

THE LANCET EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT SERIES

Core Messages

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[Guiding message: “Nurturing care in the early years ensures individuals and societies thrive.”]

- The human brain develops faster after conception and through the ages of 2-3 than at any other time in life. It is also the time when we respond most readily to interventions. Young children’s healthy development depends on nurturing care—defined as care which ensures health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, safety and security, and early learning.
- Around 250 million children—or 43 percent—of all children under the age of five in low and middle income countries are at higher risk of not reaching their developmental potential due to stunting, poverty, and disadvantage, which threaten their nurturing care. Moreover, children in low and middle income countries face many adversities which, together, affect their health, wellbeing and learning throughout their lives. This not only has long-term effects on individuals, but also contributes to the cycle of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion that affects all countries.
- Effective parent support programs—like the WHO/UNICEF’s *Care for Child Development* and *Reach Up and Learn*, which provide training and resources for parents—can significantly improve the quality of nurturing care for young children.
- To provide nurturing care for their children, families need supportive policies, programs, and services from their communities and governments. Many existing services could be expanded to deliver early childhood development interventions for as little as an additional 50 cents per person each year.
- The time to act is now. The global community came together under the MDGs to improve child survival by more than 50 percent. Through the SDGs, we now must ensure that children not only survive, but thrive. We call upon the global community to accelerate the scale-up of early childhood development policies and multi-sectoral services, using health as a starting point, to reach the most disadvantaged children worldwide.

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- Early childhood development starts at conception, and is influenced by the health of both the mother and the father. When children thrive in their early years, they are able to reach their full development potential as adults, and their own children are more likely to reach their full potential as well.
- The first three years are particularly critical, as it is a period of rapid brain development and learning. New evidence about early development, particularly from the neurosciences and epigenetics, highlights how sensitive children are to environmental influences in their first 2-3 years of life. Developing secure attachments with their caregivers helps children develop resilience in the face of adversities.
- Nutrition and health of mothers and babies is critical. Nutritional deficiencies prior to conception, during pregnancy, and in the first 2-3 years of life can result in poor birth outcomes and life-long developmental delays or disabilities, and can be detrimental to learning and adult earning capacity.
- Early childhood development programs and interventions such as breastfeeding, play and stimulation, support health and nutrition, protect children against stress, increase learning at home, and lay the foundation for learning in school.
- Early childhood development interventions yield long-term benefits—boosting workplace productivity and income, and reducing inequities.
- Follow-up studies of interventions that optimized early childhood development have demonstrated the long-term economic effects these interventions have on adult outcomes.

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- Long-term studies show that growth failure from conception to age 2-3 has a severe impact on adult health and human capital, including lower educational attainment, adult earnings, and chronic disease.
- Suboptimal development of young children is estimated to lead to the loss of roughly a quarter of average adult earning potential.
- Estimates of children at risk for suboptimal development increase dramatically when adversities beyond poverty and stunting are added, such as low maternal schooling and child physical abuse, from 62.7 percent to 75.4 percent.
- Extreme poverty increases the likelihood that children will be exposed to other serious adversities, including family stress, child abuse and neglect, food insecurity, malnutrition, and exposure to violence, which is often compounded in communities with limited resources.
- The damaging effects of early deprivation can extend to adulthood, resulting in long-term brain changes that affect language, cognitive functioning, self-control, and emotional reactivity.
- The high cost of inaction is an imperative to act boldly. Consequences of inaction impact not only present, but also future generations, and the future costs of suboptimal development can be double that of current investments in the health and education sectors.

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- Evidence is rapidly accumulating that interventions, such as WHO/UNICEF’s *Care for Child Development* and *Reach Up and Learn*, can be well integrated into existing programs and service delivery platforms for health, nutrition, social, and child protection, helping improve the quality of nurturing care for young children.
- These interventions can also build on existing platforms for delivering parental and child services at scale to target vulnerable and difficult-to-reach populations, such as community-based programs and social safety nets, making the interventions more effective and more sustainable.
- Because of its extensive reach to pregnant women and young children, the health sector is uniquely positioned to serve as an entry point for multi-sectoral collaborations that support families and reach very young children.

- Health services are widely accessible, are a frequent point of contact for pregnant women, families, and young children, and are already providing many interventions which benefit child development.

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- Recent growth in research and policy show that momentum is growing to implement, expand, and scale up interventions to support young children's development.
- National laws and policies are shown to improve early childhood development by enabling parents to provide nurturing care for their young children. Policies that support parental income and nurturing care include paid parental leave for new mothers and fathers, breastfeeding breaks at work, increased minimum wages, and tuition-free pre-primary education.
- Building on existing structures and expanding maternal and child health services to include interventions that promote nurturing care is a cost-effective way to reduce the effects of adversities on young children. For example, for an estimated average of 50 cents per person per year, we could deliver two critical early childhood development interventions—enhancing nurturing care of children and supporting maternal depression—through existing health and nutrition services.
- Collaboration across all sectors is vital to the long-term sustainability and success of high-quality early childhood development services. Bridges must be built between health and nutrition, education, and social and child protection, among others, to address the multiple needs of young children, especially the most vulnerable.
- Early childhood development interventions have the potential to strengthen coordination across sectors for common health, social, and economic goals, and to bring together international, governmental, and civil society partners.

For example, Chile's scaled-up system of early childhood development has been guaranteed by law and funded in full by the government since 2007. The program currently reaches about 80 percent of the target population of pregnant women and unborn children, and ensures that children under the age of four living in high-risk conditions for poor early development have access to health care, age-appropriate stimulation at home, and education from nursery school through preschool. Strong

political leadership and collaboration between the Ministries of Social Development, Health, and Education has been critical to Chile's success.

- More attention must also be given to engaging families and communities in understanding the importance of early childhood development and the critical role that parents and caregivers play in their children's learning. This engagement further enables families and communities to demand and monitor quality of services to support their young children.

The time to act is now. The global community came together under the MDGs to improve child survival by more than 50 percent. Through the SDGs, we now must ensure that children not only survive, but thrive. We call upon the global community to accelerate the scale-up of early childhood development policies and multi-sectoral services, using health as a starting point, to reach the most disadvantaged children worldwide.

- The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a historic opportunity to implement at scale interventions to promote early childhood development. In turn, services and interventions to support early childhood development are essential to realizing the vision of the SDGs as well as several of the goals—eradicate poverty, end hunger and improve nutrition, ensure healthy lives, ensure lifelong learning, achieve gender equality, and reduce inequality in and between countries.
- The extensive benefits of nurturing care during the first years of a child's life are proven, and opportunities exist to reach young children and their families during pregnancy and the first years of a child's life, through health, nutrition, education, and social and child protection services.
- Yet, important challenges and gaps in knowledge remain. More research is needed to understand the effects of early and combined interventions on developmental outcomes, in childhood and later in life, especially in low and middle income countries.
- We must also gain a better understanding of workforce requirements to effectively deliver a range of high-quality services for early childhood development that are well coordinated and address the needs of families and children who are most vulnerable, including those with developmental difficulties or disabilities.
- We must make it a global priority to build consensus around the indicators, measurements, and tools that can be used to successfully assess the status of child development.

- Special attention must be given to populations who are displaced, living in conflict, or who are otherwise in need of humanitarian assistance.
- Investing in young children is a moral, economic, and social imperative. The SDGs have set the targets, and the Global Strategy for Women’s, Children’s and Adolescents’ Health and other, related strategies provide the roadmap towards their attainment. What we now need is political will and investments—by governments, development partners, academia, civil society, and all those who are concerned with the health and well-being of children, communities, and societies. Remember—early childhood development will not only benefit children of today but will have a direct impact on the stability and prosperity of nations in the future.