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for every child

Early Moments Matter
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for every child

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Summary

Building brains, building futures

The early moments of life offer an unparalleled opportunity to build the brains of the children who will build the future.

But far too often, it is an opportunity squandered.

For nations, the price of not investing in early moments is children with poorer health, fewer learning skills and reduced earning potential. It is a weaker economy and a greater burden on health, education and welfare systems. It is intergenerational cycles of disadvantage that hinder equitable growth and prosperity.

For children, especially children from disadvantaged communities, the price of this failure is lost potential.

The science is clear: A child's brain is built, not born.¹

The process begins before birth and involves a complex interplay of neural connections that are shaped by experience and environment.² In the early years, these neural connections occur at lightning speed – a speed never again repeated. They establish a foundation of development that will help children grow, learn and thrive. This process is fuelled by adequate nutrition, protection from harm and responsive stimulation including early learning opportunities.

Unfortunately, many millions of children around the world are deprived of the ingredients that foster optimal brain development. They do not have nutritious food or health care; they are not protected from violence, extreme stress, pollution and conflict; they are starved of responsive stimulation from a caring adult; and they miss out on opportunities to learn. Negative experiences can slow down and alter how neural connections are made in a baby's brain. They can impact a child's ability to grow and learn,³ and they can even reduce future earnings by up to 25 per cent.⁴ For example, exposure to violence, abuse and neglect can produce toxic stress, which when prolonged and extreme, can interfere with the development of neural connections.⁵

Most of the children who miss out in early childhood come from the world's most deprived communities. In low- and middle-income countries, for example, an estimated 43 per cent of children younger than age 5 are at risk of poor development due to extreme poverty and stunted growth.⁶ Globally, 155 million children younger than age 5 have stunted growth because of inadequate nutrition and health care.⁷ In countries with available data, mostly low- and middle-income countries, about 80 per cent of children

aged 2 to 4 are violently disciplined regularly; and there are about 15.5 million 3- and 4-year-olds with whom an adult does not read, tell stories, count or draw.⁸

These deprivations can limit children's development and harm their opportunities in the future. For nations, the loss of individual potential can turn into an unhealthy and ill-equipped workforce. It hampers economic growth and strains education, health and welfare systems. It leads to cycles of deprivation and dependence that can continue for generations.

Reasons to invest

The financial case for investing in children's early moments is strong. The rate of return on investing in early childhood programmes can be 13.7 per cent.⁹ The benefits are reaped in better education and health outcomes, lower crime and higher individual earnings.¹⁰ Investments in children's early development can lead to better individual adult incomes of up to 25 per cent.¹¹ Investing in early childhood development also benefits nations –

supporting a more skilled workforce that is better prepared to take on the future challenges of a global and digital economy.

The cost of investing in early childhood development can be surprisingly affordable because many early childhood interventions can be integrated into existing services. For example, for an estimated average of US\$0.50 per person annually, programmes for families with young children can be added to existing health and nutrition services.¹²

Time to act

In many parts of the world, governments and their partners are providing children with adequate nutrition, protection and stimulation – and reaping the benefits.

But it is time to do more. It is time to pick up the pace of progress and transform our knowledge about early childhood development into investments and interventions that support families, communities and nations. It is time to act because we are losing the potential of 43 per cent of children in low- and middle-income countries – a loss we cannot afford.

More than 15 years ago, the Millennium Development Goals helped spur global action to save and improve the lives of millions of children. These efforts helped reduce rates of child mortality by more than half between 1990 and 2015.¹³

Now, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) present an opportunity to build on that progress by helping more children to survive – and thrive.

The SDGs, a road map for creating a better future, recognize the link between early childhood development and equity, productivity, wealth creation, sustainable growth and a more peaceful future. Embedded in the SDGs are targets on malnutrition, child mortality, early learning and violence – targets that outline an agenda for early childhood development.¹⁴

Early Moments Matter for every child presents data, practices and policies that can put governments on the path to success for children and success in achieving the SDGs.

The report synthesizes the neuroscience of early childhood development, covering essential issues including: the importance of

nutrition and health; the need for protection from extreme, prolonged and toxic stress; the threat of environmental pollutants; and the need for the responsive stimulation that comes from interactive and responsive parenting.

The report also draws attention to the millions of children who miss developmental milestones. It outlines methods and approaches for infusing nutrition, protection and responsive stimulation interventions into existing programmes in emergency response, health, nutrition, protection, and water, sanitation and hygiene –

programmes that reach the most disadvantaged children and families. And it makes the case for scaling up investment, evaluation and monitoring in early childhood development programmes. The report concludes with a six-point call to action that can place governments and their partners on the path towards a more prosperous and sustainable future.

A new global agenda comes with a responsibility to act. We have the science, knowledge and experience. Now, it is up to us to invest in children's brains and their futures. For their sake – and ours.

Call to action

The evidence is clear: Early childhood development must be a global and national priority. Governments already have pledged to achieve the early childhood development targets in the Sustainable Development Goals. But they need to back up this pledge with action and place early childhood development at the top of their economic and political agendas.

UNICEF calls on governments and partners to:

1. **Invest urgently in services that give young children, especially the most deprived, the best start in life.**

Increasing the overall share of budgetary allocations for early childhood development programming is a critical step governments can and should take. For example, allocating 10 per cent of all national education budgets to pre-primary education will greatly expand the number of children with access to early learning opportunities,¹⁵ which can improve their educational attainment and increase future earnings. Innovative financing can also help governments reach more children with more effective programming. Approaches

Twenty-first-century science underscores our shared responsibility to provide all young children with a strong foundation of responsive relationships, positive learning experiences and health-promoting environments as early as possible so they can grow into resilient adults with the skills to successfully manage the responsibilities of work, citizenship and parenting of the next generation. We cannot let this critical opportunity slip by. The time to invest in the future strength of our nations, our economies and our communities is in the earliest years of life. The clock is always ticking and the time to act is now.

Jack P. Shonkoff, M.D., Director of the Center on the Developing Child at

can include earmarking taxes to pay for early childhood development services or instituting ‘payment by results’ frameworks that tie investment to outcomes (*see Box 6.1*).

2. **Expand access to effective and essential early childhood development services in homes, schools, communities and health clinics.** To reach more children and families more cost-effectively, governments and their partners can integrate early childhood interventions into existing services such as routine health screenings at preschools and parenting support as part of home-health visits for new parents. Interventions that can be added to well-known and effective services such as antenatal care, nutrition support and community-based childcare, these interventions can be added: breastfeeding counselling, guidance on responsive stimulation, early learning, and parenting programmes to protect children from violence.
3. **Make family-friendly early childhood development policies a national priority – and a private sector imperative.** Policies, programmes and other support that enable parents and caregivers to provide the best start in life for their children pay off in healthier, better educated children, a better equipped workforce and more sustainable growth. All countries should provide two years of tuition-free pre-primary education, which is critical for early cognitive development. Key workplace policies include 12 months of paid parental leave; breastfeeding facilities and remunerated breastfeeding breaks for the first six months; and onsite child care and early learning programmes for the children of employees.
4. **Collect data on essential indicators of early childhood development and track progress.** To assess progress towards giving every child the best start in life, we need to measure young children’s social, emotional, cognitive, language and motor development against internationally comparable data. As countries track progress towards achieving the specific targets that address young children in the Sustainable Development Goals on health, nutrition, education and protection, they can also disaggregate data to better track equity gaps so they can reach the children in the greatest need.
5. **Provide dedicated leadership for early childhood development programmes and coordinate efforts more effectively across sectors.** Early childhood development programmes cut across sectors including health, nutrition, education, protection, and water, sanitation and hygiene. Policies and programmes also need to be integrated. A coordinating minister or body can oversee efforts so they are better

integrated and more effective and cost-effective. Similar structures at the provincial, municipal and village level can help reach the most deprived children.

6. **Drive demand for high-quality early childhood development services.** Parents and caregivers are the single most important factor in giving children the best possible start in life. Communication for development programming and other public information initiatives can build greater understanding of the critical importance of nutrition, protection and stimulation in helping children reach their full potential. With this understanding, families can generate greater demand for high-quality early childhood development services.

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