

Bernard van Leer Foundation
Submission to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child
Day of Discussion: Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood

Children are our future

*Survival and development are simultaneous,
development is not something that occurs after survival¹*

Children are our future. What happens to children in their first days, months and years of life affects their development, the development of our society, and the development of our world.

The Bernard van Leer Foundation has worked in the field of early childhood development for 40 years and for more than 20 of those years we have concentrated solely on young children from birth to eight years of age. Our work has comprised support for programmes in more than 50 countries, both developing and industrialised. Our support includes grants, the exchange of ideas and experiences, commissioning studies and research, and publishing and advocating with the aim of informing and influencing policy and practice.

The programmes that we support are participatory. They are based on working in and with the context, with families and communities, taking account of local culture and traditions. The programmes are mainly implemented by non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

When our Foundation began to work in early childhood, in the 1960s, the concept of children's rights was not yet widespread. Instead, we talked of needs and, in the early days, talked of needy children being compensated to offset the disadvantages of the environments in which they were growing up. But it did not take long to realise that while there were many disadvantages in those environments, there were also many strengths. Even more important, it was obvious that the children and their families had their own strengths so that any programmes designed to support them should start from those strengths and build upon them.

The adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its almost universal ratification has created a whole set of opportunities and challenges. One of these challenges is that the practice lags far behind the concept. And another of these challenges is that, in the vast majority of countries, the rights of the very youngest children are virtually ignored.

Four arguments for supporting early childhood development

There are a number of compelling arguments for concentrating on the youngest members of our society. In this section we concentrate on just four of these: the scientific argument, the rights-based argument, the economic argument, and the human development argument.

The **scientific argument** is a very clear one. It is based on developmental research that has shown that the early years are extraordinarily important in relation to a child's development intellectually, emotionally, socially, physically, and morally. We know from evidence in a variety of fields such as psychology, physiology, nutrition and health care that particularly during the early years, both physical and environmental factors play a significant role in child development².

The combined impact of quality health care, adequate nutritional sustenance, and appropriate intellectual stimulation on young children's physical, mental and emotional growth are synergistic and cannot be broken into separate domains. These impacts are powerful, exact and affect not just general development but the specific wiring of the brain.³

Beginning at conception and continuing on through birth, the environment has a significant impact on brain development. A simple summary of what is known about brain development is:

- Before the age of one, brain development is quicker and more encompassing than heretofore thought. Cell formation is essentially complete prior to birth but brain maturation continues.
- The brain is extraordinarily susceptible to environmental influences. Brain development is seriously compromised by inadequate nutrition prior to birth and during the first years of life. Consequences can include neurological and behavioural disabilities such as learning disabilities and mental illness.
- Early environments influence brain development. Infants raised in stimulating environments have better brain function at age 12 than those raised in less stimulating environments.
- Early stress adversely affects brain function, learning, and memory. Young children who experience extreme stress later in life are at greater risk for behavioural, emotional, and cognitive problems.⁴

From the time of conception until a child enters primary school, development advances at a pace greater than any other stage in life.⁵ During this period children develop remarkable linguistic and cognitive skills and they begin to exhibit emotional, social, and moral capabilities. Development can be compromised or enhanced depending upon the social and economic circumstances children experience, and long-term differences are clearly associated with social and economic circumstances. Understanding this process makes clear the many remarkable accomplishments that young children achieve despite the many problems they and their families encounter.

The **rights-based argument** for attention to the early years is based squarely on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention takes a holistic view of development. Articles 2 (non-discrimination), 3 (the best interests of the child), 6 (inherent right to life, survival and development) and 12 (participation of the child) set out basic principles while other Articles are concerned with health, family, education, and respect for the child in her or his own culture and environment.

While the right to development is an overriding principle of the Convention, young children are specifically mentioned only in terms of survival, health and malnutrition, birth registration. However, in addition to the above, the following Articles are specifically relevant to young children: Article 5 (evolving capacities of the child), Article 24 (health and social services), Article 27 (standard of living), Article 28 (education), Article 29 (aims of education), and Article 31 (leisure, recreation and cultural activities).

If the nations of the world are to take seriously the right to development, they have to begin at the beginning – with prenatal care for pregnant women and from birth until at least eight years of age for all children as this is the only way they can ensure a healthy development for all, as well as the only way they can ensure that they are meeting their legal obligations under the Convention. Governments need to make the appropriate balance between protection rights and development rights, both of which are especially important for young children.

The rights-based argument is further supported by commitments made by governments at the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien in 1990. Article 5 of the Declaration states that *‘Learning begins at birth. This calls for early childhood care and initial education. These can be provided through arrangements involving families, communities, or institutional programmes, as appropriate.’* During a follow-up meeting in Dakar in 2000 the first of the adopted goals is: *‘Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children’.*⁶

Governments are the only bodies that can put the appropriate policy and legal frameworks in place. They have to take the lead but they do not have to work alone. Civil society is an essential partner in early childhood development at all levels and should be involved as participants and implementers where possible.

The **economic argument** is as compelling as the scientific and rights-based arguments when the question ‘why early childhood programmes?’ is posed. Although only a very few studies have done the detailed calculations of costs and benefits that give us actual figures in dollars and cents, the benefits are obvious.

The most valuable economic asset of any country is its population, known in economic terms as ‘human capital’. Human capital is best developed by providing every child with the opportunity to develop to her or his full potential. In early childhood this means focusing on health, learning, and behavioural development. Underdeveloped language acquisition, social skills, lack of the ability to think critically and the capacity to learn, all of which develop during the early years along with physical disabilities, learning impairments, poor preparedness for school, and gender disadvantages among others keep prosperity and development from occurring.⁷ Robert Fogel, a Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences wrote in 1993:

Much of the capacity for success in life depends on the quality of prenatal care of mothers, on nutritional adequacy during pregnancy, and on both physiological and spiritual nurturing of children during early childhood. Not only is the physiological basis for good health laid during these early years, but those essential values that have such high payoffs in competitive labor markets are also transmitted from parents to children.⁸

In recent years, there has been an increased effort to place a monetary value on the benefits of early childhood care and development programmes. From an economic perspective, the test of any investment is whether the rate of return justifies the expense.

Cost-benefit analysis in early childhood holds that education is both a consumptive good that gives immediate benefits and an investment good that gives personal and social benefits well into the future.⁹ From an economic perspective, cost-benefit analysis entails estimating the monetary values of streams of costs and benefits in order to measure the programme’s net value as a social investment. There are two core components of a cost-benefit analysis: a detailed estimate of all programme costs (regardless of the source of the financing) and the identification of multiple programme benefits or effects. Benefits or effects must be assigned a monetary value. Cost benefit requires the use of a control or comparison group who serve as estimates of the cost of the programme without the intervention and a participant group from whom estimates are derived for the intervention.¹⁰ Constant dollars are calculated by analysing streams of costs and benefits over time. Additional analyses can include discounting costs to the present by using appropriate rates of discount which reflect the opportunity cost of public resources.¹¹

Three long-term studies that conform to this pattern are available from the USA. The returns have been calculated at amounts between four and seven dollars for every single dollar spent on the early childhood programme.¹² These are rates of return on investment that many commercial enterprises would envy.

Cost-benefit analyses are by necessity situation and country specific. Each study is unique, and results do not carry over easily to other countries, regions, or target groups.¹³ When discussing the economics of education, cost benefit analysis demonstrates that early education, while a fundamental right of every human being, is also an investment in human capital. Investments in human capital make economic sense because the value of additional future benefits exceeds the extra costs to be incurred in the present.¹⁴

Research has shown that financial benefits of early childhood development programmes accrue directly to children and families, and that there are financial and other benefits to communities and society as a whole. For example, the implications of improved health and nutrition on performance and mortality rates, increased school enrolment with lower repetition and drop-out rates, influences on gender disparities, childbearing, unsocial behaviour. These are discussed in more detail in the next section.

The **human development argument** is perhaps the most compelling of all the arguments for devoting resources to early childhood. Attention to young children and their families contributes to the overall

quality of human experience in both the short and the long terms. This leads to an overall enhancement in the quality of any individual society and thus, to enrichment of world society at large.

A recent review of 11 early childhood studies covering 15 countries¹⁵ lists the following as the most important and consistent findings:

- Early childhood development and care programmes in the early years can do much to prevent malnutrition and increase children's chances of survival.
- Intervention during the early years can assist in the healthy development of children cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically.
- Participation in preschool programmes promotes cognitive development in the short term and prepares children to succeed in school.
- Early childhood programmes can reduce educational inequalities.
- Interventions can raise the status of mothers in the home and community.
- Interventions reduce gender inequalities.
- Early interventions generate economic returns and reduce social costs by reducing grade retention, special education placement, juvenile delinquency, and substance abuse.

A range of studies on the effects of early childhood development programmes have highlighted a wide variety of findings:

- **Turkey:** Programme mothers enjoy higher inter-family status, greater decision-making, more role sharing, and better communication with their husbands. They have greater satisfaction in their current life situations and positive expectations for the future.¹⁶
- **United Kingdom:** Children who spend time learning at home with parents combined with quality preschool experiences had more positive social and intellectual development.¹⁷
- **New Zealand:** Competency levels are affected by early childhood educational experiences. Of particular importance is the quality of teacher support as well as the quality of teacher interactions with the children.¹⁸
- **Ten-country IEA Preprimary Project:** The most important contribution at age 7 to children's language and general performance can be attributed to free activities in which teachers let children choose the activities.¹⁹
- **Nepal:** Girls and boys who attended the ECD programmes enrol in primary school in equal numbers, compared to a 39 percent enrolment for girls and 61 percent enrolment for boys with no ECD experience ... parents of children who participated in the ECD programmes are more likely to take an active role in their children's first and second grade of school. This includes talking to the teachers, showing an interest in their children's progress, engaging actively with the school management committees, raising issues that concern them, and calling for accountability from teachers and administrators.²⁰
- **Mauritius:** At the age of 23, self report rates of criminal behaviour for children who had participated in the enrichment programme were significantly lower than those who had not.²¹
- **Kenya:** The proportion of children with untrained preschool teachers who dropped out at Standard 1 was six times that of children with trained teachers.²²
- **Honduras:** Teachers observed characteristics that differentiate programme children from non-programme children: knowledge and use of language, ability to learn, punctuality, responsibility, sociability, ability to communicate, hygiene.²³
- **Israel:** Programme children perceive themselves, and are perceived by their parents, as more mature than children in the comparison group. It is possible that parents' greater confidence in their ability to educate and provide for their children enables them to give their children room for independence and responsibility, which the children take on and develop into a more adult and responsible behaviour pattern.²⁴
- **Jamaica:** The comparison group mothers had produced more than twice as many children over the last 13 years as the programme mothers combined.²⁵

- **Ireland:** Ten years on, the nutritional intake of children from the programme group is consistently better than that of the control group.²⁶
- **Colombia:** Twenty years after the programme began, educators are involved in community activities, their homes are much better, they have increased feelings of competence and self-confidence, they continue to participate in activities to improve their community and are proud of the educational leaps that their children have made.²⁷
- **USA:** At age 21, those who had been in the programme were more likely to have attended a 4-year college, postponed childbirth and to be employed.²⁸
- **USA:** Cost-benefit analysis indicates that every dollar invested in the preschool programme returned \$7.14 in education, social welfare, and socioeconomic benefits by reducing public expenditures for remedial education, criminal justice treatment, and crime victims. Cost-benefit analysis in the extended intervention programme (4-6 years of participation) provided a return to society of \$6.11 per dollar invested.²⁹
- **USA:** At age 27 female participants in the programme had only about two-thirds as many out-of-wedlock births as did the non-participants; only one-fifth as many programme members as control group were arrested five times or more and only one third as many were ever arrested for drug dealing; four times as many programme members as no-programme members earned \$2,000 or more per month; almost three times as many owned their own homes; and over twice as many owned two cars.³⁰
- **USA:** The mixed-approach Early Head Start programmes have the strongest pattern of impact among families ... evidence of the ability of the programmes to adjust services based upon family needs, cultures, and perspectives which allows them to keep families participating for longer periods of time. Early intervention is better ... the impact is greater on children's outcomes whose mothers enrol during pregnancy.³¹
- **USA:** Head Start parents report increases in intellectual and socially stimulating activities they engage in with their children. Intellectual activities include story telling, teaching letters, numbers, and words, and going to museums. Socialising activities include household chores, running errands and attending sporting events. Parents report that Head Start taught them a new manner in which to discipline their children and a significant increase in their sense of control over their lives.³²

Thus we can see that quality early childhood programmes in many parts of the world have effects that last far longer than the programme itself and that effects reach out to parents, future parents and society at large. But how are quality early childhood programmes achieved?

What should an early childhood programme look like?

ECD programmes are not only about the children, they are also about influencing the contexts in which children are growing up. Thus they need to create the conditions to ensure the young child's overall development to his or her fullest potential. There is no single blueprint for such programmes but there are some guidelines. Programmes should build on the strengths that already exist within the family, community and society. At the same time, they should work to build up the strengths of the children.

Physical strengths:

such as prenatal care and nutrition for mothers; appropriate nutrition for children; immunisation; appropriate shelter; clean water, good sanitation and hygiene; opportunities and encouragement to develop gross and fine motor skills.

Intellectual strengths:

such as language acquisition and exposure to stories; activities that encourage a child to explore, be curious and to find things out for him or herself; understanding basic concepts such as numbers, colours, dimensions and so on; encouraging creativity and critical thinking.

Social strengths:

such as learning about one's own identity; understanding relationships in the family and neighbourhood; interacting with peers and others in accordance with accepted norms of the society; acquiring good communication skills; being able to cooperate.

Moral and emotional strengths:

such as having stable relationships, love, affection and a sense of security; understanding the belief system of family and society; learning what is wise and what is not wise; being a critical thinker; instilling and strengthening the ability to protect oneself.

The Convention presents development as a continuing process of interaction between the individual child, with his or her inherent characteristics, and the immediate and larger environment, resulting in evolving capacities and maturity.³³ Thus the child is an active participant, not a blank slate to be manipulated. Even the very youngest children can communicate and it is our task, as adults, to encourage and assist them to develop their strengths and their skills.

Obviously, not all the above can be achieved in a single multi-purpose programme. The table³⁴ below shows just a few of the many programme strategies and approaches that are aimed at different groups.

A selection of options for early childhood development programmes		
Approaches	aimed at:	possible strategies
Train/inform/support caregivers	parents; family; siblings; elders; educators; teachers; public	pre- and in-service training; monitoring and supervision; home visiting; parent education; child-to-child
Deliver a service	the child: newborn, infant, toddler, preschooler; first/second grader	home day care; health clinics; integrated centres; 'Add-on' centres; preschools; religious schools; ECD part of curriculum; birth registration
Strengthen national resources and capabilities	programme personnel; professionals and paraprofessionals	training; experimental/demonstration projects; strengthening structures; action research; partnerships
Strengthen demand and awareness	policy makers; media; professionals; general public	social marketing; multimedia dissemination of knowledge; advocacy
Develop supportive legal and regulatory frameworks	policy makers; legislators; young children, their families and caregivers; society	partnerships government/civil society; family legislation; alliances such as women's groups, community groups; tax incentives; parental leave and benefits; support for breastfeeding

As can be seen, there are many options and many approaches. Some aspects need to be emphasised such as the importance of programmes that support parents and families rather than replace them. Such as training people from the local community to implement early childhood activities rather than insisting that all personnel be professionally qualified. Such as communities and parents and children participating in decision making about their programmes and the activities.

But who decides what is in the best interests of the children? Who will implement early childhood programmes? How can a country decide its overall policy for young children and their families?

Who should be responsible for early childhood development programmes?

Effective ECD programmes result from a series of mutually dependent partnerships of individuals, organisations and agencies. Governments have an essential role to play in that they can set the climate of opinion and they are the ones who have to create the legal and policy frameworks. Governments set and endorse national agendas, validate private efforts, create a climate of acceptance and approval, and establish priorities. They are also fundraisers and conduits for donor agencies.

Resources vary between countries and not all can afford the same levels of coverage and services. But there are choices to be made in all circumstances: how much of the health/welfare/education budgets to devote to young children? How much of the total budget should be devoted to health and welfare and education? At the minimum, the role of government should be to make ECD policy – in collaboration with partners – and ensure its implementation. Such a policy should include items such as standards in training and curricula; and legal and administrative measures for implementing the rights of children and women.

Responsibilities for young children and their families are frequently spread over a number of different ministries: health, education, welfare, housing, planning, finance and others. Coordination is essential to ensure that all policies and actions have the best interests of the child at heart.

In many countries ECD programmes are initiated and/or implemented by civil society organisations be they local, regional or international, be they religious groups or community-based, be they not-for-profit or for-profit bodies. Essentially, all society is responsible for ECD services but the main partners are the natural caregivers on the one hand and the government on the other. It is the government's role to create an environment (legal, policy, social) that will permit and encourage the healthy development of young children and their families. It is also the government's obligation under the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Article 4 of the Convention calls on States Parties to undertake 'all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the present Convention'. Further, States Parties are required to 'undertake such measures to the maximum extent of their available resources'.

The aim is to build sustainable programmes and services that ensure that all young children have the opportunity to develop their innate potential to the greatest extent possible. That is our collective responsibility – the children cannot wait.

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