


Act for early years: A call for a global movement to support the world's youngest children ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

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Attachment	Size
 AFEY Case Report.pdf ^[4]	4.13 MB

Executive (action) summary

It's what any parent wants. It's what anyone should want for any child. The best start in life. A healthy beginning. A foundation for the future.

Yet in every country and most communities across the world, the opportunities offered to a newborn child are based on the luck of the draw, predetermined before birth and perpetuated by inequality and lack of services.

Eight years ago, world leaders set a target that by 2030 every girl and boy should have access to “quality early childhood development, care and education”, so they are properly prepared for primary school. But this target is off track and there is no recognised plan in place to achieve it.

Around the world:

- More than half of all young children (349 million) do not have the access they need to childcare, and around half of pre-primary-aged children are not enrolled in any form of early education.
- At least 175 million children are not enrolled in pre-primary education programmes (UNICEF 2010).
- One in four children aged five have never had any form of pre-primary education (UNESCO 2022).
- Malnutrition and stunting impact an estimated 250 million children under five, thwarting their development at a critical moment in their lives (Ndayizigiye et al 2022).
- Of the world's 100 million displaced people, just under 12 million are estimated to be children under the age of five (Moving Minds Alliance, 2022).

It's time to end this crisis in early years services, a crisis which is both very local and global in its nature.

The high cost or lack of availability of early years support is the main reason why women leave the workforce, sometimes never to return. When this happens, it is not only the women and their families who suffer – businesses lose valuable employees, economies lose productivity and tax revenues decline. The first years of childhood are quite literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Research has shown that up to 90% of a child's brain development takes place between birth and the age of five, when more than one million neural connections are formed every second, a rate that is never matched again.

Without adequate support, children are at risk of going through life with poorer physical and mental health. They face a struggle to learn and, later, to earn a living.

Investment in the early years supports future learning, health and wellbeing, and upholds the right of every child to survive and thrive. It also promotes social equity and higher economic returns, because failing to give children the best start in life perpetuates cycles of poverty and inequality.

The early years is when inequality sets in. Children from more prosperous, educated backgrounds tend to begin primary school ready to learn, but more than 40% of children in low- and middle-income countries – almost 250 million children – are at risk of not attaining their full development potential due to poverty, inadequate nutrition, exposure to stress and lack of early stimulation and learning (Black et al. 2017; Lu, Black, and Richter 2016).

Despite the science and evidence in favour of investing in the early years, this critical period in a child's life receives some of the lowest levels of investment from governments around the world, with the situation only worsening in recent years. The Covid-19 pandemic

resulted in millions of young children missing out on vital care and learning. With funding often diverted to other sectors, rising energy prices, increases in the cost of living and staff shortages, millions of families were left without access to quality affordable care, preschool, primary health and nutrition services.

The opportunity

When the early years are done right, a child's life chances – their health, employment and wider contribution to their community – can be transformed.

It is therefore critical to provide a comprehensive package of care – good-quality education and learning, constructive play, sound healthcare, nurturing care, nutrition and protection – for the youngest children.

Research has shown that:

- Among children from disadvantaged backgrounds, quality care and early education meant they were 17% less likely to be suspended from school, 26% more likely to be employed and 11% more likely to enjoy good health (Heckman 2021).
- Early years interventions can help narrow the wide gaps in outcomes and opportunities that exist between children from higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds and also the gender gap between boys and girls (G20).
- Expanding the childcare economy offers substantial employment opportunities. The expansion of the childcare workforce to meet current needs could create 43 million jobs globally (World Bank, 2021).

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