

WHY FOCUS ON EARLY YEARS

## A good start for all children: if you change the beginning of the story, you can change the end of the story

Scientists, public health specialists and economists alike are unequivocal: babies and toddlers are the best learners on the planet, growing and learning fastest before their fifth birthday. During this window, their brains develop more quickly than at any other time of life, and their experiences carry a profound, lasting impact on their physical and mental health and their capacity to learn and relate to others.

What parents and other caregivers do during this time helps to build the brain architecture that lays the foundation for good health and learning in later childhood and adulthood. That’s why we believe that a good start for all children is one of the most important parts of a healthy, peaceful and creative society.

## The most powerful influencers on child development: parents and other caregivers

A baby or toddler’s relationships with the adults in their life are the most important influences on their development. These relationships begin at home, with parents and other family members, such as grandparents and siblings. These caregivers are responsible for a child’s safety and health, as well as what they eat and how they perceive the world.

When parents and other caregivers talk, sing and play with their babies, they help to build a healthy brain wired to learn and interact with others. Studies show that warm, stimulating, responsive caregiving is one of the best predictors that children will do well in school, and subsequently be happy and healthy adults.

WHAT IS AN EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION?

## For a child to thrive, they need good nutrition and healthcare, protection from harm, opportunities to play and loving exchanges with adults

This is the foundation of a good start in life, and it has been the mission of the Bernard van Leer Foundation for more than 50 years.

Early childhood interventions are a priority for us because hundreds of millions of young children across the world do not have access to a good start in life, which prevents them from reaching their full potential. It’s also an increasing priority for governments and other stakeholders worldwide as they recognise the exponential return on investments in the early years.

Traditionally, early childhood interventions can take many forms, from nutrition, health, water and sanitation, to education and social protection. See this World Bank diagram of examples of interventions by sector and age.

More recently, we and others have been working to include a focus on the early years in other sectors that affect millions of young children’s early experiences, such as urban planning and humanitarian assistance.

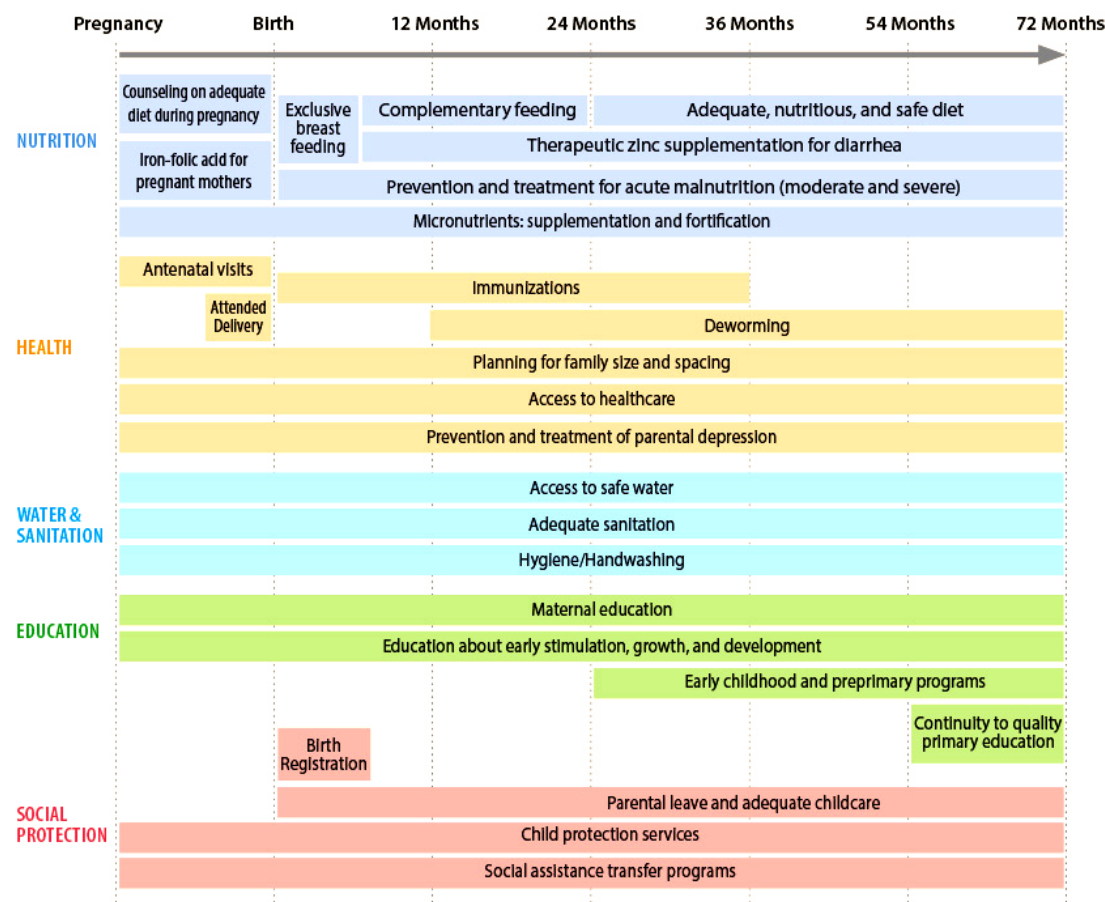


< 1 million neural connections are formed every second in a young child’s brain

43% of children under 5 outside high-income countries are at risk of poor development

US\$4-9 estimated return for every \$1 spent on high-quality early years programmes

FIGURE 1: 25 Key Interventions for Young Children and their Families



Source: Authors. Note: The idea of presenting interventions by sector and/or age has been used by a number of previous authors.


GUIDING PRINCIPLES

How do we reach all children?

Early childhood interventions have proven their worth, resulting in healthier, more resilient and prosperous families and communities around the globe. Today, our challenge is to scale-up cost-effective models to reach all children, paying particular attention to the most disadvantaged.

Two important lessons from 50 years of work – and the work of our partners – guide us:

First, the best way to support babies and toddlers is to ensure the people who care for them have what they need to create a stable, healthy and stimulating environment



Stable, responsive, nurturing relationships and rich learning experiences during a child’s early years provide lifelong benefits for learning, behaviour and physical and mental health. But providing that care is not always easy or straightforward. For example, maternal depression, which affects 13% of new mothers worldwide and 20% in low-income countries, can hinder mother–child bonding, carrying lasting repercussions for the child’s development. Additionally, parents and other caregivers who live in poverty and cannot access key services will face not only more difficulties providing food, shelter and sanitation, but may also have less time, energy and cognitive space to care for babies and toddlers the way they would like.

Investments in the well-being of parents and other people who care for babies and toddlers can take many forms, from reducing daily sources of stress and increasing access to key services, to raising awareness about how to encourage developmental milestones.

Second, reaching every child means incorporating a greater focus on babies, toddlers and the people who care for them in activities already taking place at scale, in addition to setting up stand-alone programmes



Families need support from society, including from the government and the broader community. This requires policies and programmes to serve everyone, and to provide extra support for those most in need. Strategic expansion of what is already working saves money and delivers results quickly.

The Bernard van Leer Foundation harnesses these lessons learned by focusing its efforts in two ways. We bundle support for parents and other primary caregivers with existing services, through our Parents+ initiative, and we support large-scale urban policy, planning and design activities to reach primary caregivers through our Urban95 initiative. Learn more about initiatives at scale in Brazil (Parents+) and Israel (Urban95).

THE ROLE OF SOCIETY

Government officials – from administrators to frontline workers to decision-makers – have a role to play

We have found that not everyone is aware of the ways in which their work can support babies, toddlers and caregivers. Yet we know that many government agencies which are not commonly associated with early childhood do have a critical role to play in helping young children reach their full potential. Here are examples of how some agencies can support healthy child development.

Culture agencies

Can develop programming for families with young children, such as storytelling gatherings and tailored communications campaigns.

Education agencies

Can ensure the provision of sufficient good-quality and affordable childcare facilities to meet the needs of caregivers and young children. They can also work closely with employment and health agencies to support a strong pre-service training pipeline for the future frontline workforce.

Authorities in charge of employment and job market regulation

Can promote family-friendly work policies that support caregivers to spend time with their babies and toddlers, and develop job opportunities tailored to caregiver needs.

Health agencies

Can ensure that basic health and nutrition services for babies also include parenting support.

Parks and gardens agencies

Can facilitate universal access to green space, the provision of public spaces that are safe and appealing for all ages, and the design of playgrounds with built-in features known to support child development, such as sand and water play.

Social service agencies

Can strengthen referral systems to make sure that families with young children get all the support they need as soon as possible.

Transportation agencies

Can deliberately plan for journeys taken by caregivers, which tend to be more complex and at different times than the typical peak-hour commutes, and work to make those journeys safer for women, and more fun and interesting for small children.

Urban design agencies

Can leverage the perspective of babies, toddlers and caregivers as a universal design principle to make streets, plazas, playgrounds and other urban spaces better for babies, toddlers, caregivers and everyone else.

Urban planning agencies

Can contribute to decisions on the location and capacity of such services as healthcare, childcare or preschools so that they are closer to home and easy to use for families with young children.