

# Early Child Development: *A Powerful Equalizer*

Final Report



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## Final Report

for the World Health Organization's  
Commission on the Social Determinants of Health

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## Abstract

This document synthesizes knowledge about opportunities to improve the state of early child development (ECD) on a global scale. In keeping with international policy standards, we define early childhood as the period from prenatal development to eight years of age. What children experience during the early years *sets a critical foundation for their entire lifecourse*. This is because ECD—including health, physical, social/emotional and language/cognitive domains—strongly influences basic learning, school success, economic participation, social citizenry, and health. Within the work of the Commission, ECD has strong links to other social determinants of health, particularly Urban Settings, Gender, Globalization, and Health Systems. Areas of common concern with these determinants are discussed throughout this document. Research confirms a strong association between child survival and child development, such that the child survival and health agendas are indivisible from ECD. Our developmental approach to the early years includes the factors that affect child health and survival, but goes beyond these to consider how the early years can be used to create thriving global citizens. Here, we provide a framework for understanding the environments (and their characteristics) that play a significant role in influencing early development. The evidence and its interpretation is derived primarily from three sources: 1) peer-reviewed scientific literature, 2) reports from governments, international agencies, and civil society groups, and 3) a Knowledge Network of experts in ECD that is representative in both international and inter-sectoral terms. The principal strategic insight of this document is that the nurturant qualities of the environments where children grow up, live and learn—parents, caregivers, family and community—will have the most significant impact on their development. In most situations, parents and caregivers cannot provide strong nurturant environments without help from local, regional, national, and international agencies. We propose

ways in which government and civil society actors, from local to international, can work in concert with families to provide equitable access to strong nurturant environments for all children globally.

**Key Words:** early child development; equity; social determinants of health; lifecourse; rights of the child

*Abstract*



## Political Briefing

### Early Child Development: Investment in a Country’s Future

The early years of life are crucial in influencing a range of health and social outcomes across the lifecourse. Research now shows that many challenges in adult society—mental health problems, obesity/stunting, heart disease, criminality, competence in literacy and numeracy—have their roots in early childhood. Economists now argue on the basis of the available evidence that investment in early childhood is the most powerful investment a country can make, with returns over the lifecourse many times the amount of the original investment. Governments can make major and sustained improvements in society by implementing policies that take note of this powerful body of research while, at the same time, fulfilling their obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Research now shows that children’s early environment has a vital impact on the way their brains develop. A baby is born with billions of brain cells that represent lifelong potential, but, to develop, these brain cells need to connect with each other. The more stimulating the early environment, the more positive connections are formed in the brain and the better the child thrives in all aspects of his or her life, in terms of physical development, emotional and social development, and the ability to express themselves and acquire knowledge.

We know what kinds of environments promote early child health and development. While nutrition and physical growth are basic, young children also need to spend their time in caring, responsive environments that protect them from inappropriate disapproval and punishment. They need opportunities to explore their world, to play, and to learn how to speak and listen to others. *Parents and other caregivers want to provide these opportunities for their children, but they need support from community and government at all levels.* For example, children benefit when national governments adopt “family-friendly” social

protection policies that guarantee adequate income for all, and allow parents and caregivers to effectively balance their time spent at home and work. *Despite this knowledge, it is estimated that at least 200 million children in developing countries alone are not reaching their full potential.*

*Political leaders can play an important role in guaranteeing universal access to a range of early child development services: parenting and caregiver support, quality childcare, primary healthcare, nutrition, education, and social protection.* In the early years, the health care system has a pivotal role to play, as it is the point of first contact and can serve as a gateway to other early childhood services. To be effective, services at all levels need to be better coordinated and to converge at the family and local community in a way that puts the child at the centre.

These kinds of family-friendly policies and practices clearly benefit children and families, but they also result in economic benefits to the larger society. Globally, those societies that invest in children and families in the early years—rich or poor—have the most literate and numerate populations. These are the societies that have the best health status and lowest levels of health inequality in the world.

Success in promoting early child development does not depend upon a society being wealthy. Because early child development programs rely primarily on the skills of caregivers, the cost of effective programs varies with the wage structure of a society. Regardless of their level of wealth, societies can make progress on early child development by allocating as little as \$1.00 in this area for every \$10.00 spent on health and education.

*Child Survival and Child Health agendas are indivisible from Early Child Development. That is, taking a developmental perspective on the early years provides an overarching framework of understanding that subsumes issues of survival and health. A healthy start in life gives each child an equal chance to thrive and grow into an adult who makes a positive contribution to the community—economically and socially.*

Political  
Briefing



## Executive Summary

The early child period is considered to be *the most important* developmental phase throughout the lifespan. Healthy early child development (ECD)—which includes the physical, social/emotional, and language/cognitive domains of development, each equally important—strongly influences well-being, obesity/stunting, mental health, heart disease, competence in literacy and numeracy, criminality, and economic participation throughout life. What happens to the child in the early years is critical for the child’s developmental trajectory and lifecourse.

The principal strategic insight of this document is that the nurturant qualities of the environments where children grow up, live and learn matter the most for their development, yet parents cannot provide strong nurturant environments without help from local, regional, national, and international agencies. Therefore, this report’s principal contribution is to propose ways in which government and civil society actors, from local to international, can work in concert with families to provide equitable access to strong nurturant environments for all children globally. Recognizing the strong impact of ECD on adult life, it is imperative that governments recognize that disparities in the nurturant environments required for healthy child development will impact differentially on the outcome of different nations and societies. In some societies, inequities in ECD translate into vastly different life chances for children; in others, however, disparities in ECD reach a critical point, where they become a threat to peace and sustainable development.

The early years are marked by the most rapid development, especially of the central nervous system. *The environmental conditions to which children are exposed in the earliest years literally “sculpt” the developing brain.* The environments that are responsible for fostering nurturant conditions for children range from the intimate realm of the family to the broader socioeconomic context shaped by governments, international agen-

cies, and civil society. These environments and their characteristics are the determinants of ECD; in turn, ECD is a determinant of health, well-being, and learning skills across the balance of the lifecourse.

The seeds of adult gender inequity are sewn in early childhood. In the early years, gender equity issues—in particular, gender socialization, feeding practices, and access to schooling—are determinants of ECD. Early gender inequity, when reinforced by power relations, biased norms and day-to-day experiences in the family, school, community, and broader society, go on to have a profound impact on adult gender inequity. Gender equity from early childhood onwards influences human agency and empowerment in adulthood.

Economists now argue on the basis of the available evidence that investment in early childhood is the most powerful investment a country can make, with returns over the lifecourse many times the size of the original investment.

The scope of the present report is fourfold:

1. To demonstrate which environments matter most for children. This includes environments from the most intimate (family) to the most remote (global).
2. To review which environmental configurations are optimal for ECD, including aspects of environments that are economic, social, and physical in nature.
3. To determine the “contingency relationships” that connect the broader socioeconomic context of society to the quality of nurturing in intimate environments such as families and communities.
4. To highlight opportunities to foster nurturant conditions for children at multiple levels of society (from family-level action to national and global governmental action) and by multiple means (i.e. through programmatic implementation, to “child-centered” social and economic policy development).

In keeping with international policy standards, early childhood is defined as the period from prenatal development to eight years of age. The evidentiary base, as well as

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*Economists now argue on the basis of the available evidence that investment in early childhood is the most powerful investment a country can make, with returns over the lifecourse many times the size of the original investment.*

interpretation of the body of evidence, is derived from three primary sources:

- 1) peer-reviewed scientific literature,
- 2) reports from governments, international agencies, and civil society groups, and
- 3) international experts in the field of ECD (including the Commission on Social Determinants of Health, Knowledge Network for ECD) that is representative in both international and inter-sectoral terms.

This evidence-based multiple-sourced approach ensures that the conclusions and recommendations of this report are borne out of the perspectives of a diverse array of stakeholders and broadly applicable to societies throughout the world.

*One guiding principle is an “equity-based approach” to providing nurturant environments for children everywhere.* Multiple perspectives—from the provisions of human and child rights declarations to the realities reflected by research evidence—make clear the importance of equity. Programs and policies must create marked improvements in the circumstances of societies’ most disadvantaged children, not just in absolute terms, but in comparison to the most advantaged children as well.

What is now known is that, in every society, inequities in socioeconomic resources result in inequities in ECD. The relationship is much more insidious than solely differentiating the rich from the poor; rather, any additional gain in social and economic resources to a given family results in commensurate gains in the developmental outcomes of the children in that family. This step-wise relationship between socioeconomic conditions and ECD is called a “gradient effect.” However, some societies are more successful than others at “dulling” the

disadvantaged children are developmentally stronger than disadvantaged children in other nations, whereas, in all nations, children at the higher ends of the socioeconomic spectrum tend to demonstrate relatively strong outcomes.

In this report we provide a framework for understanding the environments (and their characteristics) that play a significant role in providing nurturant conditions to all children in an equitable manner. The framework acts as a guide to understanding the relationships between these environments, putting the child at the center of her or his surroundings. The environments are not strictly hierarchical, but rather are truly interconnected. At the most intimate level is the family environment. At a broader level are residential communities (such as neighbourhoods), relational communities (such as those based on religious or other social bonds), and the ECD service environment. Each of these environments (where the child actually grows up, lives, and learns) is situated in a broad socioeconomic context that is shaped by factors at the regional, national, and global level.

The framework affirms the importance of a lifecourse perspective in decision-making regarding ECD. Actions taken at any of these environmental levels will affect children not only in present day, but also throughout their lives. The framework also suggests that historical time is critically influential for children; large institutional and structural aspects of societies (e.g. government policy-clusters, programs, and the like) matter for ECD, and these are “built” or “dismantled” over long periods of time.

Socioeconomic inequities in developmental outcomes result from inequities in the degree to which the experiences and environmental conditions for children are nurturant. *Thus, all recommendations for action stem from one overarching goal: to improve the nurturant qualities of the experiences children have in the environments where they grow up, live, and learn.* A broad array of experiences and environmental conditions matter. These include those that are intimately connected to the child, and therefore readily identifiable (e.g. the quality of time and care provided

by parents and caregivers and the physical conditions of the child’s surroundings), but also more distal factors that in various ways influence the child’s access to nurturant conditions (e.g., whether government policies provide families and communities with sufficient income and employment, health care resources, early childhood education, safe neighborhoods, decent housing, etc.).

While genetic predispositions and bio-physical characteristics partially explain how environment and experience shape ECD, the best evidence leads us to consider the child as a social actor who shapes and is in turn shaped by his or her environment. This is known as the “transactional model,” which emphasizes that the principal driving force of child development is relationships. Because strong nurturant relationships can make for healthy ECD, *socioeconomic circumstances, despite their importance, are not fate.*

*The family environment* is the primary source of experience for a child, both because family members (or other primary caregivers) provide the largest share of human contact with children and because families mediate a child’s contact with the broader environment. Perhaps the most salient features of the family environment are its social and economic resources. Family social resources include parenting skills and education, cultural practices and approaches, intra-familial relations, and the health status of family members. Economic resources include wealth, occupational status, and dwelling conditions. The gradient effect of family resources on ECD is the most powerful explanation for differences in children’s well-being across societies. Young children need to spend their time in warm responsive environments that protect them from inappropriate disapproval and punishment. They need opportunities to explore their world, to play, and to learn how to speak and listen to others. Families want to provide these opportunities for their children, but they need support from community and government at all levels.

Children and their families are also shaped by the residential community (where the child and family live) and the relational communities (family social ties to those with a common identity) in which they are embed-

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