EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT in the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2018–2021
Early childhood development is defined as the period from conception up to school entry. It is a unique window of opportunity for children’s cognitive, social, emotional and physical development, which occurs as the result of the interaction between the environment and the child.¹

While children’s lives have certainly improved in recent decades, persistent inequities and a lack of opportunities endanger the futures of millions of children around the world. An estimated 43 per cent of children – some 249 million – under 5 years of age in low- and middle-income countries are at risk of poor development due to extreme poverty and stunting.² Millions more are deprived of the caring and nurturing environment they need to thrive.

To improve children’s chances in early childhood and to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, including Goals 2.2; 3.2, 16.2. and particularly Goal 4.2, efforts will now have to outpace the rate of progress achieved in the past. The good news is that promising evidence points to early childhood interventions that can potentially achieve these goals.³

Building brains and futures

In recent decades, advances in neuroscience have provided insight into the way babies’ brains develop. In the early moments of life, children’s brains develop at a speed of over 1 million new neural connections per second, a pace that is never again repeated.⁴ Evidence has also shown that the brain-building process is fuelled by adequate nutrition, protection from violence and environmental toxins, and responsive stimulation, as core elements of Nurturing Care.⁵ These insights have illuminated the links between ECD and a child’s future health, well-being and earnings as an adult. For example, investment in ECD initiatives can lead to better individual adult incomes of up to 25 per cent.⁶ The rate of return on ECD investments can be more than 13 per cent.⁷
Every child lives in a safe and clean environment

Every child survives and thrives

Every child learns

Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

Every child has an equitable chance in life

Realizing the rights of every child, especially the most disadvantaged

**RESULT AREAS**

**EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN UNICEF’S STRATEGIC PLAN 2018-2021**

**ENABLERS:** help to deliver the WHAT and HOW

**HOW:** Change strategies

**GOAL AREA 1:** Every child survives and thrives
- Promote improved hygiene practices and sanitation.

**GOAL AREA 2:** Every child learns
- Scale-up ECD programmes that promote social cohesion.

**GOAL AREA 3:** Every child is protected from violence and exploitation
- Protect young children from harsh discipline and promote positive parenting.

**GOAL AREA 4:** Every child lives in a safe and clean environment
- Improve systems and quality of early learning services, including community-based child care and pre-schools.

**GOAL AREA 5:** Every child has an equitable chance in life
- Promote ECD programmes as equalizer, poverty alleviation and women’s empowerment.

**ECD and the UNICEF Strategic Plan**

The UNICEF Strategic Plan 2018-2021 takes effect as the global community intensifies its work towards achieving the SDGs. The SP recognizes the importance of the early years and the need to work across sectors to achieve impact on ECD outcomes and the catalytic role of a strong early childhood for a bright adolescent future. The SP describes the results to be achieved by UNICEF and key partners by 2021 (the ‘what’) and outlines the change strategies necessary for the achievement of these results (the ‘how’).

ECD is anchored in the first goal area, but cuts across all five goal areas.

Photo: UNICEF India/Ashutosh Sharma ©
All children from conception to the age of school entry, especially the most disadvantaged, achieve their developmental potential, including in humanitarian settings.

To achieve this vision, UNICEF focuses on the following two outcomes:
1. Providing all young children, from conception up to the age of school entry, with equitable access to essential quality health, nutrition, protection and early learning services that address their developmental needs; and
2. Supporting parents, caregivers and families and encouraging them to provide their children with nurturing care and positive parenting.

This vision and focus are firmly embedded in the five goal areas established in the new UNICEF Strategic Plan. ECD is anchored in the first goal area, but cuts across all five goal areas, as follow:

### The What: Results

UNICEF’s vision for ECD states that:

- All children from conception to the age of school entry, especially the most disadvantaged, achieve their developmental potential, including in humanitarian settings.
- To achieve this vision, UNICEF focuses on the following two outcomes:
  1. Providing all young children, from conception up to the age of school entry, with equitable access to essential quality health, nutrition, protection and early learning services that address their developmental needs; and
  2. Supporting parents, caregivers and families and encouraging them to provide their children with nurturing care and positive parenting.

This vision and focus are firmly embedded in the five goal areas established in the new UNICEF Strategic Plan. ECD is anchored in the first goal area, but cuts across all five goal areas, as follow:

### 1. Every child survives and thrives

**Result areas:** UNICEF works with partners to sensitize parents and promotes responsive care and stimulation of young children, with a focus on the first 1,000 days from conception until about 3 years of age.

**Key results:** 80 countries having adopted, at scale, early childhood development packages promoting early stimulation and responsive care – up from 9.

**Indicators:** Number of countries that have adopted ECD packages for children at scale.

### 2. Every child learns

**Result areas:** UNICEF works to improve preschool, community-based childcare and kindergartens so that children starting at age 3 years are prepared to begin school ready to learn and succeed.

**Key results:** 60 million out-of-school children gaining access to early learning, primary or secondary education – up from 10 million. Through UNICEF supported programme.

**Indicators:** Number of out-of-school girls and boys who participated in early learning through UNICEF supported programme.

### 3. Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

**Result areas:** UNICEF promotes positive parenting interventions and family support as ways to protect young children from harsh disciplinary practices, including verbal, psychological and physical violence, abuse and neglect.

**Key results:** 80% of UNICEF-targeted girls and boys in humanitarian situations provided with psychosocial support, including access to child friendly spaces with intersectoral programming interventions from 71%.

**Indicators:** Percentage of UNICEF-targeted girls and boys in humanitarian situations provided with psychosocial support, including access to child friendly spaces with intersectoral programming interventions.

### 4. Every child lives in a clean and safe environment

**Result areas:** UNICEF water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) efforts in homes and in ECD centres and preschools help ensure that young children live in safe and clean environments.

**Key results:** 60,000 schools with separate sanitation facilities for girls and boys – up from 8,000 – and, 5,000 health centers that have basic WASH facilities – up from 1,600 – will be provided by UNICEF supported programmes.

**Indicators:** Number of institutions: (a) schools with separate sanitation facilities for girls and boys; and (b) health centers that have basic WASH facilities, through UNICEF-supported programmes.

### 5. Every child has an equitable chance in life

**Result areas:** ECD interventions provide children a fair start in life, which can help alleviate poverty. UNICEF supported ECD interventions can be universal or targeted towards the most vulnerable and marginalized children, including those with disabilities and in humanitarian contexts, and towards women’s empowerment.

**Key results:**
- 43 countries in the poorest region – up from 26 - and/or 28 countries in the poorest quintile – up from 8 - have nationally owned measurement of the share of public spending in health, education and/or social protection benefiting children
- 56 countries with moderately strong or strong social protection systems – up from 28.

**Indicators:**
- Number of countries with nationally owned measurement of the share of public spending in health, education and/or social protection benefiting children in households living in the poorest region and/or the poorest quintile
- Number of countries with moderately strong or strong social protection system.

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1. Every child survives and thrives
2. Every child learns
3. Every child is protected from violence and exploitation
4. Every child lives in a clean and safe environment
5. Every child has an equitable chance in life
The How: Achieving results

The UNICEF Strategic Plan identifies seven change strategies to drive results for ECD. These strategies include:

1. **CHANGE STRATEGY**
   **FOSTER MULTISECTORAL PROGRAMMING**
   With its vast experience and expertise in multiple sectors, UNICEF is uniquely placed to support multi-sectoral “Nurturing Care” programmes that enhance existing services in health, nutrition, education, protection and WASH. As an example, ECD services are delivered through health, education and community platforms, using tools such as the ‘Care for Child Development’ package to train frontline workers. UNICEF also promotes national policies, budgeted action plans, and coordinated and accountable management frameworks that support multisectoral interventions.

2. **CHANGE STRATEGY**
   **IMPROVE THE DELIVERY OF ESSENTIAL SERVICES THROUGH SYSTEM STRENGTHENING**
   Strengthening service delivery systems – an essential part of fostering ECD programmes – involves ensuring that health workers, nutrition counsellors, preschool teachers, social workers, child protection workers and frontline workers in humanitarian settings are adequately trained, equipped and supported to deliver interventions that foster healthy brain development. UNICEF also provides capacity support in child-friendly policies to government leaders and technical decision makers.

3. **CHANGE STRATEGY**
   **PROMOTE CAREGIVING BEHAVIOURS, DEMAND FOR SERVICES AND SOCIAL NORMS FOR POSITIVE PARENTING**
   Around the world, UNICEF with ECD networks of civil society and partners focus on family and community empowerment and increasing demand for inclusive, quality services. Efforts include Communication for Development (C4D) behaviour and social change interventions on exclusive breastfeeding, nutrition, responsive stimulation, positive discipline, protection from toxic stress, fathers’ engagement in caregiving and gender equity. These efforts highlight a focus on young parents, many of whom are adolescents.

4. **CHANGE STRATEGY**
   **USE ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATIONS TO SUPPORT PROGRAMMATIC GOALS**
   UNICEF advocacy and communication efforts, such as the four-year campaign #EarlyMomentsMatter, aim to convince political leaders, policymakers, decision makers and donors to commit to and invest in ECD. Efforts also focus on building partnerships with the private sector to strengthen family friendly policies of businesses.

5. **CHANGE STRATEGY**
   **BROADEN DATA AND EVIDENCE GATHERING SYSTEMS**
   Data are critical to providing effective ECD programmes that reach the children and families most in need. UNICEF provides support to countries with tools that capture and code ECD indicators. UNICEF is the custodial agency for SDG target 4.2.1, which measures “Proportion of children under 5 years of age who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being, by sex.”

6. **CHANGE STRATEGY**
   **STRENGTHEN PUBLIC FINANCING FOR ECD**
   UNICEF works with governments, development banks, finance institutions and the private sector to identify cost-effective and equitable ways to fund and deliver ECD services. UNICEF offers advice on shaping national investment plans and leveraging financing for the best results for children and develops monitoring and tracking tools for national investments in ECD.

7. **CHANGE STRATEGY**
   **LEVERAGE PARTNERSHIPS FOR ECD**
   UNICEF leverages global and local partnerships with countries, funds and the private sector to strengthen the quality of ECD services around the world. UNICEF also leads initiatives that increase the reach and influence of ECD programmes, through advocacy, policies and service models through mechanisms such as the ECD Action Network (ECDNA!), which UNICEF announced with the World Bank in 2016.
Differentiated country contexts

UNICEF tailors its ECD interventions to the needs of different country contexts as determined by the availability of data, country capacity, the level of understanding of the importance of ECD, and the scope and quality of existing services. UNICEF provides and supports ECD interventions in five contexts:

**High capacity & conditions**
- Adequate ECD fiscal resources; family-friendly policies with effective governance and coordination at national and decentralised levels; adoption of standards leading to quality improvements and regular monitoring and reporting; equity challenges among sub-populations; social awareness of ECD leading to changes in behaviour and demand.

**Medium capacity & conditions**
- Unclear coordination and governance for ECD; limited fiscal resources; adopted standards for ECD are not implemented consistently with data gaps; equity challenges among sub-populations with limited coverage of services to vulnerable groups; ECD packages developed but not integrated into delivery platforms; some knowledge of ECD in communities and families but limited changes in behaviour.

**Low capacity & conditions**
- Weak governance and accountability for ECD; insufficient fiscal resources; limited data and understanding of ECD; lack of training on ECD for frontline workers to deliver interventions at scale; insufficient standardisation of services for ECD.

**Fragile**
- Areas with post-conflict or prolonged crises where the capacity and conditions are significantly inadequate to meet the population's expectations and needs or manage changes in expectations and capacity through political process.

**Emergency**
- A situation that, due to exceptional burden on existing resources, threatens the lives and well-being of large numbers of a population and requires extraordinary action to ensure their development.
References


9. Ibid.


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