

BUILDING BRAINS, BUILDING FUTURES¹

The early moments of life offer an unparalleled opportunity to build the brains of the children who will ultimately build the future.

But far too often, this is an opportunity squandered.

For nations, the cost of not investing in a child's early moments is a generation with poorer health, fewer learning skills and reduced earning potential. It is a weaker economy and a greater burden on health, education and welfare systems. It is intergenerational cycles of poverty and disadvantage that hinder equitable growth and prosperity.

For children, especially children from disadvantaged communities, the price of this failure is lost potential.

The science is clear: **A child's brain is built, not born.**

The process begins before birth and involves a complex interplay of neural connections that are shaped by experience and environment. In the early years between conception and 5 years of age, these neural connections occur at lightning speed – a speed never again repeated. They establish a foundation of development that will help children grow, learn and thrive. This process is fueled by adequate nutrition, protection from harm and responsive stimulation including early learning opportunities.

Unfortunately, many millions of children around the world, including in Sri Lanka, are deprived of the elements that foster optimal brain development. They do not have nutritious food or health care; they are not protected from violence, extreme stress, pollution and conflict; they are starved of responsive stimulation from a caring adult; and they miss out on opportunities to learn. Negative experiences can slow down and alter how neural connections are made in a baby's brain. They can impact a child's ability to grow and learn, and they can even reduce future earnings by up to 25 per cent. For example, exposure to violence, abuse and neglect can produce toxic stress, which when prolonged and extreme, can interfere with the development of neural connections.

Most of the children who miss out in early childhood come from the most deprived communities. An estimated 25.2 per cent of children younger than 5 years of age in Sri Lanka, are at risk of poor development due to extreme poverty and stunted growth.² 17 per cent of children younger than 5 years in the country have stunted growth because of inadequate nutrition and health care.³ Only around 50 per cent of 3 to 5 year old children are enrolled in a pre-schools,⁴ jeopardizing opportunities for optimal early childhood development, school readiness and, ultimately, longer-term sustainable social and economic development.

In countries with available data, mostly low- and middle-income countries, about 80 per cent of children aged 2 to 4 years are violently disciplined regularly; and there are about 15.5 million 3 and 4 year olds with whom an adult does not read, tell stories, count or draw.⁵

Currently, there are nearly 800 children aged 0 to 5 years left by their families and living in residential care facilities in Sri Lanka.⁶

These deprivations can limit a child's development and harm their opportunities in the future. For nations, the loss of individual potential can turn into an unhealthy and ill-equipped workforce. It hampers economic growth and strains education, health and welfare systems. It leads to cycles of deprivation and dependence that can continue for generations.

Reasons to invest

Currently, Sri Lanka invests only 0.0001 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on early childhood programmes. This is one of the lowest ratios of public spending on early childhood development in the world; lower than its South Asian neighbors but lower even than many very poor Sub-Saharan African countries.⁷

The financial case for investing in children's early moments is strong. **The rate of return on investing in early childhood development can be as high as 13.7 per cent.** Benefits are reaped in better education and health outcomes, lower crime and higher individual earnings. Investments in children's early development can lead to better individual adult incomes of up to 25 per cent. Investing in early childhood development also benefits nations – supporting a more skilled workforce that is better prepared to take on the future challenges of a global and digital economy.

The cost of investing in early childhood development can be surprisingly affordable because many early childhood interventions can be integrated into existing services. For example, for an estimated average of US\$0.50 per person annually, programmes for families with young children can be added to existing health and nutrition services.

Time to act

In many parts of the world, governments and their partners are providing children with adequate nutrition, protection and stimulation – and reaping the benefits.

But it is now time to do more - to pick up the pace of progress and transform our knowledge about early childhood development into investments and interventions that support families, communities and nations. The time to act is now.

We cannot afford to allow 25.2 per cent of children in Sri Lanka to have their growth stunted and their opportunities limited, with potentially dire consequences for the nation.

More than 15 years ago, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) helped spur global action to save and improve the lives of millions of children. These efforts helped reduce rates of child mortality from 17 to 11 for every thousand live births.

Now, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) present an opportunity to build on that progress by helping more children to survive – and thrive.

1 Excerpts from UNICEF's "Early Moments Matter for Every Child" report (September 2017)

2,3 Department of Census and Statistics. (2016). Sri Lanka Demographic and Health Survey 2016. Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics.

4,7 Dundar, Halil, Benoît Millot, Michelle Riboud, Mari Shojjo, Harsha Aturupane, Sangeeta Goyal, and Dhushyanth Raju. 2017. Sri Lanka Education Sector Assessment: Achievements, Challenges, and Policy Options. Directions in Development. Washington, DC: World Bank.

5 UNICEF global databases, 2017, based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), 2005–2016.

6 Ministry of Women and Child Affairs. (2013). A Situational Analysis: Current Status of Childcare Institutions and Institutionalized Children in Sri Lanka. Colombo: Department of Probation and Childcare Services.

The SDGs, a road map for creating a better future, recognize the link between early childhood development and equity, productivity, wealth creation, sustainable growth and a more peaceful future. Embedded in the SDGs are targets on malnutrition, child mortality, early learning and violence – targets that outline an agenda for early childhood development.

A new global agenda comes with a responsibility to act. We have the science, knowledge and experience.

Now, it is up to us to invest in children’s brains and their futures. For their sake – and ours.

Call to action

The evidence is clear: Early childhood development must be a global and national priority. Governments have already pledged to achieve the early childhood development targets in the SDGs. But they need to deliver on this pledge with action and place early childhood development at the top of their economic and political agendas.

UNICEF is calling on the government and partners to:

1. Invest urgently in services that give young children, especially the most deprived, the best start in life. Increasing the overall share of budgetary allocations for early childhood development programming is a critical step governments can and should take. For example, allocating 10 per cent of all national education budgets to pre-primary education will greatly expand the number of children with access to early learning opportunities, which can improve their educational attainment and increase future earnings. Innovative financing can also help governments reach more children with more effective programming. Approaches can include earmarking taxes to pay for early childhood development services or instituting ‘payment by results’ frameworks that tie investment to outcomes.

2. Provide dedicated leadership for early childhood development programmes and coordinate efforts more effectively across sectors. Early childhood development programmes cut across sectors including health, nutrition, education, protection, and water, sanitation and hygiene. Policies and programmes also need to be integrated. A coordinating ministry or body can oversee efforts so they are better integrated, more effective

and cost-effective. Similar structures at the provincial, district and village level can help reach the most deprived children.

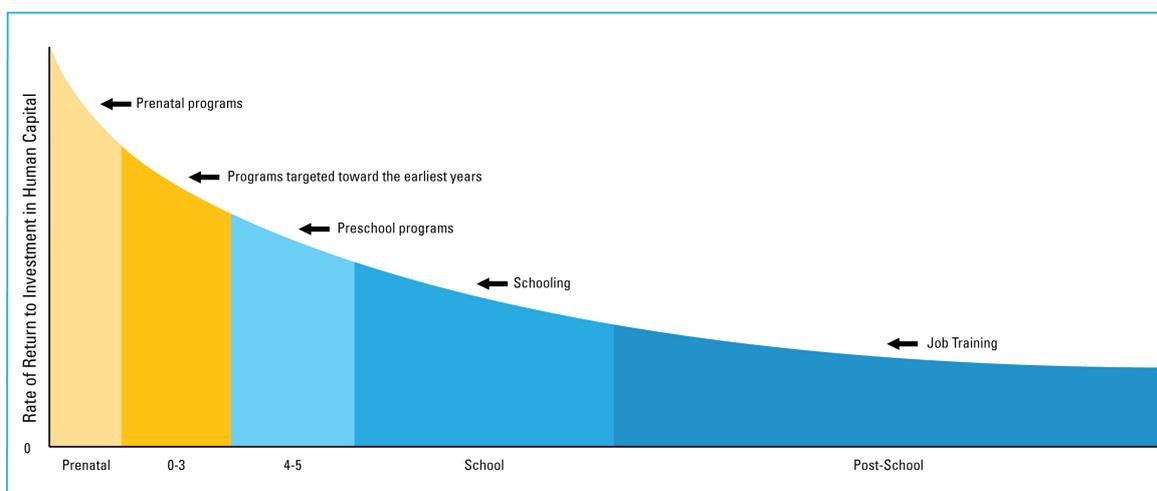
3. Make family-friendly early childhood development policies a national priority – and a private sector imperative. Policies, programmes and other support that enable parents and caregivers to provide the best start in life for their children pays-off and results in healthier, better educated children, a better equipped workforce and sustainable economic growth. All countries should provide two years of tuition-free pre-primary education, which is critical for early cognitive development. Key workplace policies include 12 months of paid parental leave; breastfeeding facilities and remunerated breastfeeding breaks for the first six months; and onsite child care and early learning programmes for the children of employees.

4. Expand access to effective and essential early childhood development services in homes, schools, communities and health clinics. To reach more children and families in a more cost-effective way, governments and their partners can integrate early childhood interventions into existing services such as providing routine health screenings at pre-schools and parenting support as a part of home-health visits for new parents. These can be complimented with breastfeeding counselling, guidance on responsive stimulation, early learning, and parenting programmes to protect children from violence.

5. Collect data on essential indicators of early childhood development and track progress. To assess progress in giving every child the best start in life, we need to measure young children’s social, emotional, cognitive, language and motor development against internationally comparable data. As countries track progress towards achieving the specific targets that address young children in the SDGs on health, nutrition, education and protection, they can also disaggregate data to better track equity gaps so that they can reach the children in the greatest need.

6. Drive demand for high-quality early childhood development services. Parents and caregivers are the single most important factor in giving children the best possible start in life. Communication for development programming and other public information initiatives can build greater understanding of the critical importance of nutrition, protection and stimulation in helping children reach their full potential. With this understanding, families can generate greater demand for high-quality early childhood development services.

The Heckman curve: The highest economic returns come from investment in a child’s earliest moments



NOTE: The X-axis is the age range for children and the y-axis is the rate of return to investment in human capital. Source: James J. Heckman, The Heckman Curve, <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/the-heckman-curve/>.

For more information :

Tim Sutton, Representative, UNICEF Sri Lanka
tsutton@unicef.org