

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

What is Early Childhood Development?

Early childhood is a critical period in a child's development. Quality ECD programs provide a comprehensive package of services that target all areas of a young child's development: physical, cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional. Inadequate health, nutrition, care, or cognitive stimulation during this time can significantly impact a child's health and well-being, ability to learn and emotional development.

These early interventions are shown to be most effective when they integrate services from multiple sectors, combining health and nutrition components with cognitive stimulation and early learning.¹ This integrated approach is best done not by creating new interventions or parallel approaches, but by incorporating cognitive stimulation, early learning, and other interventions into existing successful health and nutrition programs or pre-primary programs rather than starting from scratch.

Why Invest in Early Childhood Development?

ECD programs not only help ensure that children have a healthy start to life and reach their full developmental potential, they also have long-term positive impacts on children's achievement in primary school and beyond. A significant body of evidence exists demonstrating the cross-cutting impact that quality ECD provision has on children's development and success.

- **Neuroscience:** The most rapid brain development takes place in the first 1000 days of a child's life, when the brain develops 700 neural connections per second.² These connections contribute not only to an individual's cognitive ability and mental health, but also to his or her social and emotional development and behavior.³ Under-stimulation and stress can damage a child's brain development and lead to long-term negative consequences.
- **High rates of return:** ECD programs have been proven to reap high rates of return on initial investments; evidence shows the earlier the investment in a child's human capital, the greater the long-term return.⁴ ECD programs are also more effective and less expensive than later interventions aimed at older children or adults.
- **School readiness and success:** ECD programs enable children to develop a foundational base of knowledge and skills that prepares them for success in primary school. Children who attend quality ECD programs tend to stay in primary school longer, have higher academic achievement, and are less likely to repeat a grade or drop out.⁵ Early investments in ECD programs therefore underpin and strengthen investments in primary school and multiply the positive outcomes of formal education.
- **Non-cognitive skills:** In addition to supporting cognitive development, ECD programs help children develop important non-cognitive skills such as teamwork, communication, self-discipline, motivation, and creativity that are essential to success both in the classroom and later in the workplace.⁶
- **Equity:** Disadvantaged or marginalized children benefit the most from ECD interventions, which offer the chance to level the playing field for children entering primary school and close the achievement gap between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers early

before interventions become much costlier. ECD programs also help address gender inequalities; as childcare responsibilities decrease, adolescent girls can return to school and mothers have more educational and professional opportunities.

- **Central to the SDGs:** While ECD is mentioned explicitly in Sustainable Development Goal 4, ECD provision also strongly supports the attainment of most other SDGs, including eradicating poverty, achieving gender equality, and reducing social inequities.

Despite the clear benefits, globally ECD programs remain severely underfunded and under-prioritized and the most marginalized children are still the most likely to be left out. In developing countries more than 200 million children are at risk of not reaching their full developmental potential due to poverty, malnutrition, and inadequate learning opportunities⁷ and in 2014 just about half of the world's children (and only 18% in developing countries) had access to pre-primary learning programs.⁸ With such great unmet need, governments alone are unable to provide universal access to quality ECD programs to their citizens. Increased, targeted, and better coordinated resources from both international donor agencies as well as the private sector are essential to expand access to comprehensive ECD programs and ensure that all children have the opportunity to reach their full developmental potential and succeed in school and beyond.

What has GBC-Education Done on Early Childhood Development?

In September 2014, the Global Business Coalition for Education and the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution launched a *Business for Early Childhood Development (Biz4ECD) Task Force*. The Biz4ECD Task Force's first in-person meeting that fall, hosted by GBC-Education Executive Chair Sarah Brown, brought together representatives from the private sector, donor agencies, and NGOs, united in their commitment to improving the lives of children around the world. In 2015, the Co-Chairs of the Task Force, Sarah Brown, and more than 40 business leaders signed an open letter prepared by Ready Nation encouraging UN leaders to include ECD as a priority in the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (ECD was ultimately included in SDG 4).

Since its creation, the Business for ECD Task Force's aim has been to demonstrate the value that businesses attach to investing in young children by using its collective power to influence global discussions as well as country and company policies and practices. The task force will continue to work to effect change at company, country, and global levels in three main areas:

1. **Messaging.** Establishing common messaging that highlights the business case for investments in ECD.
2. **Influence:** Advocating for ECD internally within a company and externally to policymakers and business associations by establishing good practice guidelines and researching areas to pursue action.
3. **Action:** Effecting change on the ground through actions at corporate policy and programmatic implementation levels.

¹ Black, Maureen M., Walker, Susan P., Wachs, Theodore D., Ulkuer, Nurper, Meeks Gardner, Julie, Grantham-McGregor, Sally, Lozoff, Betsy, Engle, Patrice L., and Meena Cabral de Mello. (2008). *Policies to reduce undernutrition include child development*. The Lancet 371(9611): pp. 454-5.

² Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. *The Science of Early Childhood Development*.

³ Shonkoff, Jack P., Richter, Linda, van der Gaag, Jacques & Zulfiqar A. Bhutta. (2012). *"An Integrated Scientific Framework for Child Survival and Early Childhood Development."* Pediatrics 129(2): pp. E460-472.

⁴ Heckman, James J. *The Heckman Curve*.

⁵ Myers, Robert and Cassie Landers. (1989). [*Preparing Children for Schools and Schools for Children*](#). (Paper commissioned for the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development meeting in UNESCO Paris).

⁶ Young, Mary. (2014). [*The Case for Investing in Early Childhood*](#). United Nations Development Programme: Human Development Records.

⁷ UNESCO (2015). [*EFA Global Monitoring Report 2015. Education for all 2000-2015: Achievements and challenges*](#).

⁸ UNESCO Institute for Statistics. [*Gross Enrolment Ratio by Level of Education*](#). Accessed 5 April 2016.