

The Early Years

An introduction

► What is early childhood development?

The early years of a child's life are critical in determining their future. From pregnancy to around the age of five, children's brains and bodies develop faster than at any other point in life.

There is no better window of opportunity to transform a child's outcomes. The impacts of the early years are profound, long-lasting, and touch all aspects of life from learning potential to future health.

Babies and toddlers need the right ingredients for healthy development, which include good nutrition, a safe environment, and stimulation from caregivers like parents.

► In the first five years, a child's brain is...

Building foundations

During early childhood, a complex network of billions of connections form the brain's architecture, creating the foundations for future learning and behaviour.

Shaped by experiences

Babies' brains are shaped by experiences like sights, sounds and touch, as every interaction tells brain cells to create new connections.

Wired by parents

When parents or other caregivers talk, sing and play with their babies, they help to build a healthy brain that is wired to learn and interact with others.

Vulnerable to stress

Adverse experiences like abuse and neglect can cause "toxic stress." This disrupts the brain's architecture, increasing the likelihood of developmental delays and health problems.¹

▷ The key role of parents

Important barriers stand in the way of millions of children reaching their full potential. However, the right interventions can mitigate problems which harm child development, such as malnutrition or pollution, and promote positive experiences which improve child outcomes, like loving care and play.

The best way to give children a healthy start is to support the people who care for them. This means helping parents manage issues which may negatively impact their children, such as poor parental mental health, and encouraging good parenting practices like breastfeeding and responsive play. With stable, empathetic caregivers, children can flourish even in the most difficult circumstances.

To make that happen, families need support from society, which includes both government and the broader community. This requires policies and programmes to serve everyone, as well as extra support for the most disadvantaged to help level the playing field. Through the provision of services like healthcare and childcare, and the family-friendly design of public spaces, societies can shape healthy environments for all children and help them on the path to realizing their full potential.



▷ Early childhood in numbers



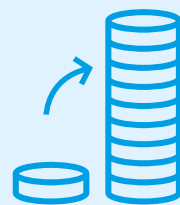
> 1 million

neural connections are formed every second in a young child's brain²



43%

of under-fives in low- and middle-income countries are at risk of poor development³



\$4 to \$9

estimated return for every \$1 spent on high-quality early years programmes⁴

REFERENCES

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- 2 Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. (online). InBrief: The Science of Early Childhood Development. Available at: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-ecd/> (accessed June 2019).
- 3 Lu, C., Black, M.M. and Richter, L.M. (2016). Risk of poor development in young children in low-income and middle-income countries: an estimation and analysis at the global, regional, and country level. *The Lancet Global Health* 4(12): e916–e922.
- 4 The Center for High Impact Philanthropy, The University of Pennsylvania. (online). High Return on Investment (ROI). Available at: <https://www.impact.upenn.edu/our-analysis/opportunities-to-achieve-impact/early-childhood-toolkit/why-invest/what-is-the-return-on-investment/> (accessed June 2019).