WHAT IS AT STAKE?

- The first five years of life have a profound effect on a child’s future. Events in early childhood – and even before birth – play a vital role in shaping health, education, social and economic outcomes for the duration of the child’s life.

- A baby and young child’s brain can form up to 1000 neural connections every second. This brain-building process is shaped by a combination of nature and nurture and lays the foundation for cognitive and social development.

- Growing up in a situation of poverty, which is the case for nearly two out of three young children in South Africa, influences their survival, growth, and educational opportunities.

- Children under age 5 are at particular risk of violence and maltreatment in the home - including corporal punishment - and are the most vulnerable to the long-term negative effects. Strong, frequent or prolonged exposure to neglect and abuse can trigger biological response systems that, without the buffer of a protective adult, create toxic stress.

- Children who are raised under disadvantaged or violent circumstances not only suffer from illness, stunting, malnutrition and physical and emotional harm, but they are also less likely to succeed in school, and lack opportunities in adulthood. These deprivations not only hold back individual children, they perpetuate a cycle of disadvantage and inequity that can continue for generations. Poor early childhood development thus contributes to cycles of poverty and hinders national efforts to overcome key development challenges such as economic inequality and unemployment.

- In order to harness the development potential of South Africa’s youngest generations, significant investment is therefore required to ensure that from the first days of life, children are raised in a safe and caring environment with access to financial support, as well as the healthcare, nutrition and early learning opportunities they deserve.

HOW DOES UNICEF HELP?

Evidence has shown that poor nutrition, hygiene and health care; insufficient psychosocial stimulation; and exposure to neglect, abuse or violence during early childhood all have detrimental effects on development which are nearly impossible to compensate for later in life. With over 70 years of experience working for children’s rights and well-being, UNICEF brings knowledge from across the globe to support governments and partners to develop and implement Early Childhood Development (ECD) policies and programmes that address these challenges, and enable young children to reach their full potential. Drawing on its technical expertise in health, nutrition, education and social protection, UNICEF South Africa helps to collect evidence; promote
quality dialogue with families and communities; identify solutions; and ensure national strategies to support babies and young children are based on what works. In consideration of all aspects of early childhood development, UNICEF supports interventions that integrate action across government departments, development partners, civil society and communities to promote quality early learning, health care, nutrition, child protection, social assistance and support to parents and caregivers. While deliberately focusing on the most vulnerable and deprived communities in the country, UNICEF partners with the South African Government through technical assistance to strengthen legislative frameworks, systems and programmes, and ensure that all children survive, thrive and develop from the start.

MAXIMIZING RETURNS BY INVESTING IN THE EARLY YEARS OF CHILDHOOD

Investments in early childhood development (ECD) interventions have very high returns, but this is not always immediately visible or obvious. Some of the benefits of ECD interventions occur only later in life once children receive subsequent investments such as quality primary and secondary education. Research also shows that investments in nutrition during the prenatal and early childhood years yield between 7 to 10 per cent greater returns than investments made at older ages.

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

UNICEF’s support in early childhood development is guided by the Government's National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy and focuses on reaching the most marginalized and deprived children with the following objectives:

- Improve child and maternal health: UNICEF works with Government and partners to increase access to quality health care; scale up proven interventions - including immunization; promote healthy behaviours; and strengthen health systems to deliver integrated packages of neonatal, child and maternal care. In view of the HIV burden in South Africa and its impact on all aspects of a child’s life, a key focus is to eliminate HIV transmission from mother to child (EMTCT), and ensure appropriate care for children living with, or affected by the disease. By using digital real time tracking, UNICEF helps to identify gaps in service delivery, and through initiatives like MomConnect and the Digital Road to Health Booklet, has spearheaded the use of mobile technology to communicate with patients and help them to keep themselves and their children healthy. UNICEF also works to strengthen linkages between public health facilities and communities.

- Support infant and young child feeding: Good nutrition and feeding practices are fundamental for both the physical and mental development of young children. UNICEF has supported the Government to shift the country’s focus from formula to breastfeeding for all infants, and also supports national efforts to promote a comprehensive package of high impact nutrition interventions for babies and young children. This is helping to lower severe malnutrition and stunting rates in the country, as well as address the equally concerning rise of childhood obesity.

- Promote safe water, sanitation and hygiene practices: Safely managed water, good sanitation and hygiene are critical to reducing malnutrition and improving maternal, newborn and child health and survival. Handwashing with soap alone prevents up to 50 per cent of childhood diarrhoea, which is one of the five leading causes of death for children in South Africa. Together with Government and partners, UNICEF promotes awareness and behaviour change in homes, schools and communities through cross-cutting programmes and campaigns in health and education.

- Strengthen early stimulation and learning: Play is a child’s right. It also boosts children’s cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development, and lays a solid foundation for learning. Yet the critical importance of play for babies and young children is not always well understood by parents, caregivers, practitioners and educators. UNICEF is supporting Government to implement the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy and early childhood development programmes as well as the National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four, which emphasizes play-based learning. This involves support to parents and caregivers; training of early childhood development practitioners and teachers; and development and roll out of mobile technology for early learning (ECD Mobi). UNICEF is also assisting Government to facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities in ECD policies and programmes.

- Increase access to social assistance by expanding social grants to reach all eligible young children - particularly infants and children younger than age 2. Studies have shown that the child support grant has a highly positive impact on young children and is associated with an increase in birth registration, improvements in child health and nutrition, and access to early childhood development programmes. However, young children are less likely to receive child support grants and 43 per cent of eligible children under age 1 currently do not receive the grant, thereby depriving them of the positive development outcomes associated with this valuable financial assistance.

- Advance protection of infants and young children from abuse and violence: In order to survive, and thrive, children also need nurturing care and protection. Preventing violence and abuse requires a shift in attitudes and norms in communities; as well as support to parents, family members, caregivers and educators to foster safe and encouraging environments wherever babies and young children live, learn and play. This includes scaling up evidence-based programmes such as Isibindi to deliver home visits, and support positive parenting and the role of men in caregiving; ensuring safe and nurturing learning environments in early childhood development centres and schools; and providing safe spaces in communities for play and recreation through Safe Parks. By promoting family strengthening programmes and capacity development for caregivers, early childhood development practitioners and teachers, UNICEF is supporting Government to ensure that infants and young children benefit from national child protection policies and interventions. Such engagement also helps to educate communities on the holistic needs of children and build their capacity for self-sufficiency, resilience and positive social change.
Early Childhood Development - Survive and Thrive: Focus areas and critical actions

The Government of South Africa is prioritizing investment in early childhood development (ECD) through the multi-sectoral National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy, adopted in December 2015. In support of the implementation of the National ECD Policy and to achieve concrete results, UNICEF works with Government and other partners to scale up high impact interventions in the following areas:

Maternal, newborn and child health and nutrition

- Improve survival and health of mothers and children by implementing a package of integrated neonatal, child and maternal health services at hospitals and linked feeder clinics, with a special focus on districts with remote rural areas, and including support to immunization; and using mobile technology to improve care and tracking of patients from infancy and increase health seeking behaviour - including through the Digital Road to Health Booklet.

- Eliminate mother-to-child transmission of HIV (EMTCT) by intensifying tracking and follow up of HIV-positive babies and mothers for treatment and care - including through MomConnect, which already links over 1 million pregnant women and mothers to individualized health care through mobile technology; improving community engagement in the HIV response; and fast tracking progress to reach the target of 90 per cent of children accessing HIV and TB testing and treatment services.

- Improve infant and young child nutrition through a comprehensive package of high impact child nutrition interventions, including promotion of exclusive breastfeeding and appropriate complementary feeding; holistic community focused action to improve water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); and support towards integrated management of severe malnutrition in select districts - including infant and young child feeding in the context of HIV.

Early stimulation and learning

- Improve quality of early stimulation and learning programmes by supporting implementation of the National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four based on recognised and innovative teaching methods and assessments emphasizing play-based learning. This includes the In-service Learning Through Play training programme for 150,000 early childhood development practitioners and foundation phase educators (Grades R to 3); and roll out of ECD Mobi – a low cost, easy to use, real-time virtual parent support ‘app’ to provide over 200,000 parents and primary caregivers with knowledge and skills to facilitate learning through play.

- Promote positive parenting and care through implementation of the National Parental/Primary Caregiver Capacity-Building Training Programme to promote positive parenting practices among parents and caregivers.

Protection from violence and abuse

- Ensure access to the child support grant by expanding and strengthening social grants to reach eligible children aged birth to 3 years who are currently not receiving assistance.

- Increase access to family strengthening services for vulnerable households through Isibindi home visits that provide tailored support to families and caregivers; encourage positive parenting - including MenCare which promotes the role of men in caregiving; and improve tracking and referrals of children at-risk to statutory protection services.

- Expand the number of safe spaces in disadvantaged communities through Safe Parks - safe spaces for young children to play, learn skills and receive a meal - by establishing social compacts that combine the efforts and resources of Government, civil society, private sector and the community.

- Promote an integrated case management approach that uses the digitized Child Status Index (CSI) to identify and prioritize the most at-risk young children, and involves a holistic assessment of the child; development of a tailored action plan; support and referrals across education, health and child protection services to implement the plan; and a process of review and adaptation where necessary to ensure the plan continues to address the child’s needs.

- Implement national norms and standards for ECD programmes that prohibit violence against, and punishment of babies and young children.
HOW CAN YOU HELP?

The South African National Development Plan - Vision 2030 sets early childhood development as a national priority and the Sustainable Development Goals put forth clear targets to ensure babies and young children survive and thrive. Yet, these commitments can only be achieved through collective efforts by all sectors of society. Supporting UNICEF and Government in the area of early childhood development represents a tremendous opportunity to invest in the country’s future. Through new and unique partnerships with Government, the private sector, bilateral donors and civil society, UNICEF builds on the knowledge, expertise and innovation of each to ensure the most effective and efficient use of combined resources. By uniting with UNICEF, you gain a credible and respected partner who can support a comprehensive and results focused corporate social investment (CSI) strategy that ensures South Africa’s youngest generations get the best possible start in life.

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

Quality interventions in the first years of life not only impact on the development of the child, but also have positive outcomes for both the family and society as a whole. Women are able to participate in the labour market and earn an income while their infants are cared for, while interventions to improve parenting skills increase positive family involvement. The long-term gains for the child include decreased health risks; higher academic achievement during the formal schooling years; higher income earning potential; and enhanced self-sufficiency in adulthood. Investment in the early years often results in a society that has a higher concentration of pro-social and productive members; reduced crime and delinquency rates; increased tax revenue; and improved equity.

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