

The foundations for a healthy and productive life are set in childhood. The environments in which children grow and the conditions to which they are exposed affect the developing brain, which provides the foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health. A child can only reach his or her full potential under healthy, nurturing, and safe conditions that promote good growth, learning, and development.

The Need

- At least 250 million children under the age of five, living in poverty in low- to middle-resource countries, fail to reach their cognitive and socioemotional developmental potential, due to nutritional deficiencies, inadequate stimulation, and other causes with simple solutions.
- Toxic stress disrupts the developing brain and can have lifelong effects on learning, behavior, and health. This extreme and repetitive stress can be caused by exposure to violence, abuse, neglect, or economic hardship.
- Despite the relationships between child health, protection, and learning, each issue is usually addressed separately, and without adequate evaluation of child development metrics.

Policy solutions

Early childhood development (ECD) interventions and coordination can increase the impact of the U.S. government's successful global child health, early education, and protection programs while boosting economies and creating a more stable world.

- Include ECD targets within Maternal and Child Health (MCH), Nutrition, Basic Education, and Child Protection programs.
- Coordinate for ECD across these sectors.
- Support pilot programs.
- Fully fund MCH, Basic Education, and Vulnerable Children at the U.S. Agency for International Development.

We Know What Works

We can build healthier lives, communities, and economies when early childhood development is prioritized and coordinated across sectors. However, it will require political will to support this effort on a large scale.

- Effective investments during the prenatal and early childhood years can generate returns of up to 10% per year. A 20-year study in Jamaica found that combining early childhood health and education interventions increased future earnings by 25%. This is the most cost-effective time to reach children and ensure they can contribute to stable, prosperous societies.
- The U.S. government's global health platforms already reach pregnant women and young children during the period when their brains are growing mostly rapidly in volume and neuronal connections.
- Maternal and child survival interventions can contribute to child development. These include food and micronutrient supplementation for mothers, reduction of iron deficiency in infancy, and newborn care including resuscitation, delayed cord clamping, Kangaroo Mother Care, and optimal breastfeeding practices.
- Home visits in India, Pakistan, and Zambia that shared parenting skills alongside a standard World Health Organization curriculum substantially reduced the cognitive developmental gap between children from families with lower versus higher resources.
- Stable adult relationships help to build resilience and mitigate the effects of toxic stress. For health workers, this means supporting families and building links between healthcare centers, schools, and homes.
- For the roughly 93 million children with disabilities and/or developmental delays, who are at greater risk than their peers of being poor, appropriate interventions can prepare them to achieve their full potential.

