

Policy Recommendations for Congress - Early Child Development & COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic is disrupting the lives of children in the U.S. and around the world. The negative economic impacts, closure of schools and child care facilities, as well as quarantines, add stressors to households and can interrupt optimal child development. This is especially true for already vulnerable children, including children with disabilities, children on the move, and children living outside of family care. These children are at increased risk of infectious disease and of physical and emotional maltreatment, mental distress, and other forms of violence including child labor.

COVID-19 will have an extreme impact in low- and middle-income countries, as well as in fragile and humanitarian contexts. The pandemic is likely to disrupt health systems, including suspending vaccination campaigns; straining child protection systems and social services; and exacerbating existing inequalities. The prevalence of underlying health conditions, poor nutrition, weak health systems, poor access to hygiene practices and clean water, and school closures all contribute to this crisis.

The U.S. government must continue programmatic and policy efforts to ensure children in their earliest years are able to survive and thrive during this critical period.

Policy Recommendations:

1. **Additional funding for foreign assistance accounts at the front lines of the global COVID-19 pandemic:** In our interconnected world, we cannot hope to eliminate this threat anywhere unless we eliminate it everywhere. Increased funding is needed to support vulnerable communities to prevent, detect, and respond to COVID-19.

In Congress's next supplemental bill, we recommend additional appropriations for USAID accounts prioritizing the health, development and wellbeing of children. This includes the Maternal and Child Health account within the Global Health account, the International Disaster Assistance account, the Economic Support Fund, and the Migration and Refugee Assistance account. In the supplemental funding bill, we also request bill language permitting funds be provided to international organizations that provide assistance to vulnerable children through health interventions, as well as existing programs like education and nutrition that offer a lifeline to children when disaster strikes.

2. **Continuity of existing child-focused programming:** Inclusive Early Child Development programs strengthen health systems, enhance social protection, and promote stability in vulnerable families and communities. We caution against diverting funds from current programs supporting young children and their families. For example, it is critical to support responsive

caregiving, and prevent family separation and placement of children in institutions, to limit further harm to vulnerable children during challenging times.

Previous fiscal year funding should be released to continue to support programs that provide health services, nutrition, clean water and sanitation, psychosocial support, education, social protection, economic strengthening, and protection from violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect. Release of appropriated monies should include contributions to international organizations such as UNICEF, the WHO and Education Cannot Wait. These organizations rely on core funding to respond in emergency situations like this pandemic.

3. **Flexibility of programming:** U.S. government-funded health and development programs should be provided guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic that includes the ability to modify project outcomes and adapt project activities to the new environment. This should include ensuring activities align with global and national public health and humanitarian standards, and supporting redirection of available resources to COVID-19 programming through existing project platforms where necessary.
4. **Passage of the Global Child Thrive Act:** We urge Congress to pass the Global Child Thrive Act (H.R. 4864 / S. 2715). This legislation would help to elevate critical early childhood development interventions, such as hygiene, clean water, and psychosocial support, into existing foreign assistance programs for vulnerable children and their families.

The bill promotes access to clean water and hygiene practices, which are the primary tools in stopping the spread of COVID-19. It also elevates the necessity of providing safe, family-based care for children without family care, including those who may lose parental care during the COVID-19 pandemic. The bill also highlights the continued protection of children from violence, neglect, and exploitation; and it promotes critical protections and reporting mechanisms for vulnerable children. Finally, it promotes psychosocial support, which will be crucial for young children experiencing violence, traumatic events, and economic hardships which are expected to increase as a result of this pandemic.

The Thrive Coalition is a community of over 50 organizations and individuals dedicated to addressing U.S. government support for global early childhood development.