

**Early  
Childhood  
Development**

UNICEF Vision  
for Every Child



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# PREFACE

**Every child has the right to the best start in life.** This includes the right to good nutrition and stimulation, responsive care and early learning, health and a safe environment. These rights provide children with the opportunity to grow and develop to their full potential. As children thrive, entire communities grow, and a more sustainable and peaceful future is possible.

There has been important progress for young children in recent decades. However, around the world, millions of children are not receiving adequate nutrition, stimulation and responsive care, are missing out on health care and learning opportunities, and are exposed to unhealthy environments, violence and stress. The failure to give children the best start in life perpetuates cycles of poverty and disadvantage that can span generations, undermining the strength, stability and prosperity of nations.

We know that a brighter and more equitable future is possible. To achieve it, UNICEF is supporting governments to put child rights at the centre of policies and programmes in the earliest years of life.

The UNICEF Vision for Early Childhood Development provides a framework for UNICEF's organization-wide support to early childhood development, focusing on children from birth to the age of school entry. This vision is guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and supports the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is informed by scientific and programmatic evidence and responds to the changing realities of children, parents, caregivers and families in the twenty-first century.

The UNICEF Vision for Early Childhood Development acknowledges the centrality of adequate policies, programmes and practices in protecting and fulfilling the survival, growth and development rights of all children in early life, including in fragile and humanitarian settings. It defines the programming principles to be applied in all our work; a menu of multisectoral actions across a range of UNICEF programme areas – nutrition, health, education and adolescent development, water and sanitation, child protection and social policy; and a set of implementation strategies, which are tailored to each country's context.

We know that when programmes and services are designed and delivered by members of the communities they serve, they are far more likely to prove successful. Community-based workers – with their extensive local knowledge and close connection to parents, caregivers and families – lie at the heart of this success, especially in remote and underserved communities.

As a multisectoral agency with wide on-the-ground presence and deep field experience, UNICEF is uniquely positioned to take this Vision forward with partners. We stand ready to support national governments in building stronger systems that support caregivers in providing the nourishment, care and love that every child deserves, from the first days of life.



**Catherine Russell**  
Executive Director, UNICEF



# WHAT IS NEW?

**1 The definition of what early childhood development means to UNICEF.** Early childhood development encompasses UNICEF's programming for children in early life. It brings together UNICEF's multisectoral expertise and experience to ensure that all children benefit from policies, programmes and practices that protect, promote and support optimal nutrition, stimulation, learning, health, safety and security in early childhood, everywhere.

**2 A new UNICEF vision and goal. UNICEF envisions a world where all young children survive, grow and develop to their full potential.** This means that all young children, from birth to primary school entry, benefit from policies, programmes and practices that protect, promote and support child survival and optimal growth and development, including in fragile contexts and in response to humanitarian crises.

**3 A deliberate focus on children from birth to primary school entry, with emphasis on the first 1,000 days.** Experiences from birth to school entry have profound impacts on children's physical, cognitive, emotional and social development and lay the foundation for the rest of their lives. The first 1,000 days are the most sensitive period for physical growth and brain development for girls and boys, in times of stability and crisis, throughout the world.

**4 A deliberate emphasis on supporting parents, caregivers and families.** UNICEF will support governments and partners to integrate parenting and caregiving support into existing programmes and services that interact with parents, caregivers and families of young children, particularly during the first 1,000 days. UNICEF will strengthen the presence, competencies, supervision and motivation of community-based workers to build the knowledge and skills of parents, caregivers and families on responsive caregiving.

**5 The UNICEF Causal Analysis of Optimal Early Childhood Development.** The Causal Analysis describes the pathways to optimal development in early childhood. It clarifies the immediate, underlying and enabling determinants of early childhood development, describes their vertical and horizontal interconnectedness, and highlights their contribution to positive individual and societal outcomes.

**6 The UNICEF Programme Framework for Early Childhood Development.** The Programme Framework describes how UNICEF will protect, promote and support the optimal survival, growth and development of all children from birth to primary school entry – with emphasis on the first 1,000 days – through improved policies, programmes and practices, including in fragile contexts and in response to humanitarian crises.

**7 Six universal programming principles.** Guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UNICEF programming for early childhood development is rights-based, equity-focused, gender-responsive, context-specific, evidence-informed and systems-centred, and aims to sustainably improve the survival, growth and development of children in early life.

**8 Three universal results areas.** These results areas apply in all programming contexts and include: policies and legislation that enable opportunities for early childhood development; programmes and services that promote and support early childhood development; and parents and caregivers that are supported in caring for their young children and themselves.

**9 A set of UNICEF programming areas specific to each sector.** At global, regional, national and subnational levels, UNICEF will apply its sectoral expertise in the areas of child nutrition and development, health and immunization, water and sanitation, education and adolescent development, child protection, and social policy, as well as cross-cutting programming in gender, disability inclusion, climate change and social and behaviour change.

**10 A new global target for early childhood development.** As a multisectoral agency with technical expertise in child nutrition and development, child health and immunization, water and sanitation, education and adolescent development, child protection, and social policy and deep field experience, UNICEF is uniquely positioned to ensure, **by 2030, at least 275 million children benefit every year from policies, programmes and practices that protect, promote and support early childhood development in UNICEF programme countries.**



# WHY THE EARLY YEARS MATTER

Children's early years lay the foundation for the rest of their lives. Early experiences have profound impacts on their physical, cognitive, emotional and social development that extend into adulthood.

This is true in times of stability and crisis, for girls and boys, in rural and urban communities, and in countries throughout the world.

**Early childhood development is an outcome**, and encompasses the physical, cognitive, motor, language, social and emotional development of children in the early years.

Early childhood is typically defined as the period from birth to 8 years of age.<sup>1</sup> The **UNICEF Vision for Early Childhood Development focuses on the period from birth up to primary school entry**, with emphasis on the first 1,000 days, because it is scientifically proven that this is the most sensitive period for children's physical growth and brain development.

## A right for every child

Early childhood development is a **fundamental right of every child**. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) acknowledges the significance of early childhood development in enabling children to achieve their full growth and development potential.<sup>2</sup>

All countries that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child are duty-bound to provide universal access to essential services for early survival, growth and development, with particular focus on protecting the most vulnerable children. Recommendations for fulfilling these rights are outlined in the Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No. 7.

The **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** has also embraced development in early childhood as central to ending poverty and inequality and ensuring prosperity and peace.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline specific commitments and targets that directly influence the services and enabling environments that young children need in order to grow and develop to their full potential (see *Figure 1*). At the same time, early childhood development is essential for attaining many of the SDG targets.

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Early childhood is a crucial window of opportunity during which interactions between young children and their environments influence children's physical, cognitive, emotional and social development

FIGURE 1: Early childhood development in the Sustainable Development Goals



**Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere**

**Target 1.2: By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions**

Investments in early childhood development improve child nutrition, health and learning, reduce drop-outs, contribute to better labour force performance and wage rates, and cut intergenerational poverty.



**Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition**

**Target 2.2: By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age**

Children who benefit from nutritious and safe diets, essential nutrition services and positive feeding, stimulation and care practices in early life have better nutrition, growth and developmental outcomes.



**Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all**

**Target 3.2: By 2030, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births and under-5 mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births**

Children who are protected from disease are less likely to die, become undernourished or suffer cognitive impairment.



**Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all**

**Target 4.2: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education**

Interventions to promote brain development, early learning (including social-emotional learning) and school readiness provide the foundation for school success and future productivity.



**Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls**

**Target 5.4: Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate**

Greater investment in family-friendly policies and affordable childcare is linked to greater opportunities for women and better outcomes for children.



**Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all**

**Target 6.1: By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all**

**Target 6.2: By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all**

Clean and safe water, adequate sanitation, and hygienic environments at home and in facilities are critical for optimal growth and development in young children.



**Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts**

**Target 13.1: Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries**

Investments in early childhood increase the resilience of children and families, contribute to climate change adaptability and are an equalizer to climate change inequities.



**Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development**

**Target 16.2: End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against children**

Interventions to end abuse and violence against children improve early childhood development and lead to greater social cohesion in communities.

## Building brains, building futures

In the early years of life, children’s brains develop at a speed of more than one million new neural connections per second – a pace never again repeated.<sup>3</sup> Such rapid brain growth and development is most pronounced during the first 1,000 days and provides the foundation for lifelong physical, cognitive, emotional and social functioning.<sup>3,4</sup>

These rapid neuronal connections are made in response to the child’s interaction with the environment. Evidence from neuroscience shows that children are much more likely to grow and develop to their full potential if they are well-nourished and stimulated; protected from childhood illnesses, violence, abuse and neglect; and given adequate learning opportunities and responsive care.

Conversely, adversity and toxic stress during the crucial early years can lead to lifelong negative impacts on a child’s brain functioning, including impairments in behaviour, cognition, school readiness and learning (*Box 1*).<sup>5,6</sup>

Based on this evidence, the Nurturing Care Framework<sup>1</sup> was developed to describe the five interrelated and indivisible components of nurturing care that children’s bodies and brains require for optimal growth and development (*Figure 2*):

- Adequate nutrition
- Responsive caregiving
- Safety and security
- Opportunities for early learning
- Good health

BOX 1

## Key evidence from neuroscience<sup>7-9</sup>

### Nutrition

- Nutrition and stimulation interact with each other, affecting how the body and brain absorb and use nutrients and influencing children’s growth and development.
- Good nutrition in early childhood improves child survival, body growth, brain architecture, cognitive development and school readiness.

### Health

- Toxic stress in early childhood affects the body’s immune and metabolic systems, increasing the risk of heart disease, diabetes, substance abuse and depression in later life.
- Children who are protected against childhood illnesses, such as diarrhoea, are more likely to grow and develop to their full potential.

### Child protection

- Violence, abuse, neglect and traumatic experiences in early life lead to toxic stress, causing the body to produce high levels of cortisol, which disrupts brain development.
- Children who live in contexts free from conflict, climatic crises and pollution are more likely to experience optimal growth, brain development, and physical and mental health.

### Learning

- Children’s brain development suffers when they do not benefit from playful and stimulating learning interactions in early life.
- The benefits of play-based learning and early childhood education yield broad dividends that last a lifetime.

### Parenting

- The cognitive, physical, social and emotional development of children in early life can be negatively affected by a lack of nurturing and stimulating care from parents and caregivers.
- Nurturing care can offset the effects of adversity and can improve brain function throughout life, even affecting future generations.

The Nurturing Care Framework describes the five interrelated and indivisible components of nurturing care that children’s bodies and brains require for optimal growth and development



FIGURE 2: Domains of nurturing care for children to reach their growth and development potential<sup>1</sup>

These components apply to children living in development, fragile and humanitarian settings, and are particularly important for children living with developmental difficulties and disabilities, and those experiencing other forms of adversity.

### A smart investment

Policies, programmes and parenting practices that improve child survival, growth and development in early childhood also improve school readiness and learning outcomes during the school-age years and productivity and earnings in adulthood.<sup>1, 5, 7</sup> In addition, they reduce the financial strain on health, education, and child protection systems.

Investments in early childhood are one of the most cost-effective ways to achieve more sustainable growth; for governments, the economic return is as high as US\$13 for every US\$1 spent.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the return on investment in early childhood development programmes is considerably higher compared to equivalent investments in the later years.<sup>10</sup>

These investments are a social equalizer. They break cycles of inequality and injustice, make individuals and societies more resilient to stress, build social cohesion and pave the way towards sustainable peace.<sup>11</sup> This holds true during displacement and emergencies, which can aggravate inequalities and have devastating impacts on young children.<sup>12</sup>



# EARLY CHILDHOOD TODAY

## Falling behind from birth

There has been important progress for young children in recent decades. Between 2000 and 2020, the number of deaths among children under 5 has fallen by almost half and the prevalence of children under 5 with stunted growth due to undernutrition has declined by one-third.<sup>13, 14</sup> As a result, there were 4.7 million fewer annual deaths in children under 5 and 55 million fewer children suffering from stunting in 2020 than 2000, despite population growth.

These remarkable achievements show that positive change for child survival, growth and development in early life is possible and is happening at scale, across countries and continents.

However, a persistent lack of opportunities endangers the futures of millions of children around the world. An estimated 250 million children under 5 (two in five children) are at risk of not fulfilling their developmental potential;<sup>15</sup> an estimated 200 million children under 5 (one in three children) are not growing and developing well due to malnutrition in early childhood;<sup>16</sup> and more than two in five children aged 3–4 years in UNICEF

programme countries do not receive adequate early stimulation, responsive care and parenting support.<sup>17</sup> Due to these and other threats, 29 per cent of children aged 3–5 years are not developmentally on track.<sup>17</sup>

## Multiple deprivations

Millions of young children are being left behind by inequitable development and humanitarian crises, and experience multiple and mutually reinforcing deprivations (*Figure 3*). Threats to early child development often cluster together, and so exposure to one risk usually means exposure to many.<sup>1</sup>

These deprivations include, but are not limited to, extreme income poverty; severe food poverty and malnutrition; poor access to essential nutrition, health, water and sanitation services; lack of access to early stimulation, responsive care and learning opportunities; discrimination based on disability, gender identity and sexual orientation of parents, caregivers or any members of their families; violence, abuse and neglect; gender discrimination; and exposure to climatic crises, environmental pollution, armed conflicts and migration.<sup>1, 16</sup>

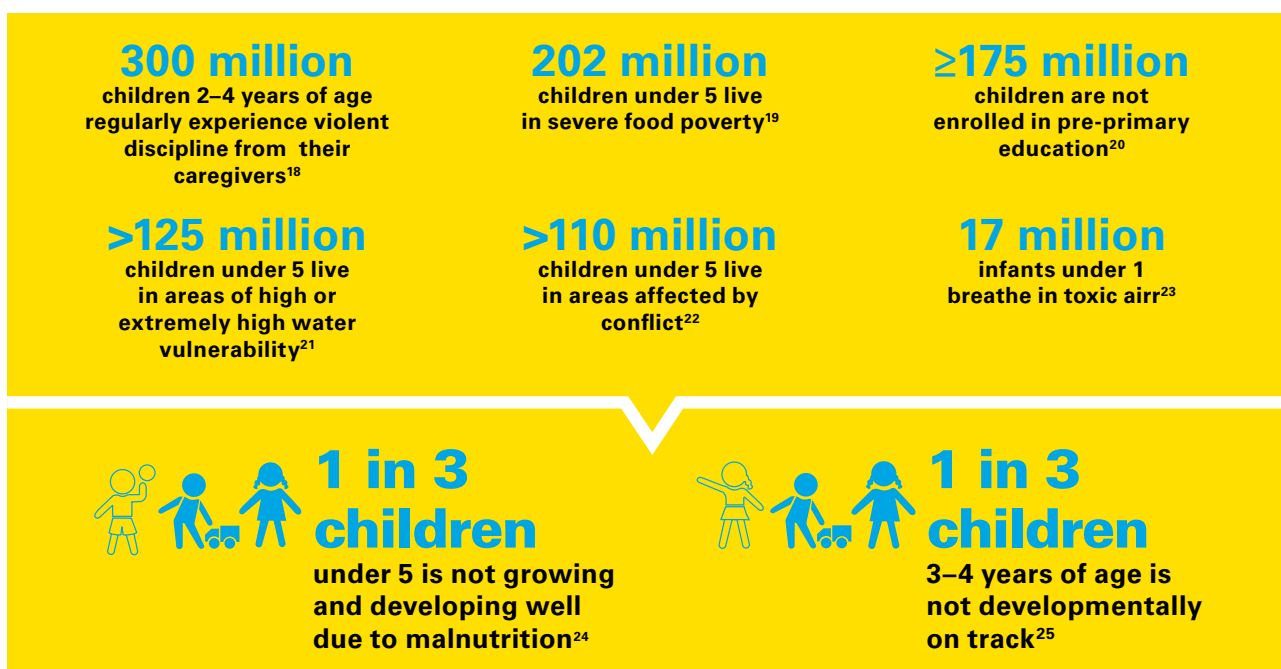


FIGURE 3: Millions of children experience deprivation in early childhood



Vulnerable children struggle most to access services. For example, children living with disabilities are 25 per cent less likely to receive and benefit from early stimulation, responsive care and early childhood education services;<sup>26</sup> and children in the richest households are seven times more likely to attend early childhood education programmes than the poorest.<sup>27</sup>

Failure to shield children from these deprivations results in unacceptable lost potential and perpetuates poverty and inequality. Deprivations in early childhood impact body and brain functioning later in life, contributing to reduced learning ability, early school dropout, reduced earning capacity, decreased economic productivity, exacerbated distrust, and negative interpersonal relationships.<sup>11, 28, 29</sup>

## A changing world

Today's children are living in a changing world. Urbanization and globalization, increasing socio-economic inequities, global and local conflicts, climate crises, public health emergencies and economic shocks jeopardize the progress made in early childhood development and exacerbate the early childhood development crisis.<sup>16, 17</sup>

Urbanization and globalization pose both challenges and opportunities to growth and development in early childhood. Urbanization has increased access to nutritious foods and essential nutrition services for many, but the poorest children and their families often miss out because they lack financial access and live in overcrowded and underserved urban poor areas. Globalization has led to a rapid rise in the sale of ultra-processed foods, which are undermining more nutritious and safer traditional diets.<sup>30</sup>

The barriers to children's growth and development are even greater in settings gripped by conflicts, climate crises, public health emergencies and economic shocks. In recent years, the scale and complexity of humanitarian crises across the world have risen to unprecedented levels. Families face immense difficulties in providing nurturing care for their young children when they are living in extreme poverty or struggling in conditions of war, drought, floods and displacement.

In addition, environmental pollution is a growing threat. Air pollution is linked with diseases and infections that kill around 600,000 children under 5 every year.<sup>31</sup> It also damages the protective barriers in a child's developing brain, leading to the loss and damage of neural tissue.

# CAUSAL ANALYSIS

The **UNICEF Causal Analysis of Optimal Early Childhood Development** uses a positive narrative to describe the pathways to optimal development in early childhood. It provides conceptual clarity on the immediate, underlying and enabling determinants of early childhood development, their vertical and horizontal interconnectedness, and the positive survival, growth, learning, health, economic and social outcomes resulting from improved development in early childhood (see *Figure 4*).

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## Outcomes

The UNICEF Causal Analysis identifies a range of short- and long-term outcomes resulting from optimal development in early childhood:

- In **childhood and adolescence**, improved survival, physical growth, cognitive development, health, school readiness and school performance.
- In **adulthood and for societies**, improved nutrition, health, productivity and wages in adult women and men, and improved prosperity and cohesion in societies.

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## Immediate determinants

The UNICEF Causal Analysis identifies two immediate determinants of optimal development in early childhood:

- Adequate **nutrition and stimulation**, driven by policies, programmes and practices that promote and support nutritious diets and responsive feeding, and enable early stimulation and learning.
- Adequate **care and protection**, driven by policies, programmes and practices that promote and support nurturing care and good health and protect young children from toxic stress.

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## Underlying determinants

The UNICEF Causal Analysis identifies three underlying determinants of optimal development in early childhood:

- **Policies** and legislation that protect, promote and support adequate nutrition, stimulation, care, early learning, health and protection.
- **Programmes** and services that protect, promote and support adequate nutrition, stimulation, care, early learning, health and protection.
- **Practices** by parents and caregivers that protect, promote and support adequate nutrition, stimulation, care, early learning, health and protection.

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## Enabling determinants

The UNICEF Causal Analysis identifies three enabling determinants of optimal development in early childhood:

- Sufficient **resources**, including human, financial and environmental resources to enable optimal development in young children.
- Positive **norms**, including social, cultural and gender norms to enable optimal development in young children.
- Good **governance**, including political, financial, social, and public and private sector actions to enable optimal development in young children.



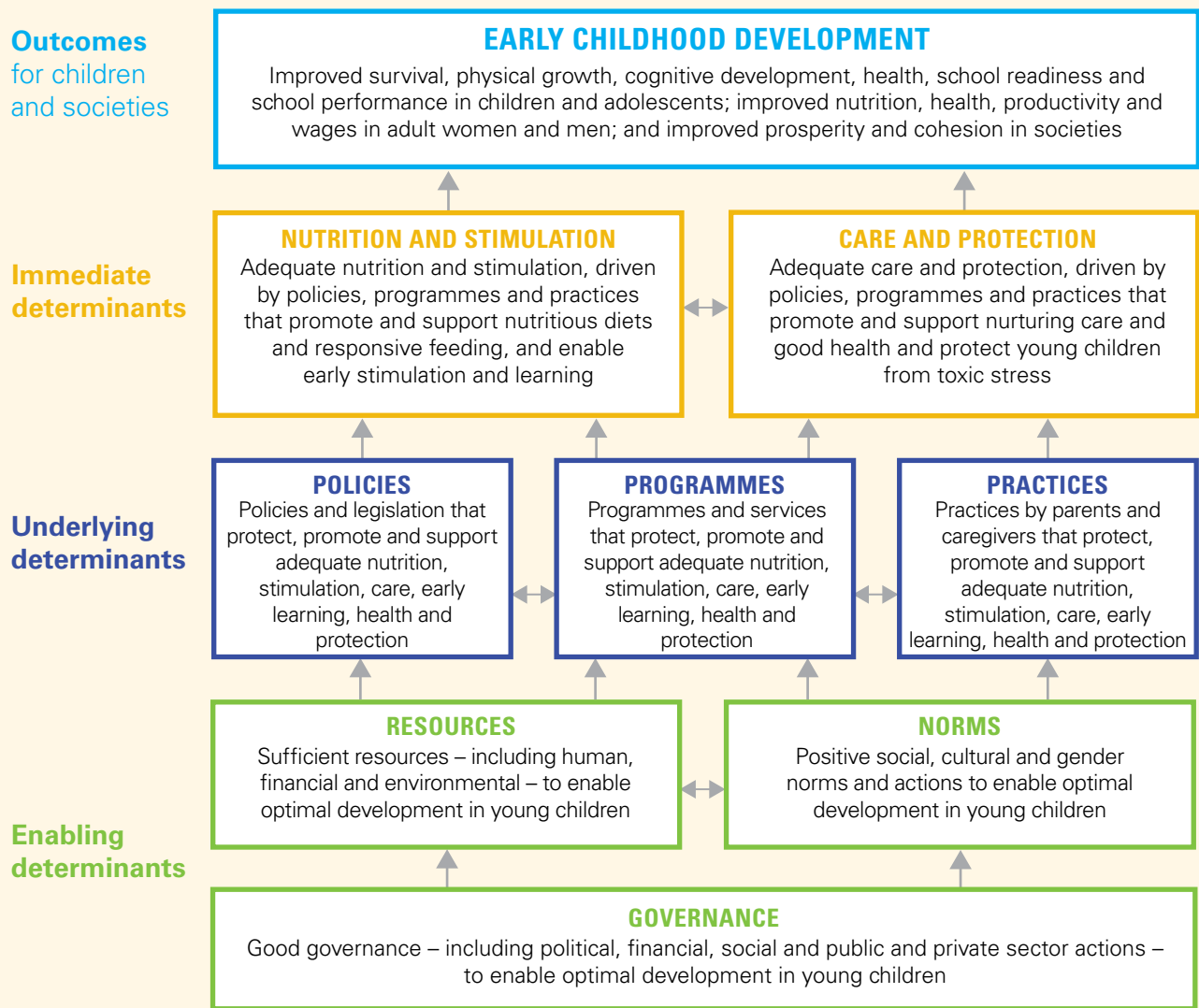


FIGURE 4: UNICEF Causal Analysis of Optimal Early Childhood Development



# VISION, GOAL, OBJECTIVES AND TARGET

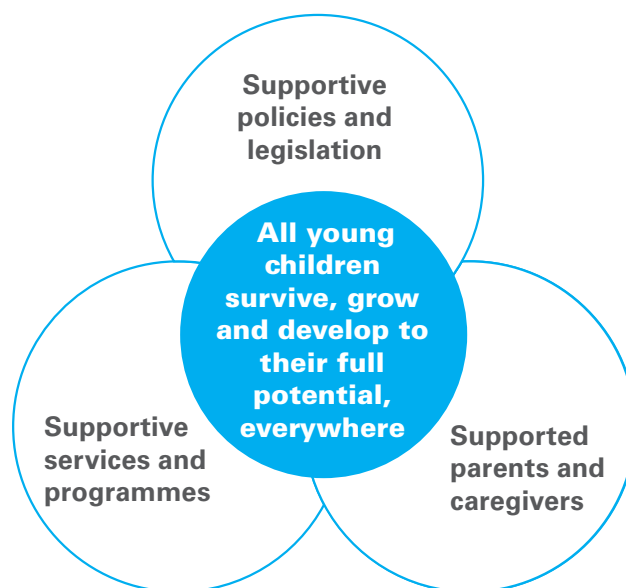
The **UNICEF Vision for Early Childhood Development** is guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and supports the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It outlines UNICEF's intent to support an organization-wide approach to child development in the early years of life, drawing on its mandate for child rights, multisectoral expertise, wide on-the-ground presence, and long-standing role as a trusted adviser to governments and partners at national, regional and global levels.

## Our vision

**A world where all young children survive, grow and develop to their full potential, everywhere**

## Our goal

**All young children, from birth to primary school entry, benefit from policies, programmes and practices that protect, promote and support child survival and optimal growth and development, including in fragile contexts and in response to humanitarian crises**



## Our objectives

- **To strengthen policies and legislation** that enable opportunities for early childhood development
- **To expand programmes and services** that protect and promote early childhood development
- **To support parents and caregivers** in caring for their young children and themselves

## Our target

**By 2030, at least 275 million children benefit every year from policies, programmes and practices that protect, promote and support early childhood development in UNICEF programme countries.**

# PROGRAMME FRAMEWORK

The **UNICEF Programme Framework for Early Childhood Development** is informed by the UNICEF Causal Analysis of Optimal Early Childhood Development and describes how UNICEF will protect, promote and support the optimal survival, growth and development of all children in early childhood, from birth to primary school entry. The Programme Framework sets out the six universal programming principles, three results areas, multisectoral approach and implementation strategies that UNICEF will use to achieve the vision, goal and objectives of the UNICEF Vision for Early Childhood Development (Figure 5).

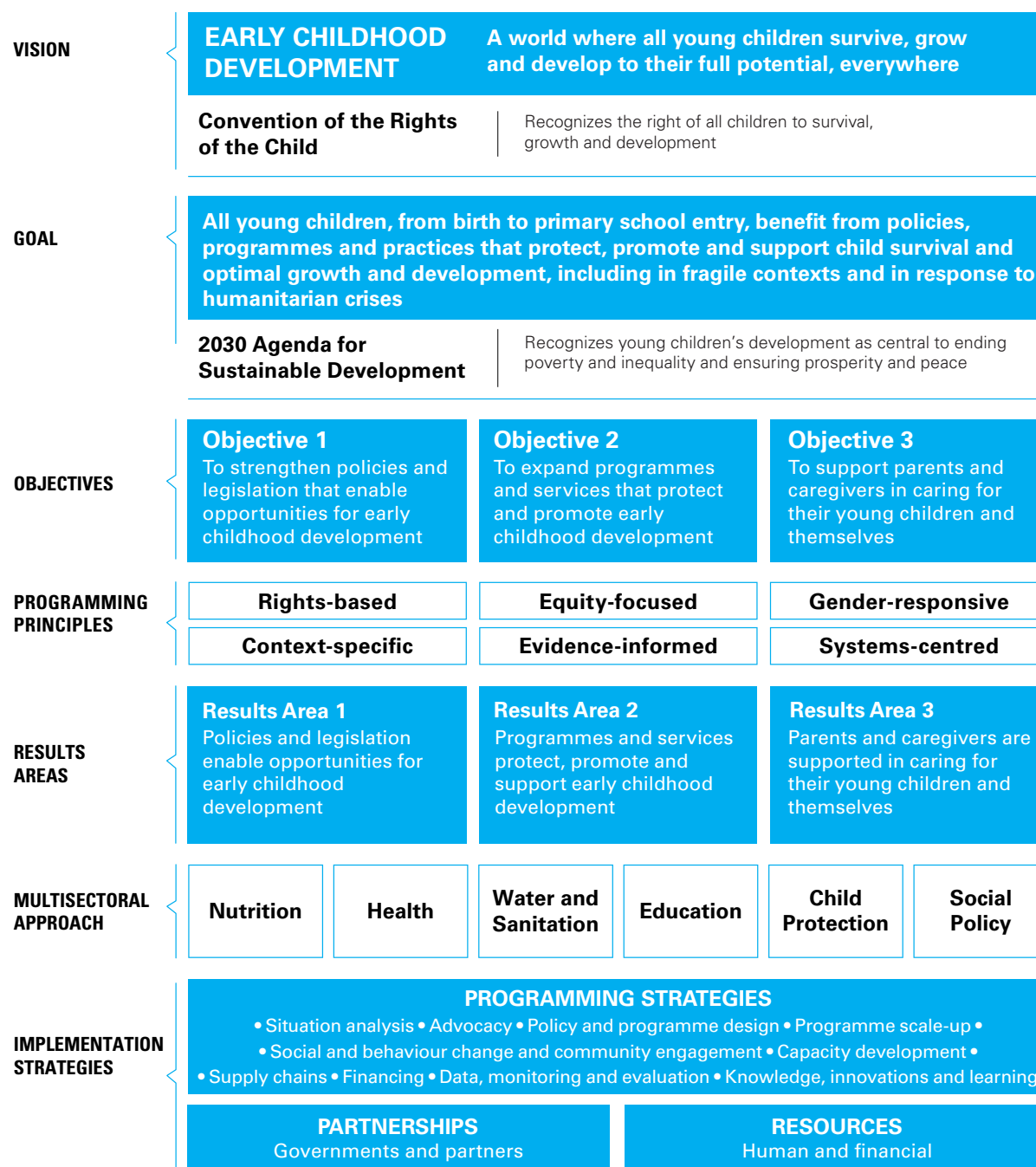


FIGURE 5: UNICEF Programme Framework for Early Childhood Development

# PROGRAMMING PRINCIPLES

**Six universal principles guide the design and implementation of UNICEF programming for early childhood development at the global, regional, national and subnational levels:**

## Rights-based

UNICEF's approach to early childhood development is guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognizes children's right to survival, growth and development. UNICEF supports national governments, civil society, academia, the private sector and other duty-bearers – including parents, caregivers and service providers – in respecting, protecting and fulfilling this right.

## Equity-focused

UNICEF programming is guided by the conviction that reducing inequities is right in both principle and practice. Policies, programmes and services that reduce inequities and promote inclusion improve impact because developmental impairments in early life, especially the vital first 1,000 days, are more likely to affect the most vulnerable and marginalized children, including minority groups, children living in extreme poverty and children living with disabilities.

## Gender-responsive

UNICEF strives to eliminate gender inequities across the life course and within households and societies. This includes advocating for maternity protection and family-friendly policies that help both women and men to manage paid work and child-caring responsibilities, and fostering social and gender norms that promote the equitable sharing of domestic and child-caring work among men and women.

## Context-specific

UNICEF adapts its interventions, strategies and approaches to the context in which children and their caregivers live. Context-specific programming is informed by an analysis of the situation of children – including determinants, drivers and potential pathways to optimal development in early childhood, as well as an analysis of the resources (human and financial) and partnerships available.

## Evidence-informed

UNICEF advocates for and supports evidence-informed policies and legislation, the scale-up of programmes and services, and the adoption of practices that protect, promote and support early childhood development. In addition, UNICEF supports the generation of new data, knowledge and evidence to inform innovative approaches to early childhood development and advocate for their implementation.

## System-centred

UNICEF works across systems to sustainably strengthen their capacity to deliver policies, programmes and practices that improve the survival, growth and development of children in early life. UNICEF focuses on six systems – food, health, water and sanitation, education, child protection and social protection – that have the greatest potential to deliver results for early childhood development.



# RESULT AREAS

UNICEF organizes its programming for early childhood development into three results areas:

- **Results Area 1:** Policies and legislation enable opportunities for early childhood development
- **Results Area 2:** Programmes and services promote and support early childhood development
- **Results Area 3:** Parents and caregivers are supported in caring for their young children and themselves

## Results Area 1

### Policies and legislation enable opportunities for early childhood development

Results Area 1 encompasses UNICEF's support to the development of policies, legislation, strategies and costed plans that enable child survival, growth and development in early life. This includes overarching policies, strategies and plans on early childhood development, as well those on specific facets of early childhood development, such as early childhood nutrition, early childhood education and social protection.

UNICEF identifies gaps in national policies and legislation, and generates and uses evidence to make the ethical, political, social and financial case to address these gaps. In low- and middle-income contexts, there is often a need for better integration of early stimulation, responsive caregiving and parenting into sectoral policies, including within the nutrition, health, education and child protection sectors. In addition, there is need for family-friendly policies and legislation that provide adequate financial protection and flexible work arrangements for families and caregivers of vulnerable young children.

UNICEF engages and convenes national stakeholders and opinion setters, including parliamentarians, to build support for policies and legislation. We provide technical support to draft policies and legislation, based on global and local evidence, recommendations and needs. We ensure these policies and legislation address the specific needs of vulnerable children, including economically disadvantaged children and those living with disabilities. We also partner with governments and financial decision-makers to influence and support the mobilization, allocation and utilization of domestic financial resources for early childhood development.

In addition, we support governments and partners in coordinating across sectors and stakeholder groups to guide and monitor the implementation of policies and legislation.

## Results Area 2

### Programmes and services promote and support early childhood development

Results Area 2 encompasses UNICEF's support to the design, implementation and scale-up of programmes and services that protect, promote and support early childhood development.

Programmes and services should be packaged and delivered in ways that optimize access to and continuity of care. UNICEF fosters integrated approaches and geographic convergence of programmes and services to enhance opportunities to meet the multiple needs of young children. For example, primary health care facilities and community-based child nutrition and development services provide the opportunity to reach young children and their caregivers with infant feeding counselling, nutrition supplements, vaccinations, counselling on early stimulation and responsive caregiving, screening for developmental delays and disabilities, and birth registration services. Mechanisms must be established to facilitate the referral of children and their parents or caregivers between services delivered through different systems and platforms.

Special attention must be given to the needs of vulnerable children, including those living with disabilities, with adolescent parents, belonging to marginalized groups, and living in extreme poverty. This may involve additional interventions or services, such as targeted support to caregivers on how to feed and care for children living with disabilities; adapted services to meet the specific

needs of adolescent mothers and fathers; tailored social and behaviour change approaches to address underlying social and gender norms; expanded community-based delivery platforms to reach young children in underserved communities; and referral to social transfer programmes.

The Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action equip UNICEF and its partners to deliver a principled, timely, quality and child-centred response to any crisis with humanitarian consequences.<sup>32</sup> The Core Commitments for Children include cross-cutting commitments on early childhood development to ensure that: young children have equitable access to essential services to fulfil their development needs; parents and caregivers are supported to practice nurturing care; and the capacities of frontline workers and partners in inclusive early childhood development and nurturing care are strengthened.

### **Results Area 3** **Parents and caregivers are supported in caring for young children and themselves**

Results Area 3 encompasses UNICEF's support to programmes and services to empower parents and caregivers to care for their young children and themselves.

UNICEF will support governments and partners to integrate parenting and caregiving support into existing programmes and services that interact with parents and caregivers of young children. This includes early stimulation and responsive caregiving of young children; breastfeeding and responsive complementary feeding; health care seeking behaviours and hygiene and sanitation practices for young children; playful interactions and positive discipline; and gender-responsive parenting. Inclusivity is a key principle; nurturing care should be supported for all children, especially the most vulnerable, including children with disabilities and those living in extreme poverty and in humanitarian crises. In addition, adolescent parents may need added support to care for themselves and meet their specific needs as caregivers.

UNICEF will seek to increase parental engagement (among both fathers and mothers) in services for young children, including community-based childcare and preschool, and early intervention services for children with developmental delays and disabilities.

UNICEF will also focus on the mental health and socio-emotional well-being of parents and caregivers. This includes supporting parents (whether they are fathers or mothers) to engage in and share childcare responsibilities, as well as empowering other caregivers, such as those in extended families. In addition, UNICEF will work with governments and the private sector to introduce family-friendly policies and affordable childcare services that allow parents to balance childcare with paid work responsibilities.








UNICEF strengthens the presence, skills and motivation of community-based workers to build the knowledge and skills of parents, caregivers and families on responsive caregiving. These workers often live in the communities they serve, and have extensive local knowledge as well as trusted and respectful relationships with community members. They play a crucial role in building collaborative partnerships with parents, caregivers and families that extends beyond the provision of information or education to the co-construction of support for the child, as well as for parents and caregivers themselves.



# A MULTISECTORAL APPROACH

UNICEF will leverage its multisectoral capabilities to support mutually reinforcing sectoral actions across the three results areas to impact comprehensively on the determinants of optimal early childhood development in a given context (Box 2).

UNICEF offices at global, regional, national and subnational levels will apply sectoral expertise in the areas of nutrition and child development, health and immunization, water and sanitation, education and adolescent development, child protection, and social policy, as well as cross-cutting programming capacity in gender, disability inclusion, climate change, peacebuilding, social and behaviour change and community engagement.

 <p><b>Nutrition</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maternal nutrition before, during and after pregnancy</li> <li>• Breastfeeding, complementary foods and responsive feeding and care</li> <li>• Fortified foods and micronutrient supplements for children and women</li> <li>• Early detection and treatment of child malnutrition</li> <li>• Early stimulation in Child Nutrition and Development programmes</li> </ul>	 <p><b>Health</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maternal and newborn health</li> <li>• Maternal and caregiver mental health</li> <li>• Immunization and management of common childhood illnesses</li> <li>• Early detection and intervention for developmental delays and disabilities</li> <li>• Early stimulation in Child Health and Immunization programmes</li> </ul>	 <p><b>Water and sanitation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safe and affordable drinking water</li> <li>• Safe handling and storage of drinking water</li> <li>• Sanitation, including the safe disposal of child faeces</li> <li>• Handwashing with soap at critical times by caregivers and young children</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Education</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early childhood care and education services</li> <li>• Parenting support for early learning and caregiving</li> <li>• Enhanced home-learning environments</li> <li>• Social-emotional development of children</li> <li>• Inclusive early childhood education for children</li> </ul>	 <p><b>Child protection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legal identity, including birth registration</li> <li>• Mental health and psychosocial support of children and caregivers</li> <li>• Prevention of violence against children and women in family settings</li> <li>• Prevention and response to child abuse and neglect</li> <li>• Prevention of family separation and promotion of family-based alternative care</li> </ul>	 <p><b>Social policy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Measurement of child poverty in early childhood</li> <li>• Inclusive social protection, including child benefits and health insurance</li> <li>• Family-friendly policies and care</li> <li>• Local governance for early childhood services</li> <li>• Public investment in early childhood development</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Cross-cutting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender-responsive parenting and gender socialization</li> <li>• Disability inclusive policies, programmes and services</li> <li>• Climate-resilient and sustainable ECD policies, programmes and practices</li> <li>• Peacebuilding and social cohesion through investments in early childhood development</li> <li>• Social and behaviour change and community engagement</li> </ul>		

Box 2: UNICEF programming areas by sector <sup>27, 33-40</sup>



# IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

**UNICEF will draw from 10 programming strategies and leverage its resources and partnerships to translate the goal and objectives of this Vision for Early Childhood Development into measurable results for children’s survival, growth and development in early life.**

## Programming strategies

UNICEF uses 10 programming strategies to support national and subnational governments and other duty-bearers to strengthen policies and legislation, expand programmes and services, and support parents and caregivers to realize children’s right to survival, growth and development in early childhood. We prioritize and tailor these strategies to the programming context, in consultation with governments and partners, and considering the needs, partnerships and resources available.

**Situation analysis:** In consultation with government and other partners, UNICEF conducts systematic situation analyses of early childhood development to understand the current status, the immediate and underlying determinants, and the potential pathways for positive impact. These analyses provide the evidence base to advocate with governments and partners on priority actions, roles and responsibilities, and resource needs.

**Advocacy:** UNICEF uses rights-based and evidence-informed arguments to convince political leaders, policymakers, donors, public and private sector partners and other decision-makers to lead and support actions that uphold children’s right to early childhood development. This involves generating evidence, strengthening relationships with decision-makers, leveraging communication opportunities and convening stakeholders to make the ethical, political, social and financial case for actions and investment in early childhood development.

### **Policy, legislation and programme design:**

UNICEF provides support to national and subnational governments to design multisectoral and sectoral policies, legislation and programmes to improve early childhood development. UNICEF supports governments in the design process by generating evidence to inform decision-making, providing technical guidance that is tailored to a specific context, and convening stakeholders.

**Programme scale-up:** UNICEF provides technical support to governments and partners for the scale-up of programmes and services to protect, promote and support child survival, growth and development in early childhood. We guide the development of the multisectoral and sectoral results frameworks and implementation plans that leverage and strengthen the capacity of six systems – food, health, water and sanitation, education, child protection and social protection – to deliver programmes and services, with emphasis on the first 1,000 days.

**Social and behaviour change and community engagement:** UNICEF uses social and behaviour change approaches to shape norms, promote nurturing care and parenting practices and to increase demand for services among parents, caregivers and community leaders. We empower and mobilize communities to participate in the analysis, design, implementation and evaluation of programmes to improve survival, growth and development in early childhood.

**Capacity strengthening:** UNICEF works to strengthen the organizational capacities of governments and partners to design, implement and monitor policies and programmes for early childhood development. We also support and equip facility- and community-based workers to build the knowledge and skills of parents and caregivers to adopt behaviours and practices that improve child survival, growth and development.

**Supply chains:** UNICEF advocates for governments and partners to sustainably strengthen supply chains to make essential supplies available and affordable in all contexts, such as nutrition supplements, vaccines, medicines and sanitary equipment. This includes support to product selection, quality assurance, forecasting, local production, procurement, distribution and rational use. We also advocate for governments to allocate funds for supplies to ensure the sustainable delivery of services.

**Domestic and external financing:** UNICEF advocates with governments, development banks, donors and the private sector for increased domestic and external financing to support the implementation of policies and programmes that improve the survival, growth and development of children in early childhood. We advocate for a more efficient and equitable allocation of existing financial resources, and support governments in monitoring and tracking national investments.

**Data, monitoring and evaluation:** UNICEF provides technical support and guidance to strengthen data, monitoring and evaluation systems across all sectors that contribute to early childhood development. We strengthen the capacities of governments and partners to develop results frameworks and to engage in results-based management. We are also the custodian of global data and information systems to track progress towards SDG targets that relate to early childhood development, including indicators 2.2.1, 2.2.2 and 4.2.1.

**Knowledge, innovations and learning:** UNICEF supports governments and partners to generate, document and share knowledge and learning to strengthen the design of policies and programmes to improve survival, growth and development in early childhood. We foster a culture of innovation to design, test, evaluate and scale up new policy concepts and programme strategies in ways that inspire governments, partners and communities.

## Strategic partnerships

UNICEF convenes and supports strategic partnerships at global, regional, national and subnational levels to protect the rights of children in early childhood and accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These partnerships allow UNICEF to share responsibilities, optimize resources, and increase the reach and influence of policies and programmes to improve early childhood development outcomes.

Governments are UNICEF's main partners because they hold primary responsibility for the protection, promotion and fulfilment of children's rights in any country. UNICEF advocates for and supports the efforts of national and subnational governments to scale up policies and programmes to protect, promote and support optimal early childhood development

outcomes. Other partners include United Nations agencies, multilateral development banks, bilateral donors, civil society and non-governmental organizations, academia, the media and the private sector.

UNICEF will continue to engage with the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement, the Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN) and other networks at global, regional and national levels. SUN and ECDAN provide platforms for organizations and networks to catalyse collective action on behalf of young children and their families. They connect partners, facilitate knowledge exchange and learning, and coordinate and align advocacy for increased investment in evidence-informed policies, programmes and services.

## Presence and people

UNICEF works in more than 190 countries and territories in seven regions, across both development and humanitarian contexts. With its multisectoral teams of in-country professionals, UNICEF is able to maximize results for children through its support to reinforce interventions across sectors and systems.

UNICEF has the largest workforce of all international organizations in nutrition, health, education and adolescent development, water and sanitation, child protection and social policy. At the start of 2023, UNICEF had more than 16,000 staff leading and supporting the design and implementation of policies and programmes in these areas worldwide.

UNICEF's global and regional emergency and supply teams – combined with in-country staff and organizational mechanisms to rapidly deploy additional staff, supplies and funds as needed – help to ensure effective and swift humanitarian response for young children in the event of emergencies.

# WAY FORWARD

While children's lives have improved in recent decades, at least 250 million children under 5 (two in five children) are at risk of not reaching their developmental potential because of poverty and malnutrition. Millions of children around the world are not receiving the responsive care they need, are missing out on nutrition, health and learning opportunities, and are exposed to unhealthy environments, violence and stress.

A good start to life for every child is increasingly urgent in a world where many millions of children are exposed to multiple interacting deprivations, especially those affected by multidimensional poverty and humanitarian crises. The first 1,000 days of life is a unique period of opportunity when the foundations of optimum growth and development are established.

The UNICEF Vision for Early Childhood Development articulates UNICEF's framework for organization-wide support to early childhood development. By strengthening policies and legislation, expanding programmes and services across multiple sectors and systems, and supporting parents and caregivers, our Vision aims to protect, promote and support early childhood development from birth to the age of school entry.

UNICEF will use its expertise in nutrition, health, water and sanitation, education and adolescent development, child protection, social policy and programming at community level and enhance cross-cutting actions to strengthen systems and support parents, caregivers and families to secure a more equitable future for children everywhere.



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