Early Childhood Development

About 80 percent of a person’s brain is formed in the first three years of life.

Advancements in the field of neuroscience highlight the impact that both genetics and social environments have on a child’s development. Effective parenting, healthy families and enriching environments are key drivers of optimal early growth. For formal education to have its intended effect, early childhood care and development must address the challenges faced by children born into marginalized populations.

Over three-quarters of children in low-income countries, and nearly two-thirds in lower-middle income countries, are missing out on preprimary education. Half the world’s preprimary school-aged children — at least 175 million — are already missing out on a critical opportunity to develop the skills that support a lifetime of learning. This disadvantage negatively affects children’s chances of reaching their full potential. Approximately 415 million children are living in areas affected by conflict. High levels of stress can be devastating for the brain development of young children.

Although the expansion of access to early childhood education for the most vulnerable children is recognized as the best investment available in the sector, the poorest children are on average seven times less likely than children from the wealthiest families to attend early childhood education programs. Early Childhood Development (ECD) includes investments in a child’s health, education, protection and non-cognitive skills, from before birth until age eight. Effective ECD is achieved when children feel cared for, nurtured and protected. The programming can disrupt multigenerational cycles of poverty in marginalized communities, improve parent-child interactions, and help children develop a foundation for learning. Quality ECD increases the likelihood that children will succeed in school, earn higher incomes as adults, and provide better education, nutrition and health care for their own children.
UNICEF in Action

UNICEF’s vision for ECD programs is informed by the concept that all children need nutrition, stimulation, protection and love for optimal brain development. This integrated approach emphasizes the importance of family support, health, early education, and social and emotional learning — and provides a huge opportunity to help children around the globe.

UNICEF is helping shape national policies through setting standards for early learning and strengthening teachers’ and parents’ abilities to support children as they transition to school. UNICEF uses evidence to pilot programs and policies, eventually handing these over to governments for long-term implementation. Prior to 2010, about half of all children in China attended early-childhood education programs. UNICEF invested $8 million in pilot programming for ECD in 29 rural areas, demonstrating its commitment to helping every child. Because of the program’s success and UNICEF’s guidance, the government committed $7.8 billion, with a goal to reach all children in China with early childhood education by 2020. This approach — using evidence to design smart pilot programs that shape national policies — is one of UNICEF’s strengths and leads to enduring change at scale.

Peacebuilding is built into UNICEF’s early education programs. Because attitudes toward others can be more fluidly shaped during early childhood, UNICEF’s programs are inclusive of children from varying backgrounds and cultures. Integrating peacebuilding into early childhood programs can build critical social and emotional skills, reduce behavioral problems, and build empathy and resilience when children experience strenuous situations later in life. In Bangladesh, UNICEF is providing structured play programs designed to teach children ways to peacefully resolve conflicts and problems through teamwork.

Conflict has forced 27 million children out of school in 24 conflict-affected countries. These children need safe spaces to learn, play and recover a sense of normalcy amid crisis. UNICEF’s ECD kits provide tools to help caregivers meet the special needs of young children in emergencies: brightly colored paper and pencils, construction blocks, hand puppets, puzzles and memory games to stimulate learning, creativity and problem-solving skills. Coupled with support from teachers, caregivers and parents, young children can use the kits to recover from trauma — in the aftermath of a natural disaster or during a protracted crisis.

UNICEF Early Childhood Development Snapshot

In 2019, UNICEF:

- Reached 45% of the world’s children under five years old with vaccines, helping to avert millions of child deaths from preventable diseases.
- Provided direct support for new WASH services in 3,341 healthcare facilities.
- Reached 307 million children under five with services to prevent stunting and other forms of malnutrition in early childhood.
- Delivered ECD programs to more than 610,000 children under 5 years of age affected by emergencies.
- Provided 16,000 children in emergencies with the opportunity for play and stimulation through ECD kits.

Less than 2 percent of overall education budgets are allocated to preprimary education.