

UNICEF report urges investment in early childhood development ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

21 September 2017: The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) launched a report that finds 32 countries lack three basic policies to support healthy brain development in young children. The report urges governments to invest in policies that support pre-primary education, paid parental leave and paid breastfeeding breaks to support early childhood development, all of which will contribute to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Titled 'Early Moments Matter for Every Child,' the report reviews three national policies critical to support young children's brain development: two years of free pre-primary education; paid breastfeeding breaks for new mothers for the first six months; and adequate paid parental leave. The report finds that only 15 countries have these three policies in place while 32 countries lack these national policies, resulting in 85 million children under five growing up in countries without these basic policies in place. Forty percent of these children live in Bangladesh and the US.

The report argues that these policies help parents to protect their children and provide them with better nutrition, learning and play experiences in the first 1,000 days of their life, a time period critical for brain development that is never again repeated. The report finds that investments in early childhood development contributes to better education and health outcomes, high individual earnings and lower individual crime. There are also significant future economic gains: each US\$1 investment in programmes that support breastfeeding yields a return of US\$35; and every US\$1 investment in early childhood care and education for the most disadvantaged children can generate up to US\$17 in return.

In addition, the report highlights other precarious development conditions for children, including children living in conflict-affected areas, deprived of stimulating activities fundamental for healthy brain growth and starved of nutritious food. For example, the report finds that 25 percent of all children between the ages of 2 and 4 years old in 64 countries do not take part in activities such as playing, reading or singing, all of which are critical for early brain development.

The report cautions that failure to protect and provide early development opportunities for the most disadvantaged children undermines the potential growth of entire societies and economies. UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake emphasized that without investments in the most vulnerable children and families, the world "will continue to perpetuate intergenerational cycles of disadvantage and inequality" and undermine long-term strength and stability.

To support early childhood development, the UNICEF report urges governments to invest in children and their families through encouraging family-friendly policies and prioritizing two years of free pre-primary education, paid breastfeeding breaks and paid parental leave, especially for the most deprived and vulnerable children. The report further recommends: investing in and expanding early childhood development services in homes, schools, communities and health clinics; making family-friendly policies a national priority; giving working parents the time and resources needed to support their children's brain development; and collecting and disaggregating data on early childhood development and tracking progress among the most vulnerable.

SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (good health and well-being), (SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) all contain targets on early childhood development. The report argues these targets should become top-tier priorities to build a solid foundation for every child and further connect early childhood development with efforts to create equity, prosperity and sustainability, among other Goals. UNICEF launched the report at a high-level event on the sidelines of the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA). [UN Press Release] ^[3] [UNICEF Press Release] ^[4] [Publication: Early Moments Matter for Every Child] ^[5]

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