

UNICEF urges access to early learning for the most disadvantaged children ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

NEW YORK, 25 April 2012 - As the world celebrates Global Action Week for Education, UNICEF calls for attention and investment to provide early learning opportunities to all children, especially the poor and marginalized.

Latest data indicates that more than 200 million children from low- and middle-income countries under the age of five are failing to attain their developmental potential because of poverty, poor health and limited opportunities to learn.

This year's theme for Global Action Week focuses on early learning under the slogan "Rights from the Start! Early Childhood Education Now!" Today, more than half of the world's children remain excluded from pre-primary education.

Early childhood is defined as the period from birth to eight years old. A time of remarkable brain growth, it lays the foundation for future learning and development. In fact, 85 per cent of a child's brain develops by age five, even before a child enters school.

"Quality early childhood programmes, designed for the most vulnerable and combined with parenting support, have a significant impact on linguistic, cognitive and social skills necessary for lifelong learning," said Susan Durston, UNICEF's Global Chief of Education.

"Opening the doors for early learning, also presents a unique opportunity to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage for many millions of children, including breaking down gender stereotypes through positive early gender socialization."

By helping children prepare for school, early learning initiatives also lessen the effects of household deprivation, halt the transfer of educational disadvantage from parents to children and strengthen prospects for economic growth for families and communities.

However, many barriers stand in the way of early childhood learning. Barriers such as the lack of importance and resource allocation given to pre-primary education, lack of annual statistical data, cost of enrolment, limited availability of nearby early childhood facilities and a dearth of skilled educators and teachers persist in excluding children from pre-primary education.

While an increasing number of countries have developed and ratified national policies on early childhood care and learning, many of these policies continue to suffer from insufficient funding and fragmented planning, and as a result, they ultimately fail to translate into action.

To address some of these constraints, UNICEF focuses on ensuring that children enrol in school at the appropriate age and that those who enter the first grade of primary school come ready to learn.

By providing appropriate options for early learning, countries can then decide depending on the situation which strategy and option to implement for maximum result in getting children the opportunity for early learning.

For example, the Getting Ready for School: A Child to Child approach initiative provides a cost-effective supplemental model countries with resource constraints can use, which has shown significant gains in children's readiness for school as well as get them into school at the right age.

Supporting countries in the development of national policies that support universal school readiness and translating them into action also helps provide this service to young children, especially the most marginalized.

"Getting children ready for school and in school at the right age demands concerted efforts and political will," Durston said. "By investing in our youngest learners now, we not only enable them to fulfil their potential, but also contribute toward achieving all the Millennium Development Goals."

-reprinted from UNICEF

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