Executive Summary

The purpose of this paper is to propose a comprehensive reform of early childcare and childhood education in the State of Israel, from birth to a child’s entry into the school system at age 6. Growing recognition of the importance of early childhood and its significance for a wide range of socio-economic developments, calls for reshaping fixed patterns that no longer serve contemporary realities. There is a need for organized policy, informed by the latest research, to outline and address the importance of this issue.

Over the past decade, studies have unequivocally pointed to the crucial impact of early childhood education and care on child development and equal opportunity. The environment into which a toddler grows and the quality of the stimuli to which she is exposed in her early years play a critical role in her cognitive and emotional development, impacting her functioning throughout the life cycle. Promoting equal opportunities is one of the main functions of the formal education system – one of the key reasons why the state provides free compulsory education from kindergarten to high school. However, the failure to apply similar policy for early childhood education and care leads to noticeable gaps in children's skills and abilities at this stage, which makes it difficult for the education system to bridge in later stages.

The State of Israel is exceptional both in holding the highest birth rate among the western countries and beyond, and simultaneously in the very high employment rate of women. However, the state has not devoted the required resources and government attention to early childhood education, resulting in poor quality of care that impairs the development of many Israeli children, high costs for parents, lack of accessibility, widening socio-economic disparities, and more. Moreover, these failures are especially damaging to mothers, thus strongly contributing to the formation and solidifying of the employment and income gap between men and women, i.e., the gender gap.

Therefore, a profound perceptual change is required in order to invert the present pyramid model, by emphasizing early childhood as the defining stage that determines the future of the child as a whole person. The importance of building the foundation of basic skills is no less important than the later stages of education. Policies that focus on early childhood can reduce the widening initial gaps, and make a decisive contribution towards equality of opportunity, gender equality, and balance between professional fulfillment and parenting and family life.