

Identifying the Gap to Act:

Early Childhood Development Outcomes and Determinants in Latin America and the Caribbean



EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT (ECD) IS THE KEY TO A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Early childhood is the most significant and rapid stage of development in human life, which spans the period up to 8 years of age. It is a crucial phase of development that prepares the foundation for children's future well-being, life-long learning and participation.

According to recent scientific evidence, early childhood is a period of extraordinary brain development which involves a complex interaction of neural connections that it is heavily shaped and sculpted by experiences and the environment. These brain connections are formed at a speed that will never again be repeated throughout life, with a significant influence on the cognitive, emotional, physical and social development of the child.

During early childhood, adequate nutrition, early stimulation, learning opportunities, protection and nurturing care are crucial for children to survive, thrive, learn and participate, all necessary for reaching their full potential.

Adequate early childhood development is an important factor that can decrease the existing gaps in society, sustain tomorrow's economy and shape future nations.

Early Childhood Development is central for the implementation of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#).

Besides being a specific target of the SDG 4 (education), it also has a multiplier effect on other Global Goals, including those related to nutrition (SDG 2), health (SDG 3) and protection (SDG 16).

Understanding the factors affecting early childhood development (ECD) is crucial to address the early childhood inequalities and to improve well-being, productivity and social equity.

Monitoring Child Development: The Early Childhood Development Index

UNICEF supports governments to monitor and report on child development and well-being, including the status of nutrition, health, education and parenting practices.

ECD is multidimensional and includes several aspects of child well-being. UNICEF developed an Early Childhood Development Index (ECDI) that represents the first effort to generate standardized and internationally comparable data on early childhood development through the use of household surveys.

The index is calculated by measuring the development of children in four domains: Literacy-Numeracy, Physical, Socio-Emotional and Learning. Children are considered to have an adequate development when they are on track in at least three of the four domains.

Since 2010, 17 countries in the LAC region have calculated the ECDI, mostly through the UNICEF supported Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey Programme (MICS) (www.mics.unicef.org).

This publication analyzes outcomes and determinants of ECD in children 3 and 4 years old. It is based on selected indicators measured between 2010 and 2016 in 17 LAC countries on a sample of nearly 35,000 children that represent 41% of the total LAC population of those ages.

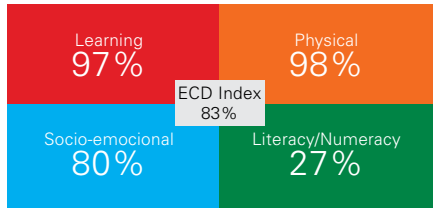
Analysis were run on the 17 pooled datasets, using adjusted sample weights reflecting both within country sample design, as well as, country population size.

In addition to the ECDI, explained above, the following indicators were used:

- Chronic malnutrition
- Availability of children's books in the home
- Support for learning
- Use of disciplinary practices, both positive and violent
- Being left at home alone or with inadequate care
- Access to early childhood care and education services
- Birth registration

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT INDEX (ECDI) IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN (LAC)

Percentage of children who are developmentally on track by domain of the ECD Index in LAC.



8 out of 10 children 3-4 years old in LAC have an adequate ECD according to the **ECD Index** (83%).

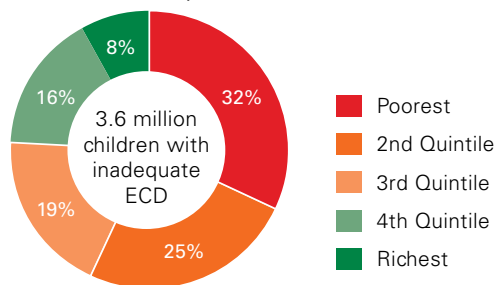


Only 1 out of 4 children 3-4 years old are on track in the Literacy and Numeracy domain (27%).

Approximately 3.6 million children 3-4 years old in the LAC region are lagging behind and are at risk for not reaching their full potential, according to the ECDI.

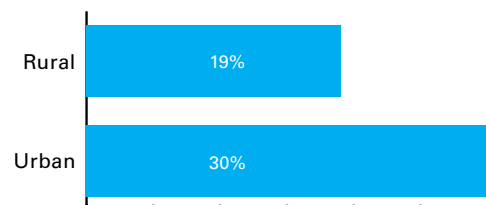
Who are those children lagging behind?

Most children with inadequate ECD live in the most impoverished households.



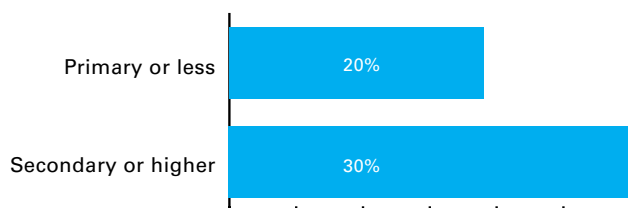
Distribution of children 3-4 years old with inadequate ECD by wealth quintiles.

Children in rural areas are 1.8 times less likely to be on-track in the Literacy-Numeracy domain than children in urban areas.



Percentage of children 3-4 years old on track in the Literacy-Numeracy domain by area of residence.

Children from less educated mothers (primary or less) are 1.7 times less likely to be on-track in the Literacy-Numeracy domain.



Percentage of children 3-4 years old on track in the Literacy-Numeracy domain by mother's education.

“Children from the poorest households, with less educated mothers and living in hard to reach communities are more likely to experience delays in early development.”

DETERMINANTS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE)

Investment in good quality early childhood education services improves learning outcomes for children.

6 out of 10



children 3-4 years old attend ECE programmes.

Children attending ECE are **2 times more** likely to have an adequate Early Childhood Development.

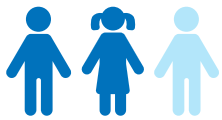


Children in the wealthiest households are **2.5 times more** likely to attend ECE programmes than children from the poorest families.

Children without birth registration are more than **8 times less** likely to attend ECE.

SAFETY AND PROTECTION

Exposure to violence, abuse, and neglect during early childhood has a lifelong impact.



2 out of 3 children under 5 years old regularly experience violent discipline at home (emotional aggression or corporal punishment).

1 out of 20 children under 5 years old is subjected to severe corporal punishment.

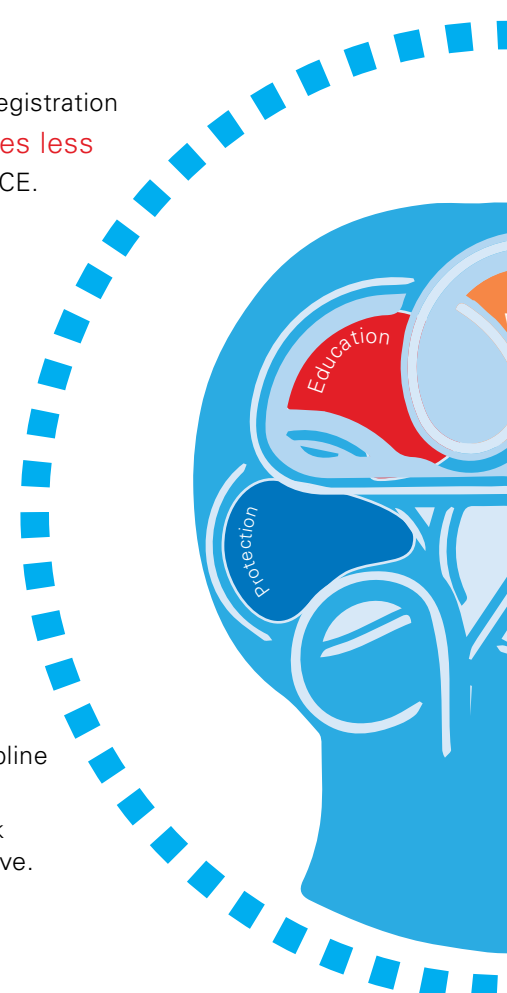
Risk for severe corporal punishment is **5 times higher** among children from the poorest households.

3.2 million children under 5 years old in LAC are not registered.

1 out of 2 children under 5 years old is subjected to corporal punishment.

Exposure to violent discipline increases by **1.6 times** the risk of a child being aggressive.

Children exposed to severe corporal punishment are **2.4 times less** likely to have an adequate Early Childhood Development.



CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN THE CARIBBEAN

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

Adequate health and nutrition in the first years of life is necessary for normal brain development and lay the foundation for the development of cognitive, motor and socio-emotional skills.

Children with chronic malnutrition are **2 times less** likely to have an adequate literacy and numeracy development.



Only **1 out of 3** children under 6 months are exclusively breastfed.

Children in rural areas are **2 times more** likely to be chronically malnourished.



5.9 million children under 5 years old are still affected by chronic malnutrition.

Chronic malnutrition is **4 times higher** in children from the poorest households.

Poorest children are **3 times more** likely to be subjected to inadequate care.

STIMULATION AND CARE

Early stimulation and interaction with parents and caregivers jumpstart the journey of brain development and well-being.



3 out of 4 children 3-4 years old are engaged in early learning activities by adults in the households.

Children 3-4 years old with access to books are **2 times more** likely to have an adequate Early Childhood Development.

Engaging in learning activities is less common for children of less educated mothers (60%), living in poor households (62%) and living in rural areas (65%).

Only **1 out of 6** children 3-4 years old engages with their father in early learning activities.

1 out of 2 children from 3-4 years old do not have access to books.

1 out of 20 children under 5 years old are left regularly with inadequate care (alone or in the care of a child under 10 years old).

Children engaged in early learning activities are **3 times more** likely to have an adequate Early Childhood Development.

CHILDREN IN LAC ARE EXPOSED TO SEVERAL RISK FACTORS

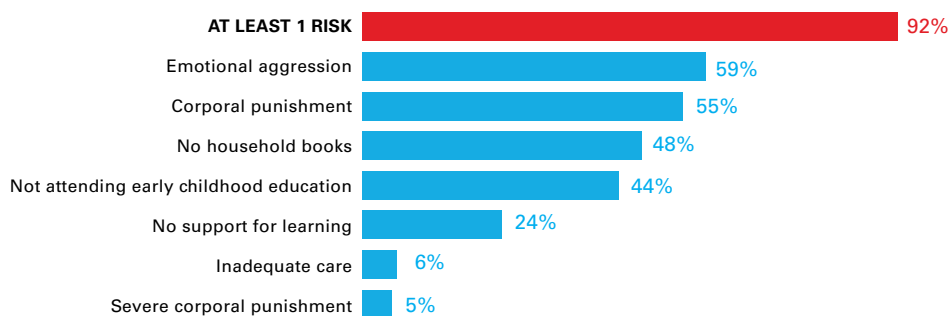
4 CORE MESSAGES ABOUT ECD IN

1. Nine out of ten children from 3-4 years old in LAC are exposed to at least one risk factor

9 out of 10 children 3-4 years old in LAC are exposed to at least one risk factor.

Emotional aggression and corporal punishment are the most prevalent risk factors, followed by the lack of learning opportunities such as availability of books, access to early childhood education and early support for learning.

Prevalence of risk factors for an adequate Early Childhood Development

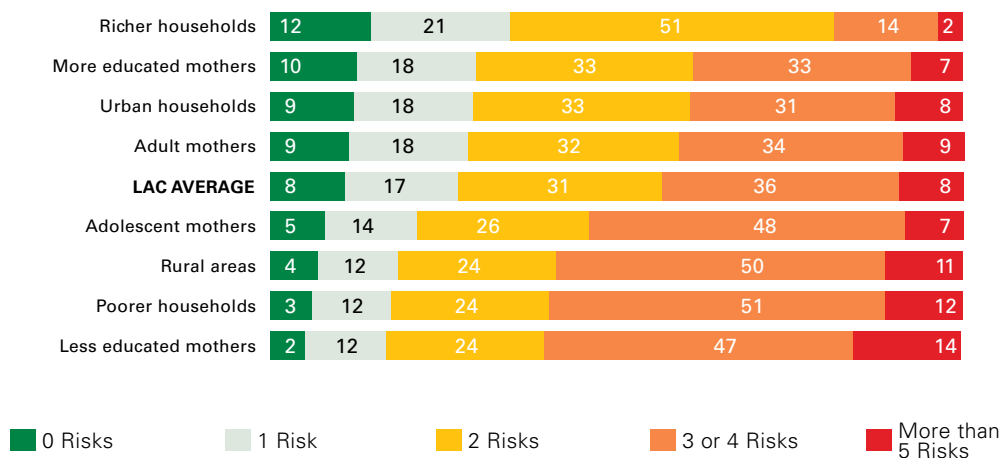


2. The great majority of children are exposed to two or more risk factors

3 out of 4 children 3-4 years old in LAC experience two or more risk factors. 8% experience at least 5 risk factors.

Exposure to risk factors increases in the context of social disadvantage, such as poverty and lack of maternal education.

Distribution of risk factors for an adequate Early Childhood Development by socio-economic background (percentage)

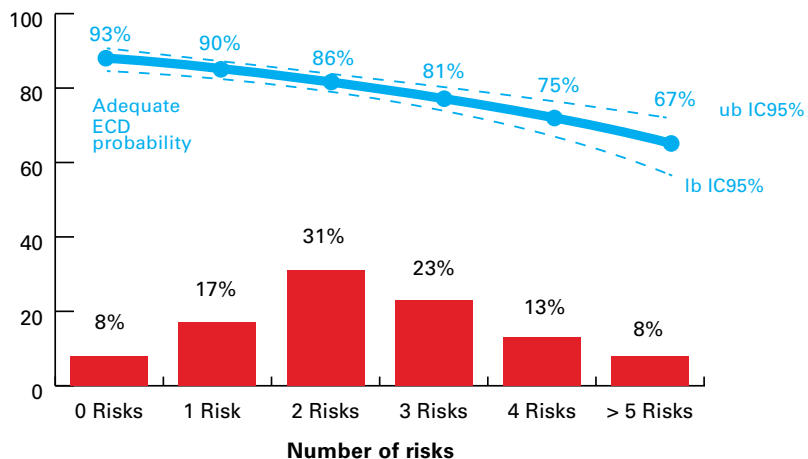


THAT NEGATIVELY AFFECT EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

3. Cumulative exposure to risk factors reduces the probability of adequate ECD

Predicted probability of adequate ECD according to cumulative risk factors

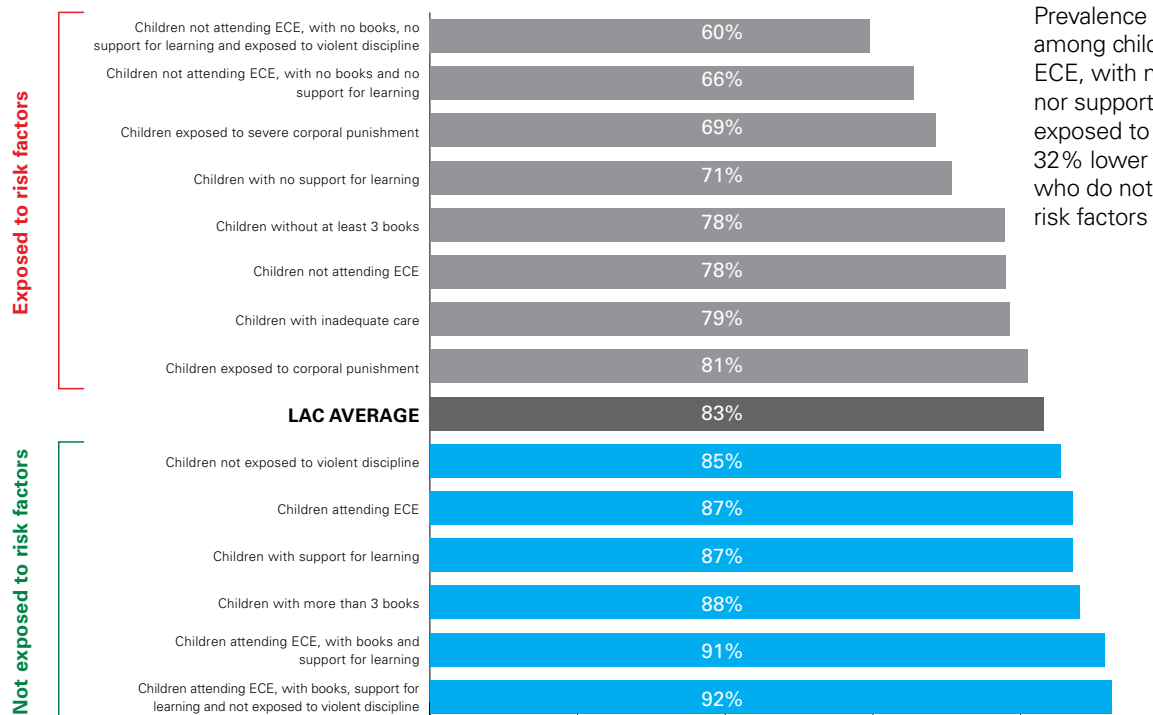


Probability of adequate ECD according to the ECDI is on average, reduced by 5% for each additional risk factor.

Children not exposed to any risk factor have 93% probability of adequate ECD, compared to only 67% probability among children exposed to 5 or more risks.

4. Preventing exposure to those risk factors could significantly improve ECD

Percentage of children with adequate ECD according to risk factors



Prevalence of adequate ECD among children not attending ECE, with no household books nor support for learning, who are exposed to violent discipline is 32% lower compared to children who do not experience those risk factors (60% vs 92%).

CLOSING THE GAPS FOR GUARANTEEING EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Children who do not receive the nutrition and stimulation they need and/or are exposed to violence, abuse, neglect and traumatic experiences face higher risk of low cognitive, physical and emotional development.

Children who miss out on early childhood development services or opportunities in LAC are more likely to live in the region's most marginalized, disadvantaged and hard to reach communities.

Data analyzed show that the threats to early childhood development are greatest among children living in the poorest households. Such children are less likely to receive support for early learning at home and have books. They are also 2 times less likely to attend early childhood education programmes. Likewise, these children are more exposed to inadequate care and severe corporal punishment.

All of these factors can have a detrimental effect on child development. Moreover, risk factors related to poverty tend to occur together. Therefore, the more risk factors are present, greater the development deficit.

These risk factors lead to inequities in early childhood development that undermine educational attainment and adult productivity, thereby perpetuating the cycle of poverty and inequity gaps.

However, there are ways to break the cycle and close the gaps: the results show that when children have access to adequate care and learning opportunities, as well as to non-violent environments, they achieve improved developmental outcomes.

Closing the gap in ECD implies that additional efforts should be focused on the most vulnerable children; those indicated in this report and others such as indigenous children and those with developmental delays or disabilities.

Thus, effective, well-targeted and well-implemented interventions in early childhood development can increase the likelihood that a child will be academically successful, socially and emotionally well-adjusted, and economically productive. Giving children the best start in life, furthermore boosts the odds that they will become responsible and contributing members of the society.

Sources: UNICEF official data (<https://data.unicef.org>) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey results from Argentina, Barbados, Belize, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guyana, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Santa Lucia, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay (www.mics.unicef.org) and DHS in Honduras.

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