GLOBAL BREASTFEEDING ADVOCACY INITIATIVE

Breastfeeding gives all children the healthiest start in life. It stimulates brain development and protects women’s health. Breastmilk acts as a baby’s first vaccine. Breastfeeding leads to lower health care costs, healthier families, and a smarter workforce. When mothers breastfeed, everyone benefits.

Yet, worldwide, less than 40 per cent of children under six months of age are fed only breastmilk.

UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) are leading a global Breastfeeding Advocacy Initiative to increase political commitment for breastfeeding—one of the smartest investments a country can make.

We want to join forces with partners who are also working to realize the Sustainable Development Goals’ vision of a better world. Our aim is to integrate agendas, messages, and advocacy to maximize our collective impact.

Together, we will go further.

The early childhood development and nutrition communities are working together on a shared agenda to give children the healthiest start in life.
BREASTFEEDING POWERS EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

KEY MESSAGES
The first years of life have a profound effect on a child’s future. These years are a critical opportunity to provide the nutrition, protection, bonding, and stimulation that children need to reach their full potential.

Adequate nutrition, safe environments, and responsive adult caregiving are the best ways to support healthy brain development. Inadequate early nutrition undermines brain development in ways that are difficult for a child to recover later on.

Breastfeeding is one of the first early childhood actions that helps prepare children for a prosperous future—in a way that is cost effective for both families and societies. Breastfeeding supports healthy growth and protects children from life-threatening and chronic illnesses.

Across all income levels, breastfeeding is associated with higher performance on intelligence tests among children and adolescents (3 I.Q. points higher on average), which translates to improved academic performance, increased lifetime earnings, and a smarter workforce.

Breastfeeding also supports healthy brain development by providing frequent physical and emotional attachment between mother and infant. These nurturing interactions have a two-generation effect, because positive behaviours are modelled for the next generation.

Never in the history of science have we understood so much about breastfeeding’s links to nurturing, resilient families and healthy economies and nations. By promoting a shared agenda, we can put this evidence into action and strengthen the collaboration between the early childhood development and the nutrition communities.

KEY FACTS
When countries—rich or poor—support breastfeeding through meaningful investments and programmes, it has an impact on their economic health, as well as the health and wellbeing of women and children.

Globally, not breastfeeding is associated with lower cognitive ability, which leads to an economic loss of more than US$300 billion each year, a figure comparable to the entire global pharmaceutical market or 0.53 per cent of global gross national income (GNI).

More than 200 million children under the age of five are not achieving their developmental potential because of multiple

“We are emphasizing breastfeeding more and more in our support to countries, not just as a health investment but as a true powerful economic investment in their futures. The gains from early childhood nutrition are forever. In sheer, raw bottom-line economic terms, this may be the single most effective investment a country can make in any sector for any reason!”

Keith Hansen,
Vice President, Human Development,
World Bank

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adversities, notably a lack of adequate nutrition. In gestation and infancy, the brain utilizes 50–75 per cent of all the energy consumed by the body. Breastmilk’s ideal blend of fats, proteins, sugars, and other nutrients nourishes brain development. The act of breastfeeding also provides positive stimulation and bonding.

Improving breastfeeding practices could save the lives of over 800,000 children each year. Breastfeeding also benefits women by reducing the risks of post-partum haemorrhages, breast cancers, and ovarian cancers, and it temporarily delays a woman’s return to fertility. Breastfeeding stimulates oxytocin, a hormone that helps improve bonding between mother and baby and serves as a stress reliever for the mother.

Women need support to breastfeed, including access to skilled counselors and time to breastfeed or express milk. To balance the demands of breastfeeding and work, working women need maternity protection, including paid leave. This helps foster interaction and stimulation of young children, a key to early childhood development. Yet, only 35 per cent of countries have maternity protection regulations in line with International Labour Organization Convention 183, which calls for at least 14 weeks of paid maternity leave. Only 47 per cent have any form of paternity leave.

Breastfeeding is an urgent global priority partly due to the aggressive marketing from the breastmilk substitute industry which undermines breastfeeding. Indeed, sales of breastmilk substitutes, including infant formula, are projected to increase from US$45 billion in 2014 to US$71 billion in 2019.

Breastfeeding can help achieve numerous Sustainable Development Goals, including the reduction of child mortality and malnutrition, better learning outcomes and increasing worker productivity.

CALL TO ACTION

Countries have demonstrated that breastfeeding rates can be improved dramatically within a very short period. Introducing the right package of actions, policies, and programmes to support mothers in health facilities, at home, and at work has had the greatest impact on increasing levels of breastfeeding. These actions are urgently needed if we are to reach WHO’s 2025 Global Target: to increase the rate of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months to at least 50 per cent.

Early Childhood Development advocates and Nutrition advocates are joining forces to advance this agenda. Together, we must:

- **Highlight the common ground** between the early childhood development and nutrition communities and promote an integrated advocacy agenda to build political will.
- **Disseminate accurate information** on breastfeeding as a practice benefiting brain development, early childhood development, and healthy families.
- **Foster positive social attitudes towards breastfeeding**, by raising public awareness of the issue and building a breastfeeding culture appropriate for the twenty-first century.
- **Promote the active involvement of men, family, and community members** in support of breastfeeding.
- **Advocate for paid maternity leave** that complies with International Labour Organization Convention 183, and advocate for paternity leave.
- **Advocate for regulating the breast-milk substitute industry** by implementing, monitoring, and enforcing the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and World Health Assembly Resolutions.
FOR MORE INFORMATION: breastfeeding@unicef.org

Resources cited:

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