Early Childhood Development

The first steps towards inclusion are taken at home during the early years. If children with disabilities do not receive the love, sensory stimulation, health care and social inclusion to which they are entitled, they can miss important developmental milestones and their potential may be unfairly limited, with significant social and economic implications for themselves, their families and the communities in which they live.

Early identification

Early childhood is important precisely because approximately 80 per cent of the brain’s capacity develops before the age of 3 and because the period between birth and primary school provides opportunities to tailor developmental education to the child’s needs. Studies suggest that the children who are at greatest disadvantage stand to benefit the most. A child whose disability or developmental delay is identified at an early stage will have a much better chance of reaching her or his full capacity.

The role of parents and communities

Experience and scientific evidence has shown that several preconditions must co-exist to ensure that children get the best start in life and the opportunity to thrive: (i) effective and responsive care of the young child by the primary caregiver, family and community, (ii) access to and use of quality basic social services, and (iii) a supportive social policy environment in place. Well-implemented interventions, combining early childhood development (ECD), health, nutrition, education and protection interventions increase the likelihood that a child will be reaching his or her full potential.

Age-old biases and low expectations with regard to children with disabilities should not stand in the way of early childhood development. It is clear that with family and community support from the earliest days of their lives, children with disabilities are better placed to make the most of their school years and to prepare themselves for adulthood.

Evidence-based response

To inform evidence-based policy development, UNICEF developed indicators to measure the status of ECD outcomes through the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS). Indicators are designed to assess the quality of a child’s home environment, access to early childhood care and education and the developmental status of young children. After being collected from a large cross-section of low- and middle-income countries, these indicators are for the first time included in The State of the World’s Children 2013 Report.

A question of human rights

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), children with disabilities have the right to the full enjoyment of their rights and freedoms on an equal basis with other children, including during the early years of their life. The CRPD specifically calls on States Parties to ensure that children with disabilities have equal rights with respect to family life. With a view to realizing these rights, and to prevent concealment, abandonment, neglect and segregation of children with disabilities, the CRPD calls on States Parties to undertake to provide early and comprehensive information, services and support to children with disabilities and their families.
A call to action

Progress made towards early identification of and intervention with children with disabilities has varied between and within countries, however more work needs to be done. Adopting an approach to inclusive early childhood education grounded in respect for the rights, aspirations and potential of all children can reduce exclusion and ensure that children with disabilities are identified and supported early on and afforded opportunities to fulfill their potential as full and active members of society. Fundamental elements and actions to ensure disability-inclusive early childhood education include:

- Ratify and implement the Conventions (CRPD and CRC).
- Fight discrimination against children with disabilities.
- Dismantle socio-economic and other barriers to inclusion.
- End residential institutionalization.
- Provide families with social welfare, health and other services to meet their needs.
- Ensure that national early childhood development standards are aligned with international standards and support their implementation.
- Coordinate services among sectors to support the child.
- Involve children with disabilities in making decisions.
- Collect reliable and objective data on disabilities to inform planning and assess impact.

UNICEF’s 2013 flagship report, The State of the World’s Children, focuses on Children with Disabilities. The report covers a range of thematic areas and attempts to contribute to the global discussion on and draw greater attention to disability rights for children.

This thematic note presents excerpts from the report related to Early Childhood Development. All references and original sources can be found in the full report.

For the full report or more information:

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