



The case for investing in early childhood development

Early Childhood Development and Nurturing Care

Early childhood development (ECD) refers to a child's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development starting prenatally through age eight. The conditions necessary to ensure healthy ECD are called nurturing care and include good health, adequate nutrition, security and safety, responsive caregiving, and opportunities for playful early learning — essentially the holistic support a child requires not only to survive, but to thrive and develop to their full potential.

Investing in ECD Interventions

ECD interventions provide young children with opportunities for learning, cognitive development, physical growth, and health. These interventions span the components of nurturing care and include everything from access to safe water and good nutrition to training caregivers to provide developmentally appropriate responsive stimulation such as singing, reading, and playing.

Why are the early years so important?

The early years — in particular the first 1000 days between pregnancy and age two — set the stage for healthy growth and development. This period is characterized by rapid change. In children's first few years of life, more than one million new neural connections are formed every second. During this crucial period, good nutrition and health interventions support a child's physical and cognitive development and lay the foundation for life-long health, productivity, and well-being. Nurturing care buffers the effects of adversity and toxic stress caused by poverty, violence, neglect, and abuse or crisis, reducing a child's stress response and fostering healthy coping mechanisms and resilience.

Support for ECD is especially important for ensuring the most vulnerable children are not left behind. Children with disabilities or developmental delays, children from disadvantaged families and communities, and children living through crises and emergencies such as conflict or natural disaster must all be included.



•	Good Health
	Antenatal visits, child immunizations, and care for children with developmental difficulties and disabilities.
•	Adequate Nutrition
	Exclusive breastfeeding, micronutrient supplementation, and growth monitoring.
•	Responsive Caregiving
	Skin-to-skin contact after birth, training caregivers to provide responsive, and emotionally warm caregiving.
•	Security and Safety
	Child protective services, prevention and reduction of pollution, and safe water and sanitation.
•	Opportunities for Early Learning
	Play time, reading and storytelling groups, quality childcare, and pre-primary education.



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Investments in ECD interventions are cost-effective, produce high economic returns, and are more impactful than “catch up” programs later in life. Lack of access to quality health services, nutrition, and cognitive stimulation during the early years harm a child’s long-term health, increasing the likelihood of poor health. Adults who experienced high levels of childhood stress are more likely to develop alcoholism, depression, and diabetes. In contrast, investments in ECD have long-term positive impacts on individuals and societies, increasing productivity and health and reducing poverty and inequality. Nobel laureate James Heckman demonstrated that high-quality ECD programs can result in a return on investment of up to 13% per year.² Other studies have shown that every additional \$1 invested in ECD programs can yield a return of between \$6 and \$17.³

High-quality ECD programs can result in a return on investment of up to 13% per year

- James Heckman,
Nobel Prize winning economist

The cost of inaction

Since 1990, the number of children dying before their fifth birthday has been cut by more than half. While real progress has been made in improving children’s survival globally, more attention and investment is needed to ensure all children thrive and have a strong start in life.

In 2016, the Lancet estimated 250 million children under five in low- and middle-income countries (43%) are at risk of stunting.⁴ This means children are not achieving their developmental potential due to poor nutrition and lack

of cognitive stimulation. An estimated 53 million children under the age of five have developmental disabilities that require additional support.⁵ Millions of children continue to live without protective and nurturing family care. In 2018, one in five babies were born into conflict-affected areas.⁶ Children in such circumstances often experience abuse, neglect, discrimination, poor nutrition, and lack of stimulation – a constellation of adverse experiences that can lead to toxic stress and prolonged developmental delays, stunting, and disabilities.

Thrive Coalition

The Thrive Coalition is a community of over 30 independent organizations and individuals dedicated to addressing U.S. government (USG) support for global early childhood development. Our vision is that the USG support an integrated global agenda for young children, ensuring that every child (ages 0-8) has the conditions to survive and thrive through healthy growth, quality nutrition, nurturing family-based care, inclusive development and learning, and protection from violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect.

The Thrive Coalition is made up of organizations and individuals invested in global ECD, including those working on child protection, education, health, inclusion, nutrition, vulnerable children, family engagement, and water, sanitation and hygiene. The Coalition provides a forum for discussion and consensus building, coordination, education, learning, strategy, and advocacy on topics related to global ECD.

The scope of the Coalition’s work includes:

- Advocating to increase USG investments in the components of ECD and Nurturing Care including maternal and child health, nutrition, water and sanitation, responsive care and early learning, and child protection.
- Engaging with the U.S. Congress and Administration to raise awareness and promote legislation on global ECD and Nurturing Care and to prioritize inter-agency coordination, program integration, and funding.
- Coordinating community input and feedback into relevant policies, strategies, and implementation plans.

For more information contact thrivecoalitiondc@gmail.com

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3. World Bank Group, Inter-American Development Bank, & UNICEF (2018). “G20 Development Working Group: Investing in Early Childhood Development.” <https://www.ecdn.org/assets/background-study---early-childhood-development.pdf>.

4. Black, M.M. et al. (2017). Early childhood development coming of age: science through the life course. *Lancet* 389(10064), 77–90.

5. Global Research on Developmental Disabilities Collaborators (2018). Developmental disabilities among children younger than 5 years in 195 countries and territories, 1990–2016: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2016. *The Lancet*, Oct;6(10):e1100–e1121.

6. UNICEF (2019). Born into conflict: Threats beyond the front lines. <https://www.unicef.org/stories/born-conflict-threats-beyond-front-lines>.