**Executive Summary**

The purpose of this document is to propose a comprehensive reform in the field of early childhood education and care in the State of Israel. “Early childhood” refers to the first years of the child’s life, from birth through entry to the structured framework of school at age six. Growing awareness of the importance of early childhood in its own right, and of the central role it plays as part of broader socioeconomic processes, have created a need to reshape old patterns that have become fossilized and are no longer appropriate for today’s reality. Accordingly, structured policy should be formulated recognizing the importance of this field and drawing on the latest research findings.

Over the past decade, a growing corpus of studies has unequivocally highlighted the crucial importance of education and care in early childhood for the child’s development and for equal opportunities. The environment in which infants are raised and the quality of the stimuli to which they are exposed during the early years of their life exert a critical influence over their cognitive and emotional development, with ramifications for their functioning throughout their life. Promoting equal opportunities is one of the key functions of the formal education system, and this is one of the main reasons why the state provides free and compulsory education from kindergarten through the end of high school. However, the failure to apply a similar policy to early childhood clearly causes the entrenchment of significant gaps between children in skills and capabilities from this stage – gaps that the education system in its current format finds difficult to bridge at later stages.

The State of Israel is unusual both for its high birthrate (relative to other Western countries and even in a broader context) and for the very high participation rate of women in employment. However, Israel has not given early childhood the governmental resources and attention it deserves. The result is poor quality care that impairs the development of many of Israel’s children, imposes high costs on parents, is inaccessible, leads to the widening of socioeconomic gaps, and so forth. Moreover, these defects disproportionately affect mothers, thereby making a crucial contribution to the emergence and perpetuation of a gap between men and women in employment and in salaries (the gender gap).

This explains the need for a profound conceptual change that will be reflected in the “inversion of the pyramid” – i.e. an emphasis on early childhood as the formative stage that determines the future of the child and the human. This stage is just as important in developing the foundation of basic skills as the later stages of education, if not more so. The new policy centered around early childhood can reduce the initial gaps that later widen further, and can make a vital contribution to the effort to promote substantive equal opportunities, gender equality, and a balance between professional self-realization and parenthood and family life.