

CONCEPTUAL NOTE



Caring, through quality education, ensuring
that all children have equitable opportunities
to grow, learn and flourish.



Fundação Mendes Gonçalves

Fundação Mendes Gonçalves (Mendes Gonçalves Foundation) was established from the commitment of **Casa Mendes Gonçalves** and its founder, **Carlos Mendes Gonçalves**, to the mission of “caring for the present and contributing to the construction of a promising future and a more sustainable world with greater opportunities for all people.”

Building an equitable, healthy, sustainable future with well-being for everyone requires essential collaborative action: CARING. Caring for people and ecosystems. For what is born, grows, and regenerates. Caring means cultivating the potential of ideas, individuals, families, and the community. With **ethics, transparency, and integrity**, acknowledging that there is always more to learn, improve, and transform. With the inquisitiveness and curiosity that allow us to envision what is not yet but can become. With the **flexibility to adapt and innovate.**

Caring is a verb of the present and a verb of the future. We aim to **plant seeds of change and possibility** in our territory, Golegã, which will transform into roots of **new ways of educating, nurturing, and regenerating.** We aspire to leave a legacy, for the future of all.

Therefore, the Mendes Gonçalves Foundation proposes to develop three complementary programs:

- **EDUCATE:** Caring, through quality education, ensuring that all children have equitable opportunities to grow, learn, and flourish.
- **NURTURE:** Caring, through healthy nutrition and food security, enabling all individuals to adopt healthy lifestyles and experience well-being.
- **REGENERATE:** Caring, through the regeneration of soils and biodiversity, so that the planet and communities have a better future.

Each of these programs operates on the ground based on scientific evidence, co-creation, impact evaluation, proximity philanthropy, and ethical responsibility. **Together, their actions build an ecosystem of transformation, empowerment, and capacity-building,** rooted in community proximity and the establishment of partnerships, in science and in the possibility of knowledge transference, in the **commitment to communicate and advocate** for present and future generations. Collectively, these programs contribute to the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, with locally rooted solutions that have the potential to influence, inspire, and transform practices and public policies in Portugal and worldwide.

Caring for the future and transforming the world is a mission only possible with syntropy, inclusion, and collaboration from all—families, professionals, organizations, companies, and the community. **We count on everyone.**

PROGRAM EDUCATE

EARTH | Context

Healthy child development is the foundation of an equitable, sustainable, and resilient society. For this reason, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) place children at the center of global strategies, recognizing that investing in the early years and ensuring every infant and child a safe and enriching start in life promotes their potential, **well-being, equal opportunities, and intergenerational justice.**

The early years are crucial, with deep and lasting effects. It is during childhood that the foundations of health (both physical and mental), learning capacity, the ability to establish healthy relationships, active community participation, and future work and prosperity are built.ⁱ

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Although the brain continues to mature into adulthood, it is in the **early years** that its **architecture** is defined, and **neural efficiency** is optimized. **Brain plasticity**, or the ability to learn from experience, is greatest in this period —especially during the first thousand days. The quality of early experiences, along with the safety and stimulation provided by the surrounding environment, determines the most-used neural connections. Frequently used connections become strong and remain; unused ones weaken and may disappear. In response to a child's experiences, the brain adjusts its structures and functions, contributing to both adaptability and vulnerability.^{iv v vi}

Children who experience **favorable developmental conditions** (such as responsive and secure relationships with parents, educators, childhood professionals, and other key figures; stable and non-violent environments; early learning opportunities and quality education; emotionally supportive social relationships; economic stability; and a sense of community and cultural belonging) are **more likely to become healthy, civically engaged adults.** Conversely, children who grow up in less favorable conditions are more likely to experience poorer physical and mental health, lower educational attainment, and difficulties with employability and interpersonal relationships.^{vii viii}

In Golegã, Portugal, and worldwide, despite consensus on the importance of healthy child development, **many children still face challenges that hinder their growth:** poverty and inequality in access to housing, healthcare, nutritious food, and quality education; exposure to violence, abuse, and neglect; and parental stress and overload. For instance, although access to childcare in Portugal has improved in recent years, demand still exceeds supply—only 50% ...

...to 55% of children under 3 attend public or private nurseries.^{ix} Moreover, the quality of interactions between early childhood professionals and children is generally average to low, particularly in terms of support for development and learning.^{x xi} Golegã has only one nursery, which is already at full capacity and cannot meet current or anticipated needs.^{xii} In the 2022/2023 school year, 83% of students completed the first cycle within four years, compared to 92% nationally among students with a similar socio-economic profile.^{xiii} In Portugal, about 1 in 5 people lives in poverty or social exclusion.^{xiv} In 2019, 28.5% of families were economically vulnerable, and 24% lacked the minimum monthly income to cover regular expenses.^{xv} Children and youth under 18 remain the age group most at risk of poverty or social exclusion—a trend persistent since 2009.^{xvi} In 2024, the absolute child poverty rate increased from 18.5% to 26.3%.^{xvii}

These figures make it clear: **there is still a long way to go** to ensure that all children have equitable opportunities to grow, learn, and thrive. **Caring for the beginning of life is caring for the entire life—and building a shared future.**

ROOTS | Foundations

Investing in the early years is a scientifically proven, socially responsible, fair, and cost-effective strategy for ensuring healthy development and generational well-being. In fact, it yields a higher economic return than any later intervention—up to 13.7% per child.^{xviii} It is not just a matter of individual well-being, but a social imperative, helping to **break cycles of poverty, crime, and inequality, and promoting health, social cohesion, and productivity.**^{xix xx xxi xxii}

Promoting access to quality education is one of the most powerful strategies to change the world—by transforming the world of the children around us. The period from birth to age 10 is one of rapid growth and transformation, during which children develop the cognitive, emotional, social, and physical skills that will shape their future. Thus, **nursery** (0–3 years), **preschool**, and **primary education** are not merely formal stages of the educational pathway; **they are foundational spaces for lifelong development, learning, and well-being.**

When access to education is limited, especially for vulnerable children, the negative **consequences are severe and long-lasting**, accumulating across multiple dimensions: school difficulties and failure, emotional regulation and socialization issues, lower employability and income, intergenerational poverty, and worsening gender inequality.^{xxiii}

The reverse is also true: **access to quality education promotes equity and social justice**, reduces inequalities, and expands developmental opportunities for all. When this access begins in early childhood, it capitalizes on the "window of opportunity" for brain development, boosting future **cognitive and resilience capacities** and providing essential **support to families**. In the long term, this translates into greater **well-being, better academic outcomes**, reduced risk behaviors, and **improved jobs and salaries** in adulthood.^{xxiv}

Yet **educational success in early childhood** depends on more than mere access. It is not enough to have a place to leave children following a curriculum while parents work. Several **key factors** must also be in place:

- **Qualified and valued early childhood professionals** are the main determinant of educational outcomes. They must receive specialized training in child development and pedagogical differentiation, engage in continuous professional development, and have decent working conditions and salaries.^{xxv}
- **Pedagogical practices focused on healthy child development**, considering age, interests, and developmental stages. In nurseries and preschools, it is vital to foster learning through play and active world exploration with creativity and autonomy, while also promoting socio-emotional skills. In primary school, learning should not only focus on literacy and numeracy but also on critical thinking, collaboration, and socio-emotional competence. The quality of education depends not only on the curriculum but on emotionally secure relationships between children and their educators and how those educators interact, listen, and respond to them.^{xxvi xxvii xxviii}
- **Safe, stimulating, and inclusive learning environments.** Physical and emotional safety is a prerequisite for learning. Educational settings must be adapted to children's needs, offering suitable facilities and engaging materials and resources. They must also protect children from violence, promote respect for diversity and non-discrimination, and ensure inclusion regardless of gender, socio-economic status, cultural background, or abilities. Every child must have the opportunity to participate in educational contexts, to grow as individuals and citizens, to learn and express their potential.^{xxix}
- **Active family and community involvement.** Educational quality improves when strong partnerships are built with families and communities throughout the educational process. This includes regular communication and cooperation channels, opportunities for family and community participation in schools, inclusion in decision-making, and support for learning in home and community settings.^{xxx}
- **Contact with nature.** Nature should not be viewed as a luxury or bonus, but as a developmental necessity. Educational settings should include green spaces and both structured and unstructured activities involving nature. Nature interaction supports health and well-being; motor skills, balance, coordination, and strength; concentration, memory, and executive functioning; cooperation skills and pro-environmental behaviors; imagination, creativity, and autonomy; and reduced stress and anxiety.^{xxxi xxxii xxxiii}

When quality nursery, preschool, and primary education are available, children benefit from early stimulation of curiosity, language, socio-emotional and problem-solving skills—essential for lifelong learning and resilience. These educational contexts help children build relationships outside their families, learn **cooperation**, resolve conflicts, show **empathy**, and respect **diversity**. They also support families by contributing to economic stability, equity, and **gender equality**. Moreover, they allow for the early identification of developmental delays, learning difficulties, and signs of neglect or abuse—creating opportunities for **timely and effective intervention**.

Quality nursery, preschool, and primary education are not just **infrastructures for the future**—they are **protective and positive environments** for individual and family health and well-being, and vital to **strengthening democracy and social cohesion**, as they are spaces where **citizenship** norms, values, and responsibilities are learned.

FRUITS AND SEEDS | A Proposal for the Future

The Educate Program aims to function both as an **anchor and a catalyst—locally and globally**—acting locally while inspiring globally, through **proximity philanthropy, syntropy, strategic partnerships, and alliances**.

The Educate Program seeks to create spaces for **co-creation, teaching and learning, research and action, literacy promotion, and knowledge transference** for **lasting social transformation**.

The Program Educate aims to "plant" an ecosystem:

... where children grow in an environment that values play, cognition, creativity, emotion, relationships, autonomy, self-determination, contact with nature, health, and well-being. One that sees children holistically and provides them with equitable opportunities from birth to develop their potential through quality education—reducing inequalities tied to poverty, geography, or family circumstances. One that supports every child, regardless of their characteristics or abilities, fostering inclusion and success by nurturing close relationships with others and with nature. One that offers the chance to develop identity, psychological safety, and resilience that will accompany them through life and decision processes.

... that supports families and parenting by enhancing their understanding of and involvement in children's healthy development. One that creates conditions for work-life balance and gender equality in the workplace. One that reduces the stress of parenting challenges and strengthens the positive effects of social support networks.

... that recognizes the value of the personal and professional development of early childhood...

... **professionals**, offering job stability and training. One that becomes a hub for pedagogical innovation and reflective practice, encouraging a collaborative culture, knowledge sharing, and a shared vision of quality early childhood education.

... **that contributes to the demographic, economic, and sociocultural vitality of the local and global community**. One that builds partnerships (with the social and business sectors, policymakers, and society at large), reinforcing community bonds and promoting education as a shared social responsibility, collective well-being, and the common good.

... **that generates positive environmental impacts and ensures sustainability** by promoting healthy lifestyles through the implementation and dissemination of good nutritional, educational, and regenerative practices.

... **of knowledge**, where **evidence-based** practices are created, adopted, monitored, and evaluated—and where those practices and learnings from the local changes, along with developmental, educational, and social progress indicators, are analyzed to transfer, scale, and multiply knowledge globally, informing best practices and public policy.

The Educate Program aspires to "sow" hope and resilience, functioning as a "living laboratory" where quality education, care, and community come together to build a more just, sustainable, and well-being-oriented future for all, locally and globally.

FROM GOLEGÃ TO THE WORLD | Theory of Change

Program Educate

A Model for Sustainable Development Based on the Local Natural Ecosystem, Child-Centered and Community-Driven

Program Mission

TO CARE for Children, Families, and the Community through Quality Education that enables the REGENERATION of Sustainable, Resilient, and Equitable Futures

Context

Despite growing recognition of the importance of early childhood, many children continue to face inequalities that hinder their development. The local reality in Golegã reflects national and global challenges, with gaps in access to quality education, well-being, and equitable opportunities.

Foundations

Scientific evidence shows that investing in the early years has a lasting impact on health, learning, and individual well-being, as well as on productivity, social cohesion, and equality.

The quality of education depends on safe relationships, appropriate pedagogical practices, family and community involvement, and contact with nature.

Investments

- Financial resources and infrastructure
- Specialized human resources
- Local, national, and international partnerships
- Research and technical support for the production and transference of knowledge
- Impact assessment strategies focused on continuous improvement

Proposal

To create an educational ecosystem that recognizes babies and children as central to sustainable development, integrating nursery, preschool, and primary education with family and community involvement. To promote innovative, inclusive, evidence-based practices within a territory that nurtures, learns, and grows together.

Outcomes

- Establishment of an Educational Centre for Children aged 0 to 10.
- Creation of Knowledge Centers linked to the Educational Centre, accelerating knowledge production and transference about child development and education.
- Development of projects that promote quality education, in partnership with other foundations and organizations (e.g., pilot projects with nannies).
- Production of high-quality, innovative, and replicable educational resources.
- Development of Best Pedagogical Practices for Quality Education — scientifically grounded and informative to both local and global contexts.
- Delivery of training and support for the ongoing development of Educators and Early Childhood Professionals.
- Implementation of family engagement and support strategies.
- Learning Spaces and Activities in connection with Nature and the Community.
- Establishment of Community and Intergenerational Partnerships.
- Creation of advocacy actions and resources for Quality Education.
- Support for projects and initiatives by other organizations committed to the principles and goals of Quality Education.

Impacts

Children experience healthy physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. They show well-being, a sense of identity, autonomy, resilience, pro-social and pro-environmental behaviors, and a sense of cultural belonging. Access to Quality Education increases.

- % of children attending nannies care with training in Healthy Child Development.

- % of children attending quality Nursery and Preschool education.
- % of children accessing quality Primary Education.
- % of children progressing through primary education without retention.
- % of children with educational or health needs identified early (and referred for support).
- % of children participating in nature-based activities.
- % of children participating in community-based activities.
- Number of children reached by the Educate Program.
- Number of child-focused projects implemented.
- Children's feedback on their development and well-being (qualitative testimonies; perception and satisfaction scales).
- Construction of the Educational Centre.

Families are actively involved in children's development and educational processes. They have tools to care, work, and achieve work-life balance, strengthening intergenerational and community bonds.

- Number of families reached by the Educate Program.
- % of families participating in Parenting Support activities.
- % of families actively engaged in educational activities (meetings, events, projects).
- Overall family satisfaction with educational services.
- Family feedback on well-being and parenting skills (qualitative testimonies; perception and satisfaction surveys).

Educators and Early Childhood Professionals feel recognized, valued, and supported in their educational role. They contribute to a culture of reflection and innovation and invest in continuous professional development. They are leaders in engaging the community in children's education.

- Number of Educators and Early Childhood Professionals involved in the Educate Program.
- % of Educators and Early Childhood Professionals participating in Continuous Professional Development activities.
- Number of pedagogical resources produced, and educational practices documented.
- Number of knowledge-sharing initiatives beyond the local area (presentations as trainers, publications, etc.).
- Feedback from professionals on children's cognitive, emotional, and social development (qualitative testimonies; perception and satisfaction surveys).
- Feedback from professionals on the quality of Educational Practices and Job Satisfaction (qualitative testimonies; perception and satisfaction surveys).

The Community embodies a local culture that values quality education, inclusion and diversity, care and sustainability, collective well-being, and the common good—through active...

...participation in socio-cultural and regenerative partnerships and the development of evidence-based, innovative educational practices.

- Number of community members impacted by the Educate Program.
- Number of local and global partnerships established.
- Number of intergenerational and community-based activities carried out.
- Number of education-promoting projects supported and co-developed with other foundations and organizations.
- Number of advocacy actions and resources for Quality Education developed.
- Number of media stories, articles, and social media mentions (social visibility).

By 2035, we aim to improve indicators related to well-being, development, and education quality — particularly in the early years of life. **We contribute directly to achieving SDGs 4** (Quality Education), **9** (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), **10** (Reduced Inequalities), and **17** (Partnerships for the Goals); **and indirectly to SDGs 1** (No Poverty), **3** (Good Health and Well-Being), **8** (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and **11** (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

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