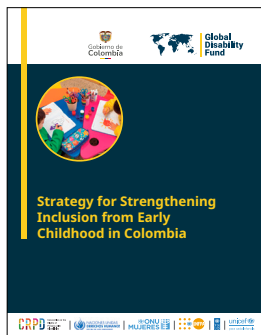




Strategy for Strengthening Inclusion from Early Childhood in Colombia



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This document was developed under the leadership of the National Working Group on Early Childhood and Disability, which brings together the following organizations:

Asdown Colombia

Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare -ICBF)

Federación Nacional de Sordos de Colombia (Fenascol) (Colombian National Federation of the Deaf)

Fundación Saldarriaga Concha (Saldarriaga Concha Foundation)

Instituto Nacional para Ciegos-INCI (National Institute for the Blind)

Instituto Nacional para Sordos-Insor (National Institute for the Deaf)

Liga Colombiana de Autismo (LICA) (Colombian Autism League)

Ministerio de las Culturas, las Artes y los Saberes (Ministry of Culture, Arts and Knowledge)

Ministerio de Educación Nacional (Ministry of National Education)

Ministerio de Igualdad (Ministry of Equality)

Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social (Ministry of Health and Social Protection)

Prosperidad Social (Social Prosperity)

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Introduction

Inclusion in comprehensive early childhood care is fundamental to advancing equity and social justice in Colombia. An inclusive approach recognizes and values the diversity of every child, as well as that of their families and caregivers and seeks to create learning and development environments that respect individual differences and respond effectively to diverse needs.

Comprehensive development, understood as the unique process of growth, transformation and change through which children progressively build their identity and autonomy across social, emotional, communicative, physical and cognitive dimensions, is the central objective of policies such as the Comprehensive Early Childhood Care Strategy From Zero to Forever (De Cero a Siempre)¹. This development is nurtured throughout the life cycle through interactions with a wide range of people, contexts and conditions.² By intentionally promoting the comprehensive development of children from birth through age six, while recognizing their individual characteristics and contexts, inclusion is an urgent imperative for early childhood rights and a cornerstone of comprehensive care.

¹ Congreso de Colombia, 2016. Ley 1804 de 2016. *This law establishes the State policy for the comprehensive development of early childhood from birth onward and sets forth other related provisions.* Bogotá.

² Ibid.

1

Fundamental principles

This strategy is grounded in principles aimed at ensuring the comprehensive protection and full enjoyment of the rights of children with disabilities, as well as those of their families and caregivers.

1. Comprehensive development: This refers to the unique process of qualitative and quantitative transformations and changes through which individuals draw upon their characteristics, abilities, qualities and potential to progressively build their identity throughout the life cycle. ³

2. Comprehensive, high-quality care: A set of planned, continuous and intersectoral actions that are relevant, timely, flexible, individualized, ongoing and complementary and that respond to the interests, characteristics and circumstances of each child and their environment. ⁴

3. Inclusion: The recognition, appreciation and responsiveness to diversity to ensure access, participation and belonging for all, through the elimination of

³ Colombian Congress, 2016. Law 1804 of 2016. Establishing the state policy for the comprehensive development of early childhood from birth onward and enacting other provisions. Article 4. Bogotá.

⁴ Ibid.

barriers and the provision of reasonable accommodations and support measures.

4. Human rights: All actions place individuals at the center as rights holders and are grounded in human dignity.

5. Social shared responsibility: The provision of comprehensive care and support is a shared responsibility of the State, families, communities and the private sector.⁵

6. Life-cycle and gender perspectives: An understanding of how needs, opportunities and vulnerabilities evolve throughout the life course and intersect with gender, particularly affecting women and girls, who often assume caregiving responsibilities.^{6,7}

7. Universality and progressivity: The commitment to reach the entire population, prioritizing those facing the greatest needs or vulnerabilities and progressively expanding coverage in line with institutional and financial capacities.^{8,9}

8. Meaningful participation: The active involvement of children with disabilities, their families, caregivers and their representative organizations (organizations of persons with disabilities- OPDs) in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs.¹⁰

5 Ibid., Art. 2.

6 Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 4 de febrero de 2025. Documento CONPES: 4143 Política Nacional de Cuidado. p. 139.

7 Alexandre Cote, A.; Ch. Knox-Vydmann y L. Lippi (2023). Hacia sistemas de protección social integradores que permitan la participación y la inclusión de las personas con discapacidad. Nota Orientativa Versión 1.0. p. 7, 31.

8 Ibid., p. 138.

9 Galián C, Rubio M, Escaroz G, Alejandro F. (2023). Los Sistemas de Cuidado y Apoyo en América Latina y el Caribe: un marco para la acción de UNICEF. Panamá: UNICEF. Oficina Regional América Latina y el Caribe. p. 90. At: <https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/43746/file/Los%20sistemas%20de%20cuidado%20y%20apoyo%20en%20Am%C3%A9rica%20Latina%20y%20el%20Caribe.pdf>

10 Alexandre Cote, A.; Ch. Knox-Vydmann and L. Lippi (2023). Toward Inclusive Social Protection Systems That Enable the Participation and Inclusion of People with Disabilities. Guidance Note Version 1.0. p. 25.

2

Current situation: Challenges and bottlenecks

Despite regulatory and public policy advances in Colombia, significant challenges remain that hinder the comprehensive development and full inclusion of children with disabilities.

- **Data gaps and fragmentation:** There is a significant lack of information on children under the age of five with disabilities due to variations and a lack of standardization across data sources. The invisibility of this population in some information systems, the absence of data disaggregated by disability, age and gender, and inconsistent registration criteria affect the quality of early identification and timely access to services. Many key indicators are not disaggregated accordingly. The limited and fragmented availability of information also constrains evidence-based decision-making and policy planning.¹¹

¹¹ Alexandre Cote, A.; Ch. Knox-Vydmanov and L. Lippi (2023).
Hacia sistemas de protección social integradores que permitan la participación y la inclusión de las personas con discapacidad. Nota Orientativa
Versión 1.0. p. 15.

- **Barriers to access and educational transition:** As of November 2024, 9,792 children with disabilities were enrolled in Cycle 2 (ages 3 to 5). However, between 2019 and 2024, nearly one in three children with disabilities did not complete the transition into the education system. Of 1,028 children with disabilities, 302 (29.38%) remained outside the education system. This is partly due to the lack of reasonable accommodations in educational settings needed to support their participation (Ministry of National Education).¹²
- **Disproportionate care burden:** The care of young children with disabilities falls largely on families. According to 2019 data (ECV), 86% of children with disabilities aged 2 to 4 receive care at home, with mothers serving as the primary caregivers in 80% of cases¹³. This heavy reliance on family care – particularly on women and girls – creates challenges for achieving shared social responsibility and limits caregivers’ opportunities to participate in education and the labor market, perpetuating cycles of economic insecurity.
- **Limited government capacity and coordination:** Institutional responses to early childhood care and support remain limited and fragmented and are even more insufficient for children with disabilities¹⁴. Although Colombia has recently established a National Care System, ensuring effective local implementation and coordination of comprehensive services remains a challenge. Weak coordination between national and local levels reduces the effectiveness of care policies. In addition, while collective and community-based care approaches play an important role, they are not widely recognized and few institutional mechanisms exist to coordinate them with government responses.

12 DNP's Interrelated Index of Issues (IIP) for 2023: <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiYTJhN2ViMjUtM2FhZi00YTZlLWI4OTFtM2LwYTM5NmFhNjQ4IiwidCI6IjMxZmNmYjNmLTlhMGltNGFiNS1iNzkxLTc0YzkwNjliOWM4ZSIsImMiOiR9&pageName=ReportSection552cc0848ab-97b71e8c1>

13 ONU Mujeres, UNFPA y UNICEF. 2022. Análisis de la situación de las personas con discapacidad en Colombia: Entre avances y retos. At: <https://colombia.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Discapacidad.pdf>

14 Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 14 de febrero de 2025. Documento CONPES: 4143 Política Nacional de Cuidado. p. 113.

3

Theory of change

The theory of change underpinning this strategy is based on the premise that strengthening state and societal capacities to implement a local management model for inclusive and transformative care systems, with a particular focus on early childhood and inclusive early childhood education for children with disabilities, will lead to:

- 1. Improved identification and assessment of the needs** of children with disabilities and their caregivers.
- 2. Strengthened provision of comprehensive care, inclusive early childhood education and basic education**, as well as support services for caregivers and families, ensuring their accessibility and quality.
- 3. Increased access to and retention** of children with disabilities in these services, ensuring the provision of the necessary supports and reasonable accommodations.
- 4. Cultural change that helps eliminate exclusion and discrimination** while

promoting shared responsibility for care.

5. Stronger knowledge management and information systems capable of generating disaggregated data and evidence to support monitoring and informed decision-making.

UNICEF proposes piloting this strategy in Barranquilla and Pasto to generate evidence of the interdependent relationship between increased access to inclusive early childhood education, care and comprehensive support services for children with disabilities and the reduction and redistribution of unpaid care responsibilities within their families and among their caregivers.

By reducing the time demands placed on primary caregivers (particularly women), the strategy creates opportunities for their participation in education, employment and personal development activities. In turn, this contributes to children's comprehensive development, strengthens their autonomy and promotes their participation in family, community and social life on equal terms.

In summary, the theory of change proposes that strategic and coordinated investment in inclusive services and capacities can transform the social organization of care, guarantee the rights of children with disabilities and dignify the work of their caregivers.

4

Strategic lines of action

The strategy is organized around the following interrelated lines of action, which are essential for achieving its objectives and addressing the identified challenges:

4.1 Strengthening governance and coordination mechanisms

Under the leadership of the **National Working Group on Early Childhood and Disability** and in coordination with other national and regional bodies within major systems such as the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare, the National Disability System and the Care Systems, as well as with sectoral coordination bodies, this line of action seeks to consolidate inclusive and strategic governance. It will strengthen spaces for dialogue and coordination among sectors, levels of government, civil society, and international cooperation actors, while promoting the development and implementation of protocols for inter-institutional collaboration.

In addition, it is essential to strengthen the role of the **Harmonious Transition Working Groups** as key mechanisms for:

- Identifying children who are outside the education system.
- Activating early warning systems and supporting institutional capacity management.
- Monitoring and facilitating transitions between early childhood education services and the transition to primary education.

Together, these actions aim to foster inclusive, protective, and equitable environments that support the holistic development of children, in line with the ***Todos Listos*** (All Ready) public policy.

4.2 Strengthening human resource capacity

The Inclusive Management Program¹⁵ will be implemented under this pillar, with a particular focus on inclusive early childhood education and the transition to primary education. The program will support the various institutions and stakeholders involved, including education secretariats, ICBF, schools, child development centers, kindergartens, inclusion support centers, and other entities with shared objectives, as well as educational agents, by strengthening strategic, pedagogical, and administrative capacities that are essential for advancing inclusion and effectively responding to diversity.

As part of this program, the development and use of the following tools and resources will be promoted:

- **Self-assessment tools:** UNICEF will make available the educational context management self-assessment tool, developed as part of the Inclusive Management Program. This tool enables assessing progress and identifying areas for improvement across three key institutional capacities for inclusion. The results will inform the identification of priorities and guide the development of institutional improvement plans aimed at strengthening inclusive practices.

¹⁵ This program is designed to strengthen regional technical assistance and support the integrated, inclusive management of public policy frameworks related to children, adolescents, and disability. Coordinated by UNICEF, it is available for transfer to government entities and private or mixed-sector organizations for adoption and implementation.

- **Self-paced training courses:**¹⁶ Through UNICEF's global training platform (Agora), different online self-paced training courses will be offered to professionals working in early childhood care and education, with the goal of strengthening their competencies in inclusion.
- **Improvement plans:** Local authorities will be able to design specific improvement plans for their institutions and organizations, based on their level of commitment to improving management and inclusive practices. The self-assessment tool will serve as a key guide for identifying priority actions to be incorporated into these plans.
- **Support pathways for training of trainer programs:** Support pathways will be established to strengthen inclusion processes within educational institutions. Government entities partnering in this strategy will be able to train priority groups of trainers, who will in turn share the knowledge they have acquired within their communities and local contexts.

4.3 Critical services and processes for inclusion

To ensure that no child with a disability is excluded from care and comprehensive development processes, local capacities will be strengthened to design and implement services and processes¹⁷ that are critical to inclusion in early childhood, including:

- **Comprehensive pathway for complementary services for children with disabilities:** Complementary services for children with disabilities will be consolidated and coordinated with the Comprehensive Development Monitoring System to support individual follow-up, with the aim of ensuring access to both universal and complementary services at the local level.
- **Quality management model for inclusive early childhood education:** Efforts will be made to strengthen the inclusion process within the quality management model for early childhood education and ICBF services, particularly regarding essential aspects of licensing procedures, quality

¹⁶ Several of these online self-training modules are being made available to the ICBF and other national and online self-paced training courses will be offered to professionals working in early childhood care and education, with the goal of strengthening their competencies in inclusion.

¹⁷ Active outreach and early warning systems / Assessment of support needs for inclusion / Disability certification / Care Barometer / Case management and service referral / Family support / Provision of human and technological supports / Development and contracting of service providers.

standards, monitoring activities and inspection and oversight processes.

- **Assessment of support needs for inclusion:** Assessments will be conducted to identify the specific support needs of each child and ensure alignment with disability certification processes and the care scale. As part of this process, local service offerings that help reduce and redistribute the time demands placed on families and caregivers will also be identified.

- **Case management and service referral:** Existing protocols will be reviewed and adapted, as needed, to strengthen case management and referral processes for children with disabilities, as well as for their families and caregivers.

- **Family support:** The development and coordination of support and accompaniment processes for families and caregivers will be promoted to enable their active participation in their children's educational process and to support a more equitable and appropriate distribution of caregiving responsibilities across society.

4.4 Supports and assistive technology

The development of processes to identify, provide, and ensure access to supports and assistive technologies that facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities across services for their comprehensive development will be promoted.

- **Identifying and consolidating support services and assistive technologies:** Based on assessments of the support needs and developmental characteristics of children with disabilities, and guided by the principle of progressive realization of rights, support services and assistive technologies will be identified to promote participation. This process includes identifying and addressing barriers to inclusion and participation.

- **Developing and contracting providers of human and technological support services:** Efforts will be made to strengthen and expand the network of providers offering the resources and tools required for inclusion. Partnerships with providers of support services will be encouraged in accordance with public procurement guidelines.

- **Providing human and technological support:** Efforts will be made to ensure that all children have access to the supports necessary for their development and learning.

This pillar will align with the national government's priorities and the new CONPES on disability to strengthen accessibility and independent living for people with disabilities, ensuring that the best interests of the child and the principle of progressivity are upheld in the implementation of care and support programs, as well as assistive technology programs for inclusion.

4.5 Sustainable funding and incentives for inclusion

Mobilizing public, private, and cooperation resources is essential to ensure that the inclusion of children with disabilities becomes a funded and sustainable priority. This requires strengthening planning and financing instruments, including the definition of costs associated with the provision of supports, assistive technologies, and reasonable accommodations, as well as the creation of project pipelines to guide investment. In addition, it is necessary to design financial and non-financial incentives to engage the private sector, service providers, and decision-makers, in order to ensure the effective implementation of comprehensive care pathways and enable access, retention, and participation of children with disabilities in services that support their holistic development, under conditions of autonomy, equity, and community life.

- **Formulation and structuring of model investment projects for inclusive early childhood education:** The design and structuring of investment projects focused on inclusive early childhood education will be promoted. In coordination with local territories, intersectoral collaboration will be strengthened to develop actions and projects that ensure comprehensive and inclusive care, as well as support for families and caregivers.
- **Results-based fund for comprehensive inclusive care – inclusive education:** The creation and strengthening of financing mechanisms at the national and regional levels will be promoted, including the development of the Inclusion Support Fund. This fund will seek to incentivize measurable progress in access, retention and the quality of inclusive education.

- **Management of public-private partnerships:** Coordination between the public and private sectors will be encouraged to mobilize resources and efforts aimed at implementing programs that strengthen inclusion and inclusive education starting in early childhood.

4.6 Cultural and community transformation

- **Family and community strengthening:** Programs will be promoted to strengthen the participation of families and communities in inclusive education, creating a supportive and collaborative environment.
- **Roadmap for guaranteeing the right to inclusive education:** Clear guidance will be provided to families and caregivers regarding the right to inclusive education in Colombia. This roadmap will include tools for enforcing this right, as well as an accessible explanation of Decree 1421 of 2017, information on community support networks and a guide on the four “Ps” of inclusive education: presence, permanence, participation and progress. The content will be available in easy-to-read format to facilitate understanding. This initiative will be based on the Ministry of National Education’s document General guidelines for promoting families’ effective participation in children’s and adolescents’ right to inclusive education.
- **Strengthening the participation of children with disabilities:** Capacity-building for teachers and educational professionals will be promoted to create materials and methodological tools that encourage children and adolescents with disabilities to develop their own views and express their ideas and opinions. The goal is to ensure they are taken into account both in the delivery of services and in the design and implementation of policies that affect them.
- **Zero-tolerance campaign against exclusion and discrimination:** Support will be provided for the design and implementation of awareness campaigns that promote inclusion and the appreciation of diversity, fostering a culture of zero tolerance toward any form of exclusion or discrimination against children with disabilities.
- **Strategic litigation:** Initiatives will be promoted to advance legal actions and litigation strategies in defense of the rights of children with disabilities and

inclusive education, ensuring compliance with current regulations. This effort will include family-strengthening processes related to the enforcement of rights and the Ombudsperson's Office will be invited to collaborate as a key partner.

4.7 Innovation and knowledge management

- **Identification and dissemination of best practices:** Significant and inspiring experiences in the implementation of inclusive education will be compiled and shared, with the aim of facilitating mutual learning among stakeholders in the educational ecosystem.
- **Communities of practice and learning:** The creation of collaborative networks among educators, educational agents and professionals will be encouraged to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, methodologies and effective strategies. This initiative may be implemented through the pedagogical collectives promoted by the Ministry of National Education and the ICBF.
- **Exchanges of best practices:** Meeting spaces, such as forums and pedagogical conferences, will be organized to share successful inclusion practices from local communities. Pedagogical collectives will serve as a key platform to highlight and replicate these experiences.
- **Research and evaluation agenda:** A research agenda will be designed and implemented to evaluate the impact of inclusion initiatives and generate evidence to guide the continuous improvement of educational policies, programs and practices.

4.8 Strengthening information and monitoring systems

- **Child-by-child monitoring – “Tell me” (Cuéntame):** The child-by-child monitoring system will be strengthened to identify gaps in access, retention and advancement for children with disabilities. This system will enable monitoring of their development and inclusion, manage early warnings and ensure the timely provision of supports and reasonable accommodations. Likewise, the incorporation of specific supports and assistive technologies into local system records will be promoted on a case-by-case basis.
- **Active search and alert systems:** Mechanisms will be implemented to identify children who are not enrolled in educational services, with the goal

of placing them in the program closest to home and ensuring their effective participation through supports and reasonable accommodations.

In areas lacking alert systems within the framework of early childhood or childhood and adolescence policies, pilot programs will be developed to generate evidence on alert models and case management pathways, with the aim of ensuring comprehensive and inclusive care for children and adolescents with disabilities.

- **Coordination with SIMAT, SISPRO and local records:** Coordination and interoperability among various information systems – such as *Cuéntame*, SIMAT, SISPRO and the Social Household Registry, among others – will be strengthened to ensure effective, comprehensive and high-quality monitoring of inclusive education.
- **Strengthening the Observatory on Educational Pathways:** The Observatory on Educational Pathways will be strengthened to systematically incorporate, highlight and analyze the educational pathways of children and adolescents with disabilities from early childhood onward, thereby contributing to the development of evidence-based policies.

5

The importance of policy coordination: Care, childhood and disability

Effective inclusion of children with disabilities and their comprehensive development require strong coordination among care, childhood, and disability policies, while consistently prioritizing an early childhood approach. The concept of **Comprehensive Care Systems (SIC)**, which has gained momentum in Latin America and the Caribbean and has made significant progress in Colombia following the publication of the CONPES on Care, seeks to integrate childcare policies with care policies for persons with disabilities and older persons within a systemic framework that promotes shared responsibility and the right to provide and receive care.

Prioritizing inclusion in early childhood within this framework is crucial because:

- Early childhood is a critical window for development, during which timely

interventions have the greatest impact.

- The costs of care in the early years of life are typically substantially higher than in other stages, placing a significant burden on families and caregivers, primarily women. Increasing the state's responsibility for childcare, including the needs of children with disabilities, must be a priority to reduce the burden on families and caregivers, particularly women, as the Care System is progressively implemented.
- Inclusive early childhood education not only promotes children's development but can also free up time for caregivers, particularly women, facilitating their economic or educational participation and improving family well-being.
- A comprehensive response must consider the needs of children, but also those of the family and, in particular, the caregiver, who often faces multiple vulnerabilities (gender, poverty, other burdens). Colombia's National Care Policy seeks to transform the social organization of care to guarantee the rights of both those who care for others and those who require care.
- Coordination makes it possible to overcome fragmented approaches to care and ensure a coherent and complementary response throughout the Comprehensive Care Pathway (RIA, its Spanish acronym). It involves linking health, education, social protection, social services and other services, recognizing that the need for care transcends any single sector.
- Integrating young children with disabilities into the design and implementation of these coordinated systems and policies, alongside access to quality supports and services from the earliest stages of life, is essential to promoting their full development, autonomy and participation in society, while also recognizing and alleviating the burdens of family caregiving.



Call to action

Recognizing that inclusion not only benefits children with disabilities, but also enriches the learning and development experiences of all children and their families, and contributes to building more equitable, resilient societies that are better able to respond to diversity and the multiple challenges across different contexts, we call for action.

This alliance, which is open to entities, organizations of all types, community leaders, and persons with disabilities and their families, will facilitate their participation in the development of the proposed areas of work. Their contributions – personal, technical, and financial – will be essential to achieving meaningful transformation. Only through collective action will it be possible to ensure that no child is left behind in exercising their right to comprehensive development, under conditions of equality and with the same opportunities as others.

Conclusion

Strengthening inclusion from early childhood, with a particular focus on children with disabilities, is an ethical and strategic imperative for comprehensive development and equity. By recognizing diversity, ensuring access to quality services and supports, coordinating care, childhood, and disability policies, and addressing the disproportionate burden of caregiving through shared social responsibility, this approach promotes the full development of every child, recognizes and values the work of women and caregivers, and contributes to building a more inclusive and resilient society for all.

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Strategy to strengthen inclusion from early childhood in Colombia

Inter-institutional working group on early childhood and disability

Purpose

To promote inclusive environments that value diversity and ensure the comprehensive development of children with disabilities.

Rationale

Lack of consolidated data, invisibility in information systems and an urgent need for coordinated action.



Strategic Pillars

1

Strengthening governance bodies for inclusion

- Working Group on Early Childhood and Disability
- Activate Harmonious Transition Working Groups and inter-institutional protocols.
- Strengthen coordination among national and regional entities (ICBF, Ministry of Education, municipal governments – education secretariats).

2

Strengthening human resource capacities

- Self-assessment, self-directed training courses, improvement plans and training of trainers.

3

Critical services and processes for inclusion

- Comprehensive care pathway, Quality management model for inclusive early childhood education, assessment of support needs, case management and family support.

4

Supports and assistive technology

- Provision of technologies and human support.
- Partnerships with providers

5

Funding and incentives for inclusion

- Investment-based projects, results-based funding, public-private partnerships.
- Results-based funding
- Public-private partnerships

6

Cultural transformation and community strengthening

- Family and community strengthening, zero tolerance campaigns against exclusion and discrimination, pathways to guarantee the right to inclusive education and the participation of children with disabilities, strategic litigation.

7

Innovation and knowledge management

- Communities of practice and learning, exchange of experiences and best practices, research and evaluation agenda.

8

Strengthening information, monitoring and quality management systems in early childhood
Cuéntame (“Tell Me”) system, active search and alert systems, interoperability with SIMAT, SISPRO, local registries, etc., strengthening of the educational pathways observatory



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