Health

Good health is among the building blocks of life that children and their parents want and to which all children are entitled. Children with disabilities, as well as all children, are entitled to the full spectrum of health care – from immunization in infancy, to treatment for the ailments and injuries of childhood and accessible quality health services during adolescence and into early adulthood.

Immunization can reduce childhood illness and death

Immunizations are a critical component of global efforts to reduce childhood illness and death. They are among the most successful and cost-effective of all public health interventions, with the strong potential to reduce the burden of morbidity and mortality, particularly for children under 5 years of age. For this reason, immunization has been a cornerstone of national and international health initiatives. More children than ever before are being reached. One consequence has been that the incidence of polio – which can lead to permanent muscle paralysis – fell from more than 350,000 cases in 1988 to 221 cases in 2012. However, there is still a considerable way to go. In 2008, for example, over a million children under 5 died from preventable diseases.

While immunization is an important means of pre-empting diseases that lead to disabilities, it is as important for a child who already has a disability to be immunized. Many children with disabilities may not be benefiting from increased immunization coverage, though they are at the same risk of childhood diseases as all children. If they are left unimmunized or only partially immunized, the results can include delays in reaching developmental milestones, avoidable secondary conditions and, at worst, preventable death.

Disability-inclusive immunization efforts are key, as are efforts to promote public awareness about the importance of immunizing each child, for example by reaching out to parents through public health campaigns, civil society and disabled peoples’ organizations, schools and mass media. The inclusion of children with disabilities in immunization efforts is not only ethical, but imperative for public health and equity and can help reach goals of universal coverage.

Importance of early detection and intervention

Children develop rapidly during the first three years of life, so early detection and intervention are particularly important. Developmental screening is an effective means of detecting disability in children. It can take place in primary health-care settings, for example during immunization visits or growth monitoring check-ups at community health centres. The purpose of screening is to identify children at risk, to refer them for further assessment and intervention as needed, and to provide family members with vital information on disability.

Health-care systems in high-income countries provide numerous opportunities to identify and manage developmental difficulties early in a child’s life. But interventions to improve young children’s development are becoming increasingly available in low- and middle-income countries. These include interventions to treat iron deficiency, train caregivers and provide community-based rehabilitation.

At times however, while treatments exist, efficient dissemination in low-income countries is often lacking.

1 For a complete list of references, please refer to the full SOWC 2013 at: www.unicef.org/SOWC2013.
For example, recent studies in high- and low-income countries have shown that up to 70 per cent of children and adults newly diagnosed with epilepsy can be successfully treated with anti-epileptic drugs. However, approximately three quarters of people with epilepsy in low-income countries do not get the treatment they need.

**Improve quality of services through participation, training, efficient resources**

Children with disabilities who overcome the discrimination and other obstacles that stand between them and health care may find that the services they access are of poor quality.

Children’s feedback should be invited so facilities and services can be improved to meet their needs. In addition, health workers and other professionals dealing with children stand to benefit from being educated about the multiple issues of child development and child disability. They should also be trained to deliver integrated services, where possible, with the participation of the extended family.

The detection and treatment of impairments is an integral aspect of public health. Nevertheless, policymakers and researchers typically characterize these measures as being in competition for resources with measures to promote the health of people without disabilities. This merely serves to perpetuate discrimination and inequity.

International cooperation can play an important role in efforts to make higher quality services available to children identified as having or at risk of developing disabilities, and in changing the competitive approach to allocating resources.

**Inclusive health care**

An inclusive approach to health care means ensuring that children with disabilities enjoy their right to health on a par with others. This is a matter of social justice and of respecting the inherent dignity of all human beings. It is also an investment in the future. Children with disabilities are tomorrow’s adults - they need good health for its own sake, for the crucial role it plays in facilitating a happy childhood, and for the boost it can give their prospects as future producers and parents.

**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 are entitled to the highest attainable standard of health without discrimination. The CRPD specifically calls on State Parties to provide persons with disabilities with the same range, quality and standard of free or affordable health care and programmes as provided to other persons, and calls on them to provide those health services needed by persons with disabilities specifically because of their disabilities, including early identification and intervention as appropriate, and services designed to minimize and prevent further disabilities.

**A call to action**

Progress made towards improving health care for children disabilities has varied between and within countries, however more work needs to be done. Adopting an approach to inclusive health care grounded in respect for the rights, aspirations and potential of all children can reduce exclusion and ensure that children with disabilities realize their right to health and afforded opportunities to fulfill their potential as full and active members of society. Fundamental elements and actions to ensure disability-inclusive health care 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 health 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.


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

For the full report or more information:

Visit our Website: [www.unicef.org/SOWC2013](http://www.unicef.org/SOWC2013)

Or contact: disabilities@unicef.org or cmills@unicef.org