



children first.

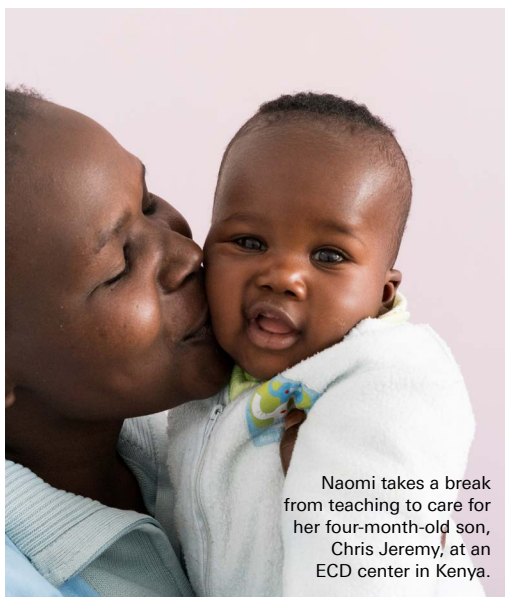
# Early Childhood Development

Nearly 250 million children under age 5 — about 1 in 3 children worldwide — are at risk of never reaching their full potential.

Advances in neuroscience show that social environments are as important as genetics in influencing how children develop. Good parenting, strong families and enriching environments are key drivers of optimal early development. During the first years of life, a child's brain has the potential to activate 1,000 brain cells every second. Each one of those neurons has the power to connect to another 10,000 neurons thousands of times per second.

Yet nearly half of all three- to six-year-olds don't have access to early education, and nearly one in four children under age five is stunted. When children experience neglect, violence and emotional distress in early childhood, their brain development can be compromised by stress, which can have lifelong negative consequences. About 535 million children — nearly one in four — live in countries affected by conflict or disaster. This can be devastating for the brain development of young children, reducing their future earning potential and costing billions in foregone GDP.

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. It can break intergenerational cycles of poverty in marginalized communities. It can improve parent-child interactions, help children develop a critical foundation for learning and improve readiness for school. Quality ECD



Naomi takes a break from teaching to care for her four-month-old son, Chris Jeremy, at an ECD center in Kenya.

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makes it more likely 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 global vision for ECD is that all children should be physically healthy, mentally alert and ready for school through an integrated approach that includes family support, health, nutrition, early education and social and emotional learning.

UNICEF invests in scaling up access to health services and support for the most vulnerable.

## About UNICEF

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) works in more than 190 countries and territories to put children first. UNICEF has helped save more children's lives than any other humanitarian organization by providing health care and immunizations, clean water and sanitation, nutrition, education, emergency relief and more. UNICEF USA supports UNICEF's work through fundraising, advocacy and education in the United States. Together, we are working toward the day when no children die from preventable causes and every child has a safe and healthy childhood.

For more information, visit [unicefusa.org](http://unicefusa.org).

Every day, 16,000 children under age five die from preventable causes. About half of those deaths occur in the first 28 days of life. UNICEF works with governments to strengthen health systems, while also investing in community health workers to provide access to routine immunization and maternal, newborn and child health care.

Nutrition is critical from conception to age two — the first 1,000 days. During this window of opportunity, mothers and babies need proper nutrition to ensure that children's brains and bodies develop fully. UNICEF works to prevent malnutrition by educating and empowering mothers with services in support of good nutrition for infants and young children: the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding from birth until six months, followed by the introduction of safe complementary foods and continued breastfeeding for at least one year. UNICEF also works to prevent and treat maternal malnutrition, address micronutrient deficiencies and treat severe acute malnutrition.

In terms of early childhood education, UNICEF is helping shape national policies, applying standards for early learning, and strengthening teachers' and parents' abilities to support children as they transition to school. UNICEF uses evidence to pilot successful programs and policies and hand these over to governments for long-term implementation at scale. For example, in China, prior to 2010, only about half of children attended early childhood education programs. UNICEF invested \$8 million to pilot such programs in 29 rural areas, demonstrating their importance for all children. Based on the program's success and UNICEF's guidance, the government committed to invest \$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 lasting change at scale.

UNICEF also integrates peacebuilding into its early education programs. Attitudes can be shaped more easily during early childhood, as children are amenable to bonding with others, including those who are different from them. Integrating peacebuilding into early childhood programs can build critical social and emotional skills, reduce behavioral problems

and build empathy and resilience when children experience difficult situations later in life. For example, in Bangladesh, UNICEF has invested in structured play programs designed to teach children ways to peacefully resolve conflicts and problems through teamwork.

Globally, one in 11 young children has spent her most critical period of development growing up in conflict. 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.

### **2016 UNICEF Early Childhood Development Snapshot**

In 2016, UNICEF:

- Reached 45% of the world's children with vaccines, helping to avert millions of child deaths from preventable diseases.
- Provided 15.7 million children with learning materials through nearly 331,000 classrooms.
- Reached over 7,100 schools in 71 countries with water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.
- Treated 3.4 million children for severe acute malnutrition in 71 countries.
- Reached 8.3 million children in 65 countries through support for micronutrient fortification programs.
- Helped over 70% of women living with HIV to receive treatment for the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV.
- Conducted peacebuilding education programs in 14 conflict-affected countries, reaching more than 2 million children, teachers and community members to promote peace in homes, schools and communities. ●

An estimated 250 million children have not learned basic math and reading skills, even though 130 million of them have reached Grade 4.