

A good start in life will ensure a sustainable future for all

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For the [Lancet Series on Child Development in Developing Countries \(2007\)](#) see <http://thelancet.com/series/child-development-in-developing-countries>

For the [Lancet Series on Child Development in Developing Countries \(2011\)](#) see <http://thelancet.com/series/child-development-in-developing-countries-2>

In 2007, the first *Lancet Series* on early childhood development reported that worldwide more than 200 million children younger than 5 years were failing to reach their developmental potential. In 2011, a second *Series* identified gaps in implementation and coverage of early childhood development interventions, and presented new evidence on the causes and effects of developmental inequities in early childhood. Crucially, the opportunity to amplify early childhood development interventions is in the first 3 years of life if stimulation through parenting, educational support, and adequate health nutrition is provided.

The Lancet now publishes a third *Series*, *Advancing Early Childhood Development: from Science to Scale*.¹⁻³ This new *Series*, led by Linda Richter from the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa, brings together the work of 45 authors from 22 global institutions—and from academic disciplines ranging from neuroscience, psychology, and paediatrics to biology, global health, and economics.

The *Series* describes the latest evidence about linkages between early care and development and progress towards global commitments on early childhood development. Interventions that are most beneficial through the life course are reviewed, and how to scale up early childhood development programmes globally is examined.

There are challenges to delivering early childhood development interventions and services that are not

specifically addressed in the *Series*. In an increasingly unstable world where conflict and humanitarian crises are widespread, it will be important to ensure practical solutions to implementation in these settings. Also, there is a huge unmet need of children with physical and learning disabilities, which has clear relevance to child development. New ways for how the health system caters for these individuals will be crucial to address.

The message that child health and childhood development services should be integrated is made throughout the *Series*. It will be important to deliver on this recommendation, and to see what can be achieved on existing child health and survival platforms with community-based health workers and others in the first 1000 days of a child's life. With the multitude of actors and initiatives in early childhood development today, governance is both a challenge and an opportunity, as pointed out by Yusra Shawar and Jeremy Schiffman⁴ in a *Health Policy* paper to accompany the *Series*.

Perhaps the most important message of the *Series* is the cost of inaction. If children are unable to fulfil their social and developmental potential, this not only harms their futures, but also the societies in which they live. The economic case for countries to invest in the early years is clear. In recognition of that reality, the *Series* is being launched on Oct 5, 2016, in advance of the first Human Capital Summit: Investing in the Early Years for Growth and Productivity, hosted by the World Bank. Heads of state and ministers of finance from high burden countries who have signalled their intent to ramp up investments in early childhood development services and reduce chronic malnutrition will attend. Countries include Guatemala, Côte d'Ivoire, Tanzania, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Madagascar, Pakistan, and Senegal.

It is the collective responsibility of governments, families, and all development health partners to guarantee that every individual starting life in every corner of the world is given the family care, education, health services, and nutrition to do so. As the *Series* is launched in several countries over coming months, *The Lancet* hopes that the messages representing almost a decade of cumulative work of early childhood development practitioners and researchers will be heard—and acted upon.

For the [Human Capital Summit](#) see <http://live.worldbank.org/human-capital-summit>



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Early childhood development: the foundation of sustainable development



Momentum for improving early childhood development has grown since *The Lancet* published the landmark Series, Child Development in Developing Countries in 2007, followed by Child Development in Developing Countries 2 in 2011. As shown in this new Series, Advancing Early Childhood Development: from Science to Scale,¹⁻³ between 2000 and 2015 the number of scientific publications on topics central to early childhood development increased substantially, about a third of countries had adopted multisectoral policies on early childhood development, and there has been an increase in funding for early childhood development.¹ Yet, few countries have institutionalised mechanisms to implement these policies, services remain fragmented and of variable quality, and programmes at scale are rare and poorly evaluated. Compelling new evidence in two areas strengthens our resolve to act to reach pregnant women and young children with holistic early childhood development services (panel).

First, new research in early human development shows that epigenetic, immunological, physiological, and psychological adaptations to the environment occur from conception, and that these adaptations affect development throughout the life course.² This knowledge calls for an approach targeting caregivers and children with effective interventions during sensitive times across the life course, with the period from conception to age 2-3 years being of particular importance.

Second, evidence on long-term outcomes from low-income and middle-income countries shows that a programme to increase cognitive development of stunted children in Jamaica 25 years ago⁴ resulted in a significant,

25% increase in average adult earnings. Conversely, long-term follow-up of children from birth shows that growth failure in the first 2 years of life has harmful effects on adult health and human capital, including chronic disease, and lower educational attainment and adult earning.⁵ Moreover, deficits and disadvantages persist into the subsequent generation,^{6,7} producing a vicious inter-generational cycle of lost human capital and perpetuation of poverty. These findings shine light on the transformative potential of early childhood development programmes in low-income and middle-income countries. Only by breaking this cycle will the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) be achieved.

The past two to three decades have seen great improvements in child survival. As a result of global efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, under-5 child mortality dropped by 53% between 1990 and 2015.⁸ Yet, this Series shows that the burden of risk for poor developmental outcomes remains extremely high, affecting an estimated 250 million children (43%) younger than 5 years in low-income and middle-income countries, and rising to over two-thirds of children in sub-Saharan Africa.¹ These estimates are based on just two known risks for which we have global data: extreme poverty and stunting. Adding other risks to young children's development, such as low levels of maternal schooling and physical maltreatment, substantially raises exposure to risks for poor development outcomes in many parts of the world.³

Nurturing interactions are crucial to mitigating these risks. A young child's developing brain is activated

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For the *Lancet Series* on **Child Development in Developing Countries (2011)** see <http://thelancet.com/series/child-development-in-developing-countries-2>