

PRIORITIES IN CHILD SURVIVAL, EDUCATION AND PROTECTION

Early childhood: beyond questions of survival, it is important that young children receive support to help them grow, learn and thrive.



Early childhood development is primarily a question of survival in Niger. Half of all children suffer from chronic malnutrition and are at risk of developmental delay. One fifth of children die before the age of five, usually as a result of preventable or curable diseases. A massive effort is underway to increase health care access and utilization. Beyond this focus on survival, children need interventions to stimulate their intellects and prepare them for school. Acquiring basic skills will help both the children – and their parents – to improve their situations and their chances for the future.

Only 1.6% of children have access to preschool services. Mothers' cumbersome workloads are made even heavier by the high fertility rate – women give birth to seven children, on average. Consequently, most children aged three to six

years are left to themselves or entrusted to the care of older sisters. These older siblings are then prevented from attending school because of their childcare responsibilities.

UNICEF IN ACTION

Work toward developing a model integrated preschool centre for Niger began in 2000. The goal is to reach a preschool enrolment rate of 5% by 2013. As part of this strategy, community-based organizations are encouraged to establish preschool centres in villages. The centres emphasize good practices in hygiene, sanitation, protection, education, nutrition and health. Parents notice that the children who attend these centres are better cared for, more resourceful, more sociable and more apt to practice good hygiene. As a result, the children are better prepared for primary school.

UNICEF has joined forces with the government, women's groups, the Association of Traditional Chiefs of Niger, school boards, village committees and nongovernmental organizations to mobilize the civil society and promote

children's interests during discussions with decision makers. UNICEF backs its partners in their efforts to create teaching materials, improve training, and develop policies and strategies.

