



## Education and **Early Childhood**



**During the first five years of a child's life, quality education, play and stimulation are crucial for development.**

This is the period when 90% of brain development takes place, and exposure to adversities can have lasting consequences for the rest of the child's life. This is also the period in which young children are most sensitive to interventions. Young children need nurturing care: good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, physical and emotional security and safety, and early learning and stimulation. Early childhood education is most effective when it is part of an integrated early childhood development approach and it can help identify learning needs early on, improve socialisation and development. Investing in early childhood development is one of the best investments for sustainable development.

### Key challenges



- **Enrolment in early childhood education is woefully inadequate for marginalised children in rich and poor countries alike.** More than 175 million children, almost half of all pre-primary-age children globally, are not enrolled in preschool. In low-income countries, only one in five are enrolled ([UNICEF, 2019](#)).

- **There is a stark global divide in access to early childhood education.** While more than 80% of children in high-income countries are attending pre-primary education, more than 80% of children in low-income countries are denied access  
[\(Zubairi & Rose, 2019\)](#).
- **Access to early childhood education varies markedly within countries.** In low-income countries, rich children are eight times more likely to attend early childhood education programmes than those who are less well off  
[\(UNICEF, 2019\)](#).
- **The cost of inaction is high.** For example, if Nicaragua does not expand universal preschool, it will lose the equivalent of 4.1% of GDP in unrealised development potential  
[\(Richter et al., 2017\)](#).
- **A substantial increase in investment is needed, particularly in early education.** In 2017, nine major donors in health, nutrition, education, and sanitation spent less than 6% of total official development assistance on early childhood development. Only 1% of all early childhood development aid was directed to education  
[\(Zubairi and Rose/Theirworld, 2018\)](#).

## Make the case



- **Early childhood development is one of the best investments that can be made.** Each dollar invested in early childhood education can yield a return as high as US\$17 for the most disadvantaged children  
[\(Theirworld, 2017\)](#).
- **More investment in early childhood education is crucial to help children reach their full potential.** It is currently estimated that 250 million or 43% of children under five in low- and middle-income countries will not reach their developmental potential, which means a loss of 19.8% in adult annual income  
[\(Black et al., 2017\)](#).
- **Quality early childhood development prepares children better for future learning.** Children in Uganda who did not attend pre-primary education are twice as likely to repeat first grade  
[\(Brunette et al., 2017\)](#).

- **Nurturing care interventions can mitigate the impact of poverty on brain development and early learning outcomes.** A recent randomised controlled trial in Switzerland found that a biweekly home visit to the most deprived families led to a significant improvement in children's adaptive behaviour, developmental status, and language skills, narrowing the learning gaps associated with poverty ([Schaub et al., 2019](#)).
- **Children who attended early childhood education are more likely to be on track with learning outcomes.** In low- and middle-income countries, 44% of children who attended early childhood education programmes are on track in literacy and numeracy skills compared with only 12% of children who did not attend any programmes ([UNICEF, 2019](#)).
- **Missing out on nurturing care in the early years can lead to lower cognitive, language, and psychosocial outcomes.** A study showed that 15-year-old immigrant youths who attended early childhood education on average scored 49 points higher in reading, which is equivalent to more than one year of school ([GEM, 2019](#)).
- **Early childhood interventions lead to high individual benefits later in life.** In Jamaica, early childhood interventions in the cognitive and socioemotional development of stunted children aged 9-24 months old led to lower crime rates, better mental health, and 25% higher earnings 20 years later, compared with children who did not receive this ([World Bank, 2018](#)).
- **Early childhood development is a key opportunity to develop important 21st century skills, including cooperation, teamwork, communication, creativity, self-discipline, and motivation.** Early development of these critical skills will create a virtuous cycle and help children to continue to learn and engage in later life ([Global Business Coalition for Education, 2018](#)).
- **The cost to integrate early childhood development into existing services is not high.** An additional US\$0.50 per person each year is all that is needed for early childhood development to be integrated into existing services ([Light for the World, 2020; see also Richter et al./Lancet, 2017](#)).
- **It is important to remember the long-term horizon.** In Jamaica, providing toddlers with psychosocial stimulation increased earnings by 25%, but these returns only materialised 20 years later ([World Bank 2019](#)).

## Key infographic



Each dollar invested in early childhood education can yield a return as high as US\$17 for the most disadvantaged children.

## Key talking points



- About 175 million children globally are not enrolled in early childhood education.
- Early childhood education is the foundation for a child's growth and developmental potential, alongside other crucial early years investments.
- Marginalised children in rich and poor countries are less likely to have access to quality early childhood education.
- Approximately 90% of a child's brain development takes place before the age of five.
- Every dollar invested in early childhood education can yield a return as high as US\$17 for the most disadvantaged children.