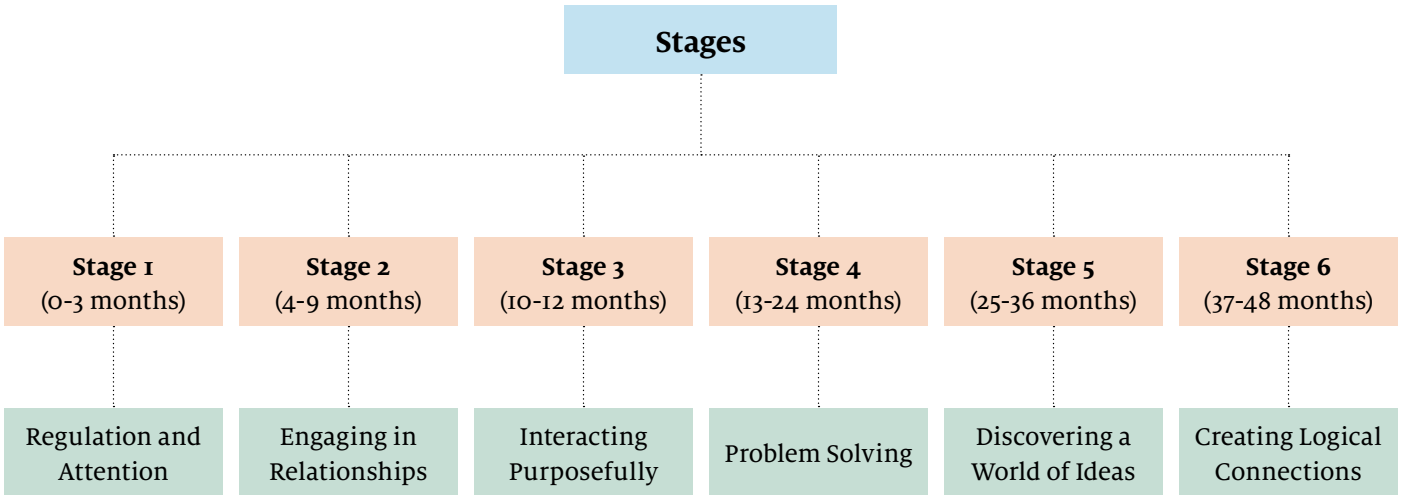
PARENT CONNECT: SUPPORTING PARENTS IN THE MONITORING OF THEIR CHILD’S FUNCTIONAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Parent Connect offers a range of easy-to-use tools to help parents interact with and promote their child’s functional and emotional development across six essential stages. Recent research highlights that vital interactions with caregivers play a crucial role in shaping a baby’s brain development.



Stanley Greenspan created a functional development growth chart, also referred to as the Greenspan Developmental, Individual-differences, Relationship-based (DIR) Model. It includes an easy-to-use checklist

designed to observe children's developmental progress through an understanding of their developmental needs, individual differences, and the importance of relationships.

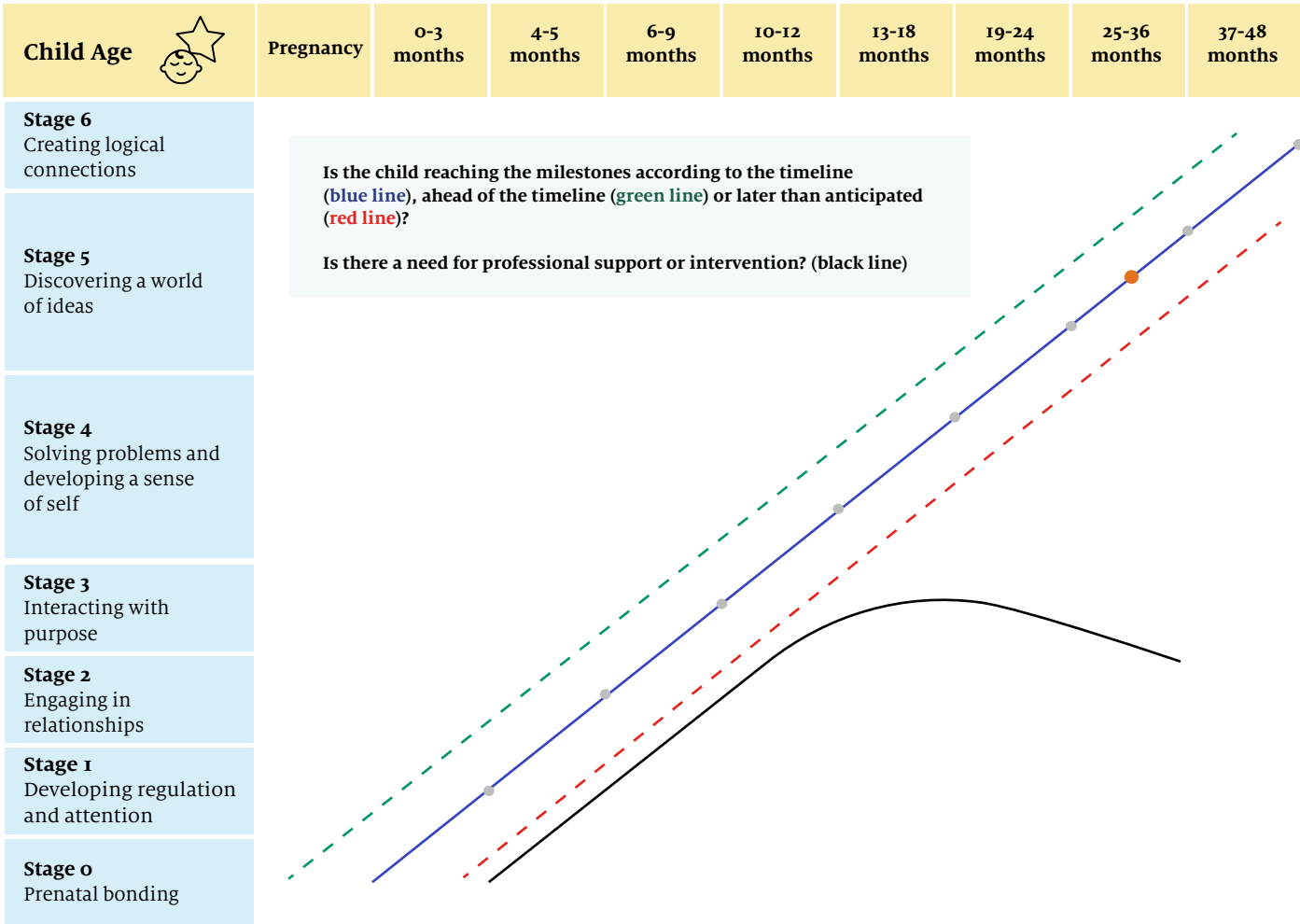
The functional development growth chart covers six progressive stages of early childhood development:



EACH STAGE INCLUDES A SUMMARY OF THE EXPECTED DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES, WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO ASSESS THEM, WHAT ARE SOME GROWTH-ORIENTED PRACTICES AND THE MOST COMMON PITFALLS

 Child Age	 Child Functional Development Stages	
Pregnancy	Stage 0 Parental bonding	The emotional connection between parent and child that begins before birth, laying the foundation for future development
0-3 months	Stage 1 Developing regulation and attention	The ability of the child to manage emotions and focus on specific stimuli, crucial for self-control and learning
4-9 months	Stage 2 Engaging in relationships	The development of basic social interactions, where the child begins to form bonds and connect with caregivers and others
10-12 months	Stage 3 Interacting with purpose	The child starts to use gestures, sounds and actions to communicate needs and intentions, reflecting early problem-solving skills
13-24 months	Stage 4 Solving problems and developing a sense of self	The child begins to tackle challenges independently and develops an awareness of their individuality and capabilities
25-36 months	Stage 5 Discovering a world of ideas	The child explores and understands abstract concepts, using language and imagination to navigate his/her environment
37-48 months	Stage 6 Creating logical connections	The ability to connect different concepts and thoughts, enabling more complex reasoning and problem-solving

PARENT CONNECT WILL HELP UNDERSTAND AND MONITOR THE CHILD’S DEVELOPMENT, LOOKING AT WHETHER THE PROGRESS IS ON TRACK OR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT IS REQUIRED



Greenspan, S. I., and Lewis, N. B. (1999). Building Healthy Minds: The six experiences that create intelligence and emotional growth in babies and young children

WHO IS DR. STANLEY GREENSPAN?

Dr. Stanley Greenspan (1941–2010) was an influential child psychiatrist, clinical professor of Psychiatry, Behavioral Science, and Pediatrics, and a pioneer in the field of child development. He is best known for creating the Developmental, Individual-differences, and Relationship-based (DIR) model, which includes the Floortime approach. This approach focuses on building healthy relationships and emotional connections as a foundation for children’s learning and development.

Greenspan’s work significantly reshaped our understanding of emotional and cognitive growth in

infants and young children. He emphasised the importance of early experiences, parental engagement, and tailored, responsive interactions to promote emotional and intellectual development. His book, “Building Healthy Minds,” outlines six key experiences that foster intelligence and emotional growth in children. Greenspan’s theories continue to impact practices in education, mental health, and parenting, helping professionals and parents better support children with developmental challenges.

LET'S EXPLORE...

At each Stage, Parent Connect will:

1. Introduce the developmental stage and its milestones, using simple everyday language
2. Highlight why parent-child interaction is important
3. Detail a set of caregiving behaviors and culturally adapted games that parents can undertake to support and promote their child's functional development
4. Explain signs that confirm progress or alert concerns
5. Show how to take confident action when additional support is needed

Parent Connect will allow parents to chart developmental milestones with evidence-backed visual tools, similar to how they track physical growth through height and weight

charts. Just as physical development can vary within a typical range, so too can emotional and functional development.

As the child grows and develops, parents can chart their child's actual mastery of each milestone in relation to the age when the achievement is expected to emerge. A precocious child may be three months ahead of the expected timeline, and their development line will be above and parallel to the expected average. Similarly, a child who is a little behind the expected timeline will have a line that is parallel to and below the average. Your child may need a little more practice. If a child's progress is not parallel, but arcs down and away from the average, it is important to seek immediate assessment.

For example:

STAGE 1 - REGULATION AND ATTENTION [0-3M]

By 3m - Security, ability to look, listen, and be calm - Becoming interested in and attentive to people, things, sights and sounds

Stage summary	The baby uses their senses of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell to process sensory and motor information.
Baby's stage of development	A baby now: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is already absorbing all the sensory information around them, and parents' relationship with them, providing them with a sense of security.• Is growing neural connections in areas of brain involved with emotions and relating and connecting vision with other senses, motor skills and creating patterns related to looking, listening, moving, smiling, crying.• Has an activated pre-verbal communication system in their brain.• Begins to feel a sense of belonging in their relationships and can differentiate between interactions with people with interactions with objects.• Learns that their mother/father are patient and will not abandon them, even when they are sleepy or have an upset stomach.• Understand, even before they can speak, that they are valued and appreciated. This is when positive self-esteem begins to develop.
Why security and calm attention are important	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The more they can make use of information from all their senses, the calmer and more regulated they will feel. This ability will help them organize their senses, motor responses and create a sense of security.
Growth-oriented practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do discover how your child's sense work. What sights, sounds, touch, and movements bring them pleasure and delight? Which sense keep them calm and foster their interest and attention? Do they prefer soft or loud sounds? Slow or fast rhythms? Bright lights and complex designs or soft lights and smile patterns?• Explore each sense and create experiences tailored to their unique nervous system.• Do help them use their muscles to turn their head, stick out their tongue, cuddle and move their arms and legs in rhythm with your voice.
Common pitfalls	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoid overstimulating your baby with exciting mobiles, rattles, music boxes or toys...babies like to be calm sometimes.• Avoid leaving them to passively gaze at the world on their own.• Avoid letting the baby cry alone, e.g., in an attempt to sleep-train them, instead try calming and soothing your child through cuddles and/or rocking.

STAGE 1 - REGULATION AND ATTENTION [0-3M]

Activities and Games

1	Soothe me game <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hold your baby when they cry. Make soft sounds near baby's ear. Sometimes help your baby calm down by wrapping them snugly in a light blanket with their arms close to their body. Sing to them. For a while after they've calmed down, hold your baby close. Look and smile at them. Talk softly. When the baby cries, assess their needs: wet, hungry, tired, or seeking comfort? 	WHY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gently soothing your baby strengthens the bond and fosters security. It stimulates their senses and aids sensory development. This responsiveness helps parents understand and meet their baby's needs effectively.
2	Look and listen together (e.g., 'follow the bee' game) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hold your index finger near the baby's face, buzzing like a bee. See if the baby follows as you move your finger around, then gently land it on their nose. Enjoy laughing and having fun together! 	WHY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops visual coordination by tracking moving objects Improves listening skills by linking buzzing sounds with the bee's movements. Stimulates cognitive growth with integrated visual, auditory, and sensory stimuli.
3	Sing to baby <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sing a song to the baby in a soft and soothing voice. They will enjoy hearing you sing! You can also help your baby learn to listen by tuning in their reactions to different sounds. 	WHY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A soft and soothing song relaxes the baby, providing comfort and security. Engages their senses. Promotes cognitive and emotional development.
4	Imitate baby's sounds <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listen to the sounds your baby makes. Repeat the sounds back to them. See if they respond. Smile and show you enjoy their sounds – "Babies can talk!" 	WHY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourages bonding through shared communication. Values the baby's sounds. Stimulates cognitive development through listening and imitation.
5	Chat with baby <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talk to your baby constantly—during changing, feeding, and bath time. Describe your actions and narrate what your baby is doing. 	WHY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthens bonding. Promotes early language skills through regular conversation.
6	Touch, love, and hug <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hold, cuddle, hug, and rock your baby lovingly. Give them kisses and express your love (this remains relevant across all other stages - the more the better). Research shows that soothing touch releases growth hormones and reduces stress, and babies who receive massages twice a week have lower cortisol levels. 	WHY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Boosts the baby's self-esteem. Makes the baby feel cherished.

DEVELOPMENTAL GAMES AND EXERCISES

Parent Connect provides a series of concise messages and brief audiovisual clips, each 2-3 minutes long, aimed at helping parents support their child's development. The messages and clips will be available in Arabic and English, covering a range of topics rooted in scientific research.

The platform will distill complex child development concepts into accessible, culturally relevant content that resonates with today's digitally engaged parents.

Parents will have access to tailored and recommended interactions or games designed to promote their child's development.

Soothe me game



Face to face game with baby in which you smile and talk to them.

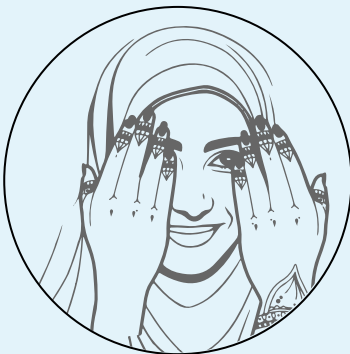
Face-to-face game



You smile and talk to your baby about his lips, eyes, and nose and move your face right and left to capture the baby's attention.

**Parent
Connect**

Peek-a-boo!



Cover your face and uncover and say "Peek-a-boo"

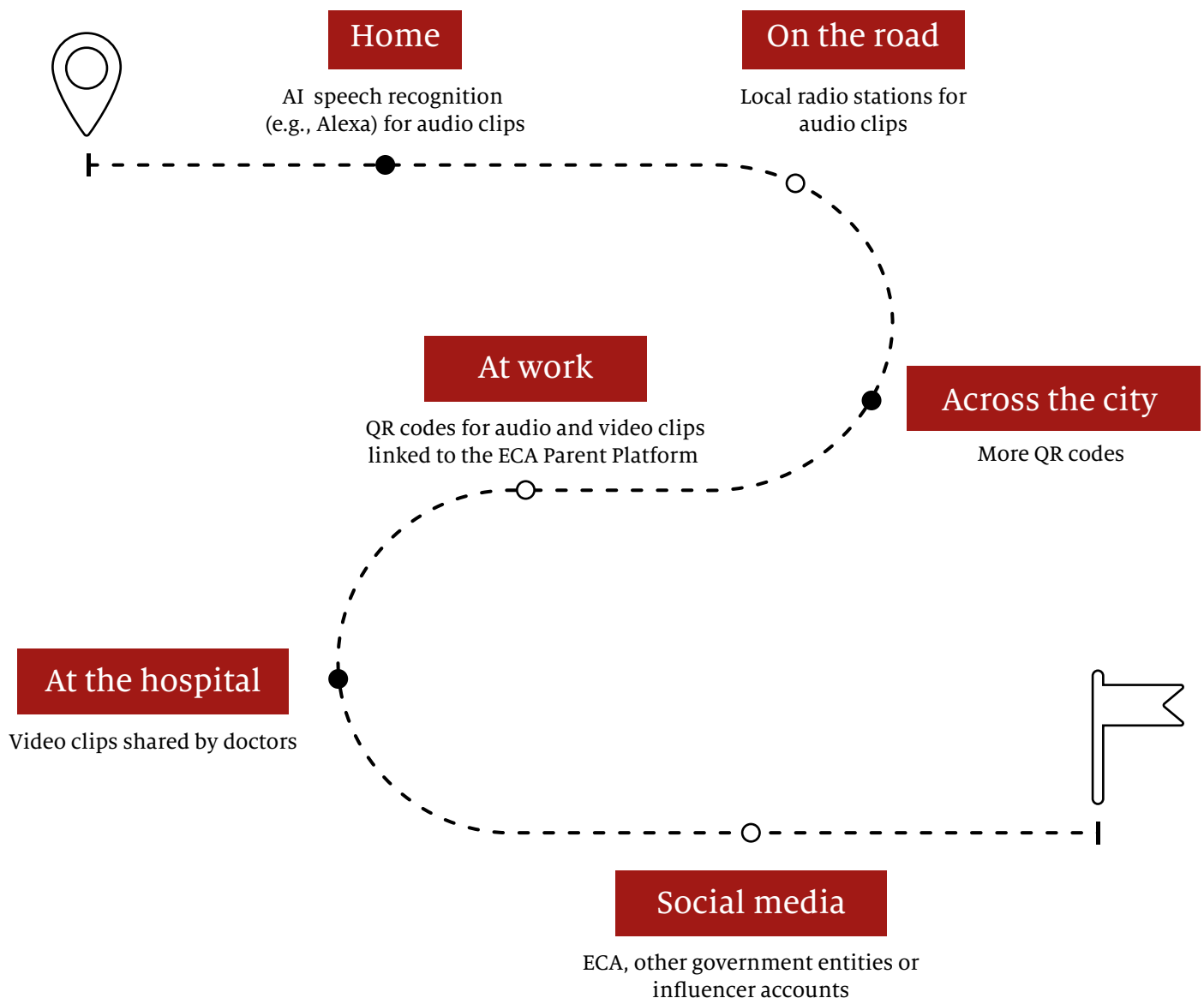
Sharing a book



Follow the baby's gaze and point to pictures as you name them. Wait for the baby to touch something on the page, then name and talk about that item.

HOW WILL WE REACH PARENTS? LET'S GET ON A PARENT DAILY JOURNEY...

Parent Connect aims to meet the parents where they are. From developing an AI voice recognition system for the home to leveraging social media and saturating the ecosystem through different prompts that can support them through their journey, parents will always be covered!



PARENT CONNECT WILL THRIVE THROUGH A COLLABORATIVE ECOSYSTEM AND EVIDENCE-DRIVEN EXPANSION

To achieve its mission, Parent Connect is collaborating with a range of stakeholders, including healthcare providers, educational institutions, and community organisations. Each partner plays a crucial role in content dissemination, stakeholder engagement, and ensuring alignment with regional needs. By leveraging these partnerships, Parent Connect will not only reach parents effectively but also foster a collaborative approach to early childhood development in the entire ecosystem of Abu Dhabi.

The team developed Parent Connect to be scalable in an interactive test-and-learn manner, based on usage patterns and parent feedback. We are planning to add new

elements that will enrich and complement the experience for families. Some ideas include:

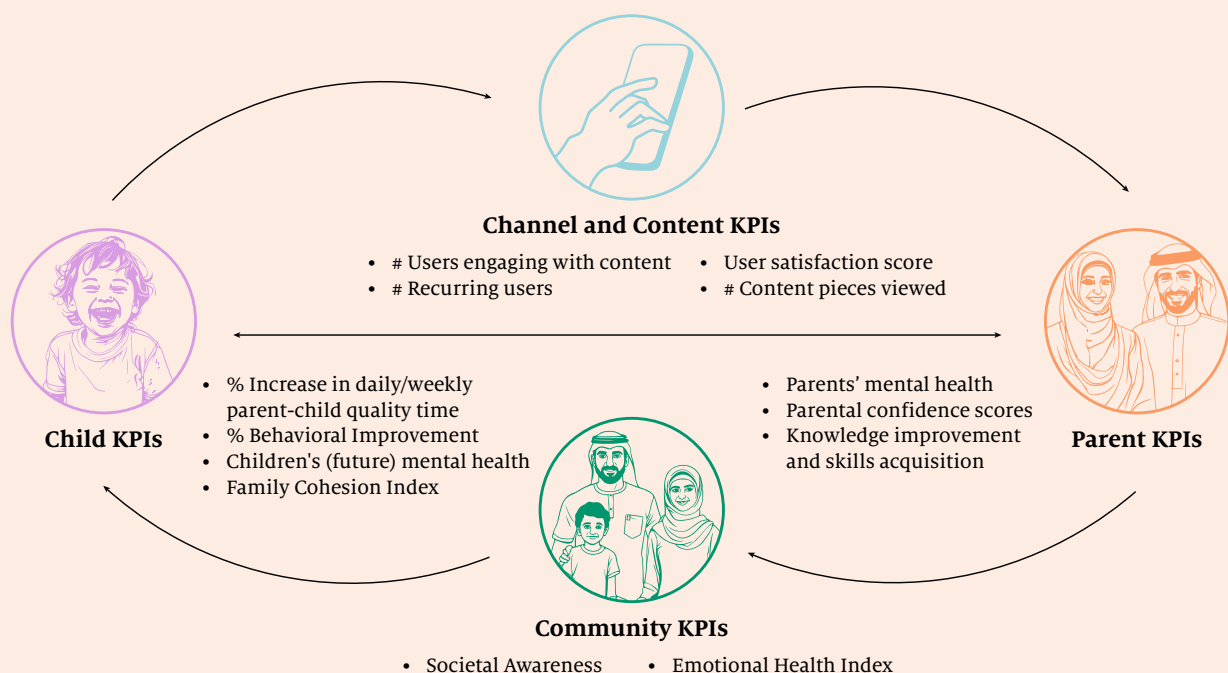
Expert communication	Direct channel or private chat with paediatricians through the parenting platform
Offline community	Focus groups and organized activities in an offline environment
Online community	Parent forums and communities to share ideas and support each other
Special needs	Personalization and support for children and parents with special needs
Rewards	Special items for subscribers to complement activities and celebrate milestones
Creative tools	Thematic journals or checklists, expanding the library of physical materials

HOW WE WILL MEASURE AND TRACK THE IMPACT OF PARENT CONNECT

Imagine a tool designed not just to inform, but to transform. It begins with engaging content and culminates in a ripple effect of positive change across families and communities. At its core, this tool operates on a robust framework of KPIs, carefully crafted to measure success at every layer: from individual users to society as a whole.

The journey starts with the Channel and Content KPIs, where success is first defined by how effectively the tool connects with its audience. But the impact doesn't stop at clicks and views. As parents engage, the tool begins to touch lives in profound ways.

- Parent KPIs track shifts in mental health, confidence, and skills, capturing a narrative of empowerment. Parents become more resilient, informed, and equipped to navigate their complex roles, leading to healthier family dynamics. These improvements in parents naturally cascade down to their children, where the next layer of impact unfolds.
- Child KPIs reveal transformations in behavior, mental health, and the quality of time spent with parents. Families find themselves more connected, sharing meaningful moments that shape the future. Children grow in environments that nurture well-being, leading to better emotional and social development.
- The real magic, however, is how these individual changes accumulate to affect society at large. Community KPIs, such as societal awareness and the Emotional Health Index, demonstrate that when parents and children thrive, communities flourish. Improved emotional health and cohesion become the new norm, creating a society that values and supports its members at every level.



This platform, through its carefully monitored outcomes, has the potential to create lasting changes, not just within individual households but across entire communities. It is a testament to the power of intentional,

data-driven interventions. Beginning with a single piece of content, it ripples outward, touching lives in the most meaningful way.

WED EXPERTS FOR PARENT CONNECT



Michele Borba

PhD, Educational Psychologist,
Author, and Parenting Expert



Mary Young

MD, PhD, Assistant Clinical Professor
at Yale Child Study Center, and
Advisor at Hupan Modou Foundation



Alessandra Schneider

PhD, Developmental Psychologist
and Global Expert in Early Childhood
Development and Parenting,
Consultant at Van Leer Foundation



Nancy Merheb

Senior ECD Expert, Abu Dhabi Early
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Parc Sen Loke


Relationship and Parenting /
Fathering Coach at LPS strategies

With a special 'Thank You' to Cecilia Vaca Jones for the support and guidance.



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Early Childhood Authority and
ECD Senior Council



INNOVATION OUTPUT #4

National Center for
Children and
Families

THE VOICES OF CHILDREN ARE GROWING LOUDER

The world is undergoing monumental disruptions—climate change, emerging technologies, globalization, and the widening economic divide—forces that are reshaping societies in profound ways. While leaders and ecosystem players worldwide scramble to adapt, one crucial perspective is becoming impossible to ignore: the eyes of a child. The youngest members of society, who will inherit the future, are no longer accepting being overlooked when decisions are made about the world they will grow up in.

But closing this gap is no small feat. Across the globe, children are often excluded or misrepresented when it comes to data collection and problem-solving processes that directly affect them. As a result, their voices and

perspectives are seldom prioritized. This disconnect has far-reaching consequences, from policies that miss the mark to educational systems that fail to nurture children's full potential.



CHALLENGES THAT NEED URGENT RESOLUTIONS

- **Children as Marginalized Stakeholders:** Children are rarely recognized as primary stakeholders in decisions that directly concern their well-being. The systems designed to protect and empower them frequently fall short of addressing their real needs. This exclusion perpetuates a cycle where adults make decisions based on assumptions rather than the lived experiences of the children they intend to serve.
- **Inaccurate Representation in Data:** The data collected about children lacks standardized guidelines and child-friendly data collection methodologies. Without intentional, child-inclusive data collection, we risk perpetuating a one-sided narrative that fails to address core issues affecting young lives.
- **Barriers to Innovation in Early Childhood Development:** Innovation requires agility and openness to change. Despite the growing recognition of ECD's importance, fresh, child-centered approaches sometimes face hurdles and delays due to outdated regulations, systems and processes.
- **Tertiary Education's Disconnect:** Tertiary education, which shapes the professionals and leaders of tomorrow, often fails to integrate the child's perspective and needs across disciplines. Whether in psychology, education, public policy, or other fields, the child's viewpoint is rarely considered a critical factor in academic training and research.



TODAY, ABU DHABI HAS AN AMBITIOUS VISION TO DEVELOP NEW INNOVATIONS AND REDEFINE THE GLOBAL ECD AGENDA

Abu Dhabi has already pioneered a number of child-centric innovations, but more needs to be done to consolidate and scale that progress. By leading the way in reimagining how societies interact with and support children, the emirate aims to ensure that children's voices are not just heard but actively shape the systems that impact their lives.

Abu Dhabi's Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector is dedicated to ensuring every young child can reach their full potential within a safe and family-friendly environment.

Guided by the ECD Strategy 2035, the focus areas include Health and Nutrition, Early Care and Education, Family Support, and Child Protection. The strategy aims to create a robust ecosystem that promotes accountability and continuous quality improvement while ensuring access to services that support optimal child development.

Early Childhood Authority (ECA) in Abu Dhabi was established in 2019, through a decree issued by His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the then President of the UAE and Ruler of Abu Dhabi. It aims to develop and implement comprehensive policies and programs that ensure the holistic growth and development of children from birth to eight years old. Today, ECA is leading numerous cross-sectoral programs to accelerate impact on ECD sector within the emirate, including but not limited to:

- Strengthen ECD research and the child protection system
- Deliver capable workforce and drive innovation
- Enhance public engagement, partnerships, and support for caregivers
- Nurture positive cultural identity and social cohesion

In addition to this, the emirate established the National Academy for Childhood Development with the mandate to offer professional and tertiary educational programs for ECD practitioners and provide consultancy services and applied research focused on child development. The academy aims to develop capabilities of workers, parents and caregivers in the field of childhood, focusing on the Arabic language and national identity. For example, it offers an accredited 18-month Vocational Diploma in Childhood Development.

Complementing and expanding on local efforts, ECA hosts the World Early Childhood Development (WED) Forum, a leading global platform in Abu Dhabi that unites experts, policymakers, educators, and practitioners to advance early childhood development worldwide. The forum fosters collaboration, showcases innovative solutions, and influences policy and practice by highlighting cutting-edge research, successful interventions, and multi-sectoral approaches. As a catalyst for change, the WED Forum drives global efforts to create supportive environments that promote optimal child development and well-being.



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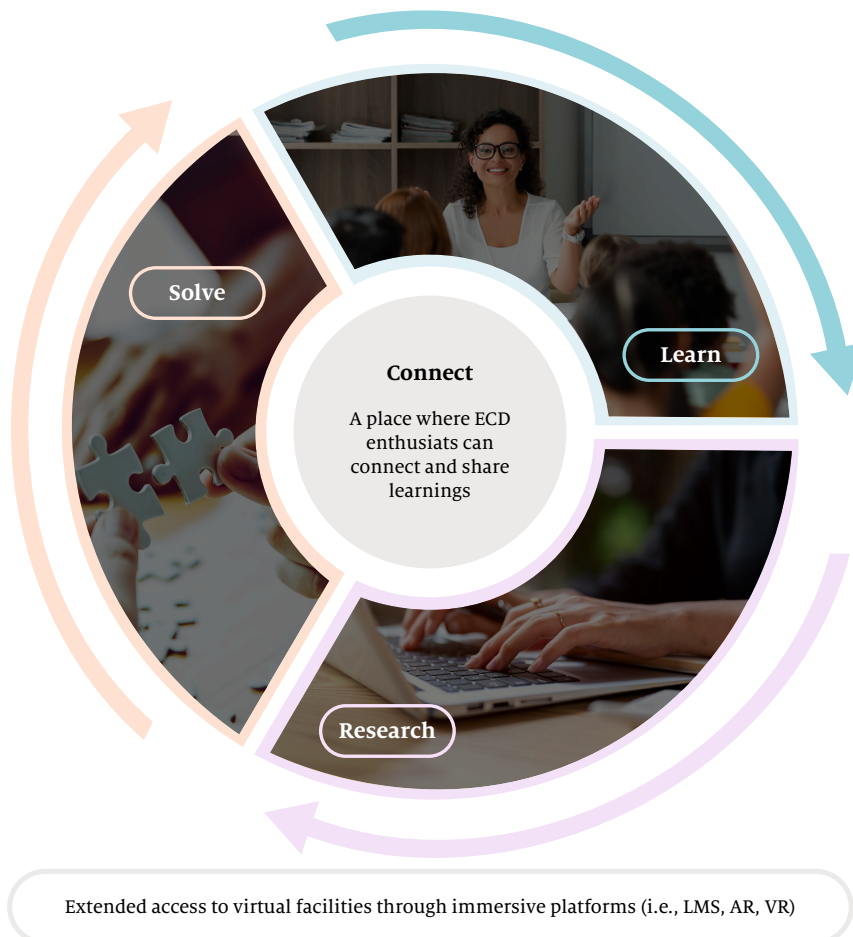
To advance these efforts further, the ECA is seeking to expand the ECD learnings and focus on the child as a main stakeholder, across every other sector and/or discipline. This will enable every practitioner, from urban designers to lawyers, to design products, services, and generate learnings taking into consideration the child's specific needs.

DURING THE INNOVATION LAB, WE DECIDED TO THINK BIG AND BOLD

We asked ourselves: How might we co-develop a cross-sectoral platform that creates sustainable environments for families and children to thrive?

ECA has a vision to revolutionize the field of Early Childhood Development (ECD) by providing a physical (physical and digital), trans-sectoral space at the forefront of research, innovation, and design. It aims to solve for cross-sectoral, systemic, and wicked 'glocal' challenges through a family-centric lens, optimizing children's well-being.

Our WED experts imagined an independent ideation, innovation, and co-creation space designed to revolutionize how we address ECD challenges. This ambitious initiative will unite diverse stakeholders—researchers, educators, policymakers, and innovators—to collaboratively research, learn, solve, and accelerate child-centric solutions.



The Center will focus on delivering three main service offerings:

- 1. Research and development:** Provide advanced research experience and opportunity to students and global scholars along with financial support, mentorship, cross-sectoral exchange, and access to resources to design innovative solutions, develop thought leadership, and generate new child-centric evidence.
- 2. Professional development:** Provide tailored opportunities for families, childcare providers and practitioners across sectors to develop and advance skills in a variety of areas, such as urban planning, architecture, and product design.
- 3. Solution venturing and prototyping:** Provide professionals, young leaders, students and researchers with the resources and support needed to develop innovative solutions to real-world problems, including rigorous testing and prototyping of ideas.



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Designing this Center is a bold and visionary journey—one that must seamlessly weave together the future trends in learning and problem-solving with the invaluable insights drawn from diverse educational and research models around the world. It calls for a forward-thinking approach that not only embraces cutting-edge innovations but also grounds them in real-world applications.

The aim is to craft an innovative model that is not just visionary, but also actionable and tailored to the unique context in which it operates. By integrating global best practices with local relevance, this endeavor aims to set a new standard in education and research, creating a dynamic platform that empowers future generations to tackle the world's most pressing challenges.

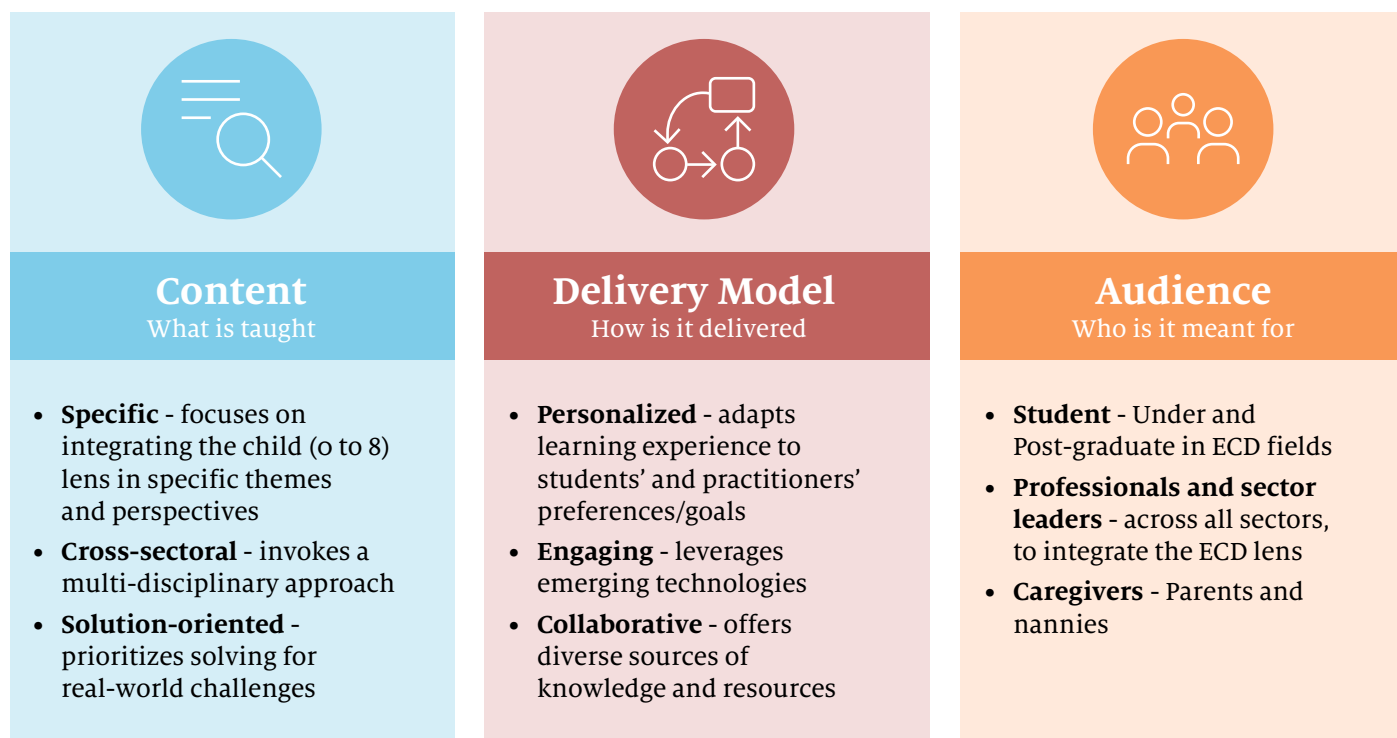
ADAPTING EDUCATION TO THE MEGA-TRENDS OF TOMORROW

Our vision for the Center embraces curiosity and agility in how we approach knowledge sharing and learning for the benefit of early childhood development.

Emerging mega-trends are reshaping how we learn, prompting a fundamental shift in the design and delivery of education and research programs. Rapid technological advancements, sectoral convergence, localization, and the imperative for sustainability are redefining traditional boundaries and creating new opportunities in education. Central to these changes is data-driven personalization, which tailors learning experiences to meet individual needs, driving a student-centered approach that extends beyond traditional classrooms and throughout life.

These transformative forces are leading to innovative models of learning, including digitized, virtual, and **personalized formats** that emphasize hands-on, project-based, and experiential learning. A la carte education, just-in-time learning and project-based learning are some of the emerging trends. The integration of formal and informal learning environments is breaking down traditional barriers, while evolving policies and standards are aligning with these shifts. Success metrics are also being redefined to prioritize outcomes, fostering education systems that are adaptable, inclusive, and future-ready.

The Center's approach to the future of learning



This evolution demands a reimagining of what is taught, how it is delivered, and who it serves. With this in mind, the Center's approach to education will be specific, cross-sectoral, multi-disciplinary and solution-oriented,

integrating the child's perspective to address real-world challenges. Learning will be personalized, engaging, and collaborative, leveraging emerging technologies to adapt to diverse goals.



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Designed for students, professionals, and caregivers, this approach will bridge the gap between theory and action and embed the ECD lens into every aspect of learning, empowering all stakeholders to shape a better future for the youngest members of society.

TURNING GLOBAL EXAMPLES INTO ACTIONABLE INSIGHT

To bring our vision to life, we have explored a range of models that span from targeted research initiatives to the establishment of a fully-fledged independent university.

Each model offers unique opportunities to integrate the child-centric approach into education and research, addressing global ECD challenges. Options include a dedicated Research Fund that supports projects embedding the child's lens across various disciplines, expanding within the National Academy for Childhood Development (NACD) to influence non-ECD sectors, creating a dedicated

lab within local universities, establishing a Center of Excellence that collaborates with local and global entities, and ultimately, developing an Independent University focused on child-centric learning and innovation.

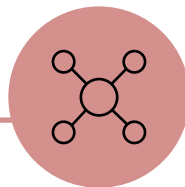
These diverse models provide a spectrum of possibilities to scale our impact, from localized efforts to influencing global educational standards.



Research Fund

Funding research projects that **integrate the lens of the child into non-ECD discipline**

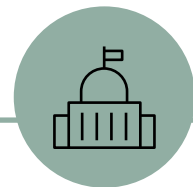
Under the mandate of an ECD Research Council



Within the NACD

Expanding NACD's scope to **address child-centricity in non-ECD sectors**

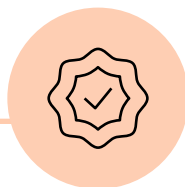
Under the mandate of the Early Childhood Authority



Within a Local University

Establishing a school or **college within a renowned local university**

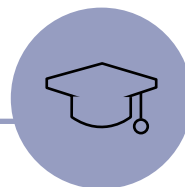
Under the mandate of Khalifa University or others



Center of Excellence

Establishing an **independent entity** that collaborates with global and local entities on specific themes/offerings

Under the mandate of Abu Dhabi government departments



Independent University

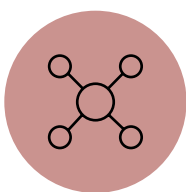
Establishing a **fully-fledged university** that brings educational offerings focused on child-centric learnings

Under the mandate of Ministry of Education



A **Research Fund** is a dedicated pool of financial resources allocated to support research activities in a specific field or area of interest. The primary purpose is to provide funding for innovative projects, studies, and experiments that aim to generate new knowledge, develop solutions, or advance understanding within a particular domain.

For example, a UK non-departmental public body funded by UKRI, supports social science research and training through various awards for researchers and postgraduate opportunities. It has been credited with increasing research productivity, aligning funding with societal needs, and supporting multi-disciplinary solutions, but has also faces challenges like limited implementation ownership, dependency on funding cycles, bureaucratic processes, and reliance on researchers' commitment.



The **National Academy for Childhood Development (NACD)** is an initiative aimed at enhancing the quality of early childhood development (ECD) in the UAE. The NACD focuses on building the capacity of professionals working with young children and improving ECD practices through training programs, professional certifications, and resources tailored to caregivers, educators, and sector leaders to elevate their skills and knowledge.

This model leverages the existing network and resources of NACD to expand child-centric initiatives into non-ECD sectors.

It benefits from the fast track to resources and established credibility, making it well-positioned to address national child well-being needs. However, it must remain focused on local priorities and carefully adapt global standards to fit regional contexts and existing regulations, which can limit its broader innovation potential.



Standing up a dedicated lab, center, school or college **within a local university** is a popular approach, benefiting from university funding, resources, and academic credibility. It attracts attention as part of a renowned institution, allowing it to offer integrated educational experiences.

Let's take the example of Harvard Kennedy School, a professional graduate school at Harvard University

that trains leaders for public, non-profit, and private sectors, and hosts the Center for International Development, a research hub that connects global experts to tackle pressing global challenges. The downsides of this model include high costs, bureaucratic hurdles, and potential misalignment with the university's brand identity, which can pose significant challenges, potentially hindering innovative decision-making and independence.



A **Center of Excellence** is a collaborative research and innovation hub established through partnerships between universities and industry players, aiming to leverage shared

resources, expertise, and facilities to drive cutting-edge projects and solutions across various sectors.

An example of this model is the MIT-IBM Watson AI Lab, a 10-year, \$240 million partnership that combines the strengths of academia and industry to advance AI research, explore the ethical implications of AI, and drive practical applications. It supports industry-driven projects and knowledge exchange, making it a dynamic hub for innovation.

Another example is Spaceo which operates as an independent research and design lab, funded by IKEA, dedicated to exploring and prototyping innovative solutions that address global challenges like urbanization, sustainability, and healthy living. It functions as a collaborative platform, bringing together designers, researchers, technologists, and creatives from around the world to ideate, experiment, and test new concepts.

While these models are great at accelerating innovation, they face issues with intellectual property management, balancing academic openness with the need for proprietary research, high funding demands, and potential conflicts with government directives, which may limit operational autonomy.



The **Independent University** model represents the boldest approach, creating a standalone institution dedicated exclusively to child-centric learning and research. It aims to redefine

education with a unique focus on real-world, interdisciplinary challenges which remain unaddressed in traditional academic settings.

However, this model comes with significant difficulties, including high setup costs, complex governance, and the challenge of maintaining independence and sustainability. It also faces the task of defining a new standard for education that bridges global innovations with local needs.

Some of the most prominent examples include London Interdisciplinary School (LIS) and Singularity

University. LIS is a pioneering UK-based university that blends multiple disciplines to tackle complex global issues, offering students a hands-on, project-based education that draws on subjects ranging from science and technology to the humanities. In contrast, Singularity University, based in Silicon Valley, focuses on exponential technologies and their potential to solve humanity's grand challenges, providing immersive programs that blend technology, entrepreneurship, and futurist thinking. While LIS emphasizes a broad, interdisciplinary academic approach to learning, Singularity University centers on technological innovation and its transformative impact on society, making both institutions unique in preparing students to navigate and shape an increasingly complex world.

Each of the options has significant pros and cons, requiring careful deliberation and constructive debate among different stakeholders before we decide on the best way forward. Going through this extensive benchmarking

exercise has equipped us with the knowledge and the tools to make informed decisions, anticipate challenges, and take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

DESIGNING A HUB FOR INNOVATION AND GROWTH

The Center aims to become a transformative space where cutting-edge ideas, research, and technology converge to shape a better tomorrow.

Its journey will begin by defining the themes of focus which aim to address systemic wicked challenges, such as the impact of climate change on children's well-being. To become this catalyst for systemic change, the Center

will require the convergence and collaboration between sectors, experts, educators, and innovators to develop solutions that address the evolving needs of children in an ever-changing world.

Global strategic partnerships will be vital to the success of this entity, with partners carefully selected based on key criteria to ensure alignment and maximize strategic impact:



International Recognition

Benefit from international recognition and engagement of key global players in a specific field or theme of focus



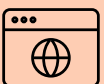
Tangible Success

Prove success and creation of tangible impact in the relevant service category



Accessibility to Experts and Researchers

Show commitment and interest in advancing knowledge and research, with a broad network of ECD, care and theme-specific experts and researchers



Advanced Functional Capabilities

Offer advanced capabilities that can't be easily replicated, through which the network can create cost and time efficiencies

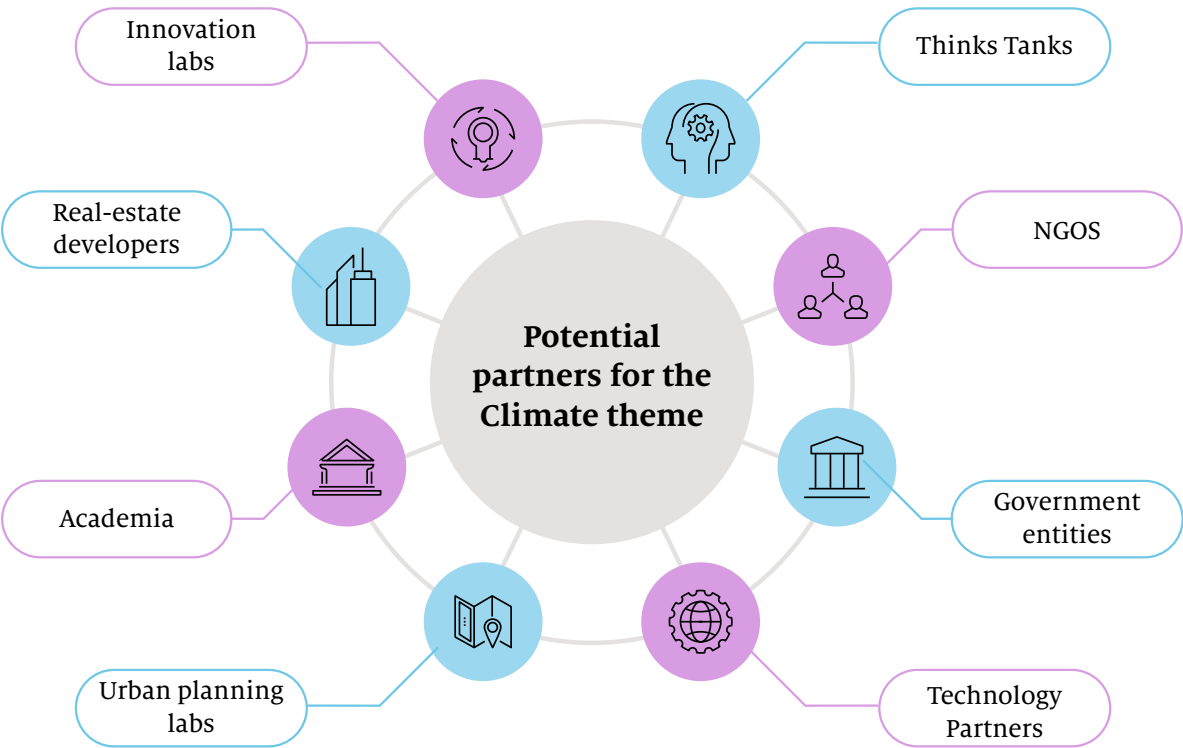


Collaboration and Innovation

Foster innovation and collaboration, showcasing an agile operating model that allows the regular expansion of capabilities and outreach



FOR EXAMPLE, THE POTENTIAL PARTNERS FOR THE CLIMATE THEME WOULD INCLUDE



Thinks tanks	NGO	Government entities	Technology partners
			 
Innovation labs	Real-estate developers	Academia	Urban planning labs
 	 	 	 

This Center’s success will also rely heavily on **digital and technology enablers**:

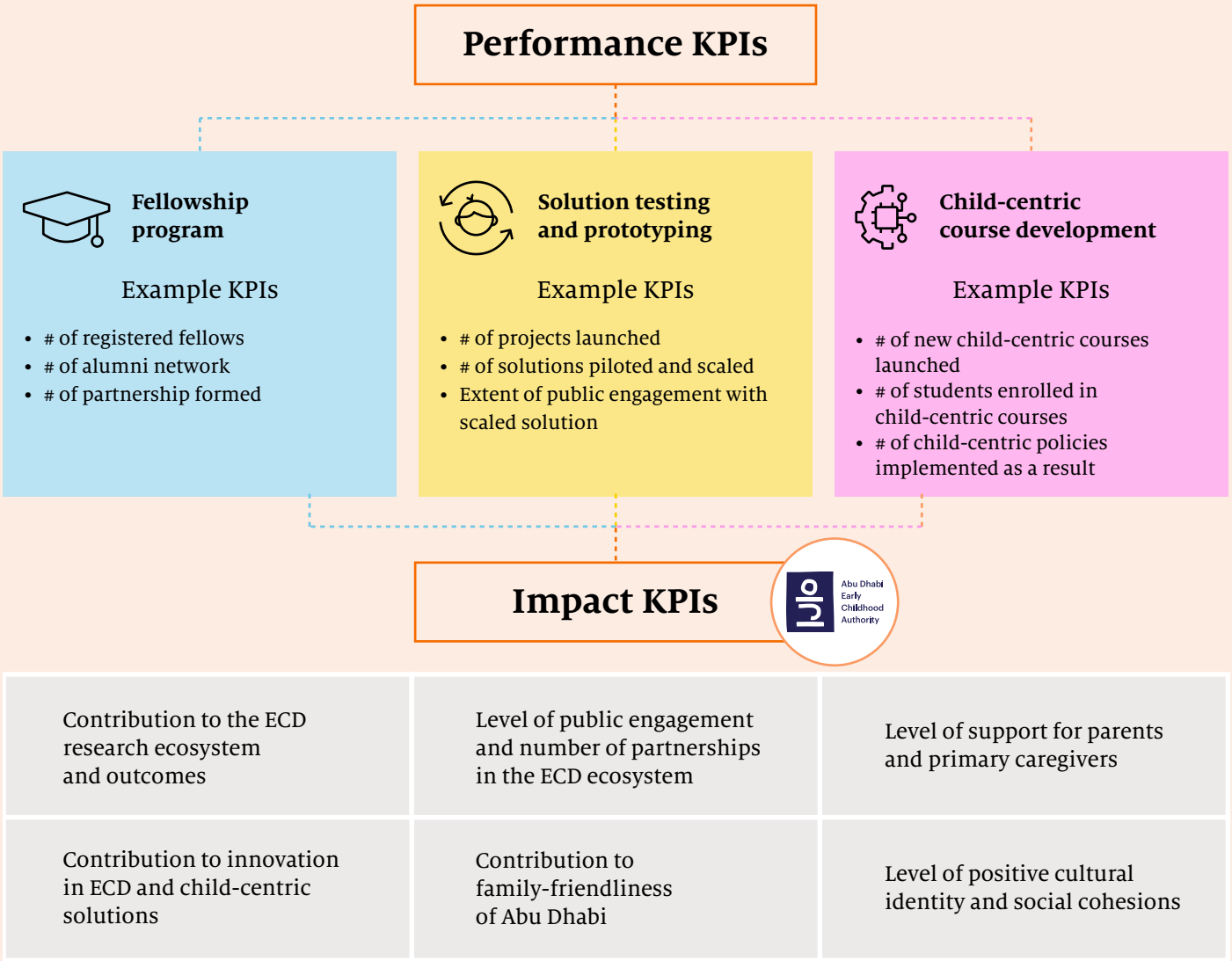
- **Digital simulators:** These controlled, immersive environments will replicate real-world learning scenarios, allowing for innovation, testing, and the refinement of innovative solutions before full-scale implementation. By enabling educators and researchers to experiment with different strategies and outcomes in a risk-free setting, digital simulators will drive forward-thinking, experiential learning tailored to children’s evolving needs.
 - **Knowledge hub:** This digital knowledge platform will serve as a one-stop shop for global collaboration, connecting educators, researchers, and innovators from across the world. By facilitating real-time knowledge
- exchange and collective problem-solving, it will foster a diverse, multi-disciplinary approach to solving global challenges, making it a powerful tool for global impact.

 - **AI-powered blockchain education:** Using advanced AI algorithms, the platform will dynamically adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of individual learners. Verified and stored on the blockchain, it will provide transparency, security, and adaptability, offering a truly personalized learning experience that evolves with each student’s progress.

HOW WE WILL MEASURE AND TRACK THE IMPACT OF THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The success of this entity will be driven by a clear set of performance and impact KPIs, aligned with the visionary goals of ECD Strategy 2035. Through its Research Program, Solution Testing and Prototyping, and Child-Centric Course Development, the Center will foster an ecosystem of innovation and collaboration.

Measurable outcomes—such as the number of fellows, projects launched, and child-centric courses introduced—will reflect its immediate progress.



More importantly, its lasting impact will be seen in contributions to the ECD research landscape, public engagement, support for caregivers, and the promotion of cultural identity and social cohesion.

Together, these efforts will create a family-friendly environment that nurtures the growth and well-being of future generations in Abu Dhabi and beyond.

WED EXPERTS FOR NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES



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Director and Urban Anthropologist
at Gehl



Sridevi Raghavan

Senior Vice President of Education,
Quality and Sustainability at Babilou
Family, and co-President at Babilou
Family Foundation



Andre Shearer

Founder and Chairman at
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Samuel Veissiere

PhD, Adjunct Professor in Psychology
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Montreal (UQAM), and Clinician-
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Marcela Sabino

AI Strategist and Business Consultant
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Technology Expert, Chief Data
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With a special 'Thank You' to Cecilia Vaca Jones and Dr Mary Young for their guidance and advice.



Cecilia Vaca Jones

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Mary Young

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and Advisor at Hupan Modou
Foundation



THE FUTURE OF EARLY YEARS INNOVATION: ARE YOU IN?

The WED innovation process of the last 18 months has taught us the importance of local and international collaboration, evidence-led experimentation, and adaptability—all driven by our mission of **redefining the global perspective on early childhood development by prioritizing the child and their eco-system.**

We invite governments, public and private organizations, industry experts, ECD advocates and the public to join our movement to create a future where all children can thrive.

We would love to hear from those who are interested in learning more about our work to date, so please reach out to discuss ideas, projects and potential collaborations.

eca.gov.ae/wed-movement

wed@eca.gov.ae

Find Abu Dhabi ECA and
WED Movement on



