When does "education" start? Although formal schooling usually starts at the age of six, learning begins at birth.

Kindergarten students at Ban Phon Phang School in Kalasin province engage in morning exercises before classes.


SIRISAK CHAIYASOOK/UNESCO

Humans are born with 100 billion brain cells, which begin connecting immediately, yielding up to 1,000 trillion (or one sextillion) connections.

Research shows that good nutrition, positive stimulation, affection and a safe environment influence how the cells connect, and that once developed, the brain is much harder to modify.

**Building the proper foundation**

Significant brain development occurs during early childhood, particularly during the first three years of life, and 75 percent of brain development takes place during the first six years of life.

That is why early childhood represents a window of opportunity for the lifetime development of a child. Quality early-childhood care and education (ECCE) enhances the health, social and cognitive development of youngsters.

It also promotes equity and inclusion because ECCE helps children from poor families, or in disadvantaged situations, to start primary education on an equal footing with children of more-affluent families.
**Impact on future success**

James Heckman, a Nobel Prize winner in economics, found that nurturing, learning experiences and physical health in early childhood greatly impacted on a person’s success or failure in society, and that it is more beneficial and cost-effective to prevent health, social and learning problems through quality ECCE than to tackle such problems through remedial measures later on.

Mr Heckman’s analysis reveals that investment in the early-childhood development of disadvantaged children provides 10 percent more benefit each year to society through increased personal achievement and productivity.

In 2008, 86 percent of Thai children between three and five were enrolled in pre-primary education, according to Unesco statistics.

Thailand has made significant efforts to improve ECCE services, as evidenced in its 1999 National Education Act, which recognises that early-childhood education begins from birth and continues to the age of five.

Dr Saisunee Chutikul, a member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and a former adviser to the prime minister, said: "We have to help children from birth to use their senses to the fullest, to be able to think, and to express their feelings. They must not be forced to sit and listen all the time, to answer the teacher's questions and not be able to think critically, creatively, and independently."

The Act reflects the government’s 1997 assessment of the benefits of ECCE services, which concluded that teaching needs to be more child-centred and play-based. The legislation led to the establishment of early-childhood learning laboratories nationwide. Thinking outside the box

Chayaniti Brady, a specialist in ECCE who runs over 20 private child development centres in Bangkok, said: "Children can learn more through activities that they enjoy. To develop academic skills, an academic approach is not required.

For example, a child can develop maths skills through playing with jigsaw puzzles as they develop grouping skills, by sorting the pieces into corners, edges and centre groups and learn how to work systematically by building the corners and edges first before using the centre pieces."

Parents are also becoming more aware of the benefits of ECCE. Kanokrose Antacompu, whose four-year-old daughter attends a kindergarten using such a pedagogical approach, said: "I can truly see how my daughter acts and behaves differently. She is more independent and has more self-confidence, a stronger sense of humanity and higher social development."

Despite the success stories, many parents still fail to see the benefit in learning through experience and play.

**Children are a nation's wealth**

"From an educator's perspective," Ms Chayaniti explained, "it has been easier to explain the concept of learning through play to parents, and parents are more active in finding and providing the best ECCE services for their children. However, there are still many parents who need to be informed about the alternatives to the academic approach to ECCE."

In order to advocate ECCE as the right of every child, Unesco and the Russian Federation will organise the World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education in Moscow from Sept 27 to 29. Under the subtitle of "Building the Wealth of Nations", the conference expects to attract 1,000 participants from 193 Unesco member-states.

The conference will examine the global progress toward the first goal of the Education for All movement on comprehensive-quality ECCE for all, especially vulnerable young children, and establish targets and strategies for more equitable and effective provision of ECCE services.
A young child's window of opportunity is wide open, and early care and education affect not only the child's future prospects and productivity but also his or her present development.

Mami Umayahara, Unesco's Programme Cycle Management Specialist, is also in charge of the early-childhood care and education programme. She can be contacted at m.umayahara@unesco.org.

Dithaya Laohaviraphab, an intern at Unesco, is an undergraduate student at the University of Guelph, Canada. Her email address is dithaya.jan@gmail.com.