



Promoting the Development of the Under-Threes: The Critical Role of Government Investment

Introduction

Three interrelated strands of research provide compelling evidence for investment in early childhood care and education (ECCE) for the under-threes. First, research from neuroscience shows that the brain develops most rapidly in the first three years of life and that it is highly affected by environmental stimulation¹. Second, studies on the economic returns of government investment indicate higher returns to society when the education investment is incurred in early childhood as compared to adulthood². Third, program evaluation research has shown that participation in early childhood programs promotes cognitive development and school success and narrows the achievement gap between children from low income families and their more advantaged peers.

Further, 192 countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child underscoring governments' responsibility to guarantee the rights of young children to survive, develop and be protected.



Current Status of ECCE Services for the Under-Threes

The Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) asserted that learning begins at birth and the first EFA goal is to expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. However, in their strategic and implementation plans for achieving EFA Goal 1, most developing countries have focused on pre-primary education, i.e., services for children from three years to the age of their entry into primary school. A corollary to this is that less attention has been directed at services for children

Evidence for Investment in ECCE

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2. Studies on the economic returns of government investment indicate higher returns to society when the education investment is incurred in early childhood as compared to adulthood.
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below three years. This is a particular concern for countries with severe survival issues of young children. For example, the under-five mortality rate (the number of children per 1000 of live births who die before reaching five) can be considered a proxy for the extent of need for effective early childhood interventions in different parts of the world, since data on access to services among the under-threes are not easily available. About 74/1000 children will not reach age five worldwide. The highest rate, 158/1000, is in Sub-Saharan Africa and the lowest, 7/1000, is in Western Europe and North America. In East Asia and the Pacific, it is 31/1000, and in South and West Asia, it is 83/1000³. This highlights the need of early interventions for very young children in developing countries.

According to the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008, only 53% of countries in the world have formal ECCE programmes for children under-three and these typically provide custodial care. The lack of ECCE for the under-threes is a barrier to achieving EFA Goal 1⁴. Governments are in a unique and important position to facilitate the development of the under-threes, particularly those from disadvantaged and marginalised sections of society. Indeed, children from socially and economically disadvantaged families who receive early interventions have much better development and learning outcomes than comparable children who have not received these services⁵.

Governments collect information on survival, health and nutrition during the early years. However, when ECCE services are provided for the under-threes, not enough attention has been directed at monitoring both access to these services and their quality. This is particularly the case when they are provided in

3. UNESCO (2009).EFA global monitoring report 2010.Reaching the marginalized. Paris: Author.

4. UNESCO (2009).EFA global monitoring report 2010.Reaching the marginalized. Paris: Author.

5. Rao, N. & Sun, J. (2010). Early childhood care and education in the Asia-Pacific Region: Moving towards Goal 1 (97pp). Regional report prepared for the World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education (WCECCE). Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, the University of Hong Kong/UNESCO.

1. Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (2000).From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

2. Lynch, R. (2004). Exceptional returns: Economic, fiscal and social benefits of investment in early childhood development. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

non-formal settings.

Recommendations

Although governments currently allocate considerably fewer resources to the under-threes compared to pre-primary and primary education, there are persuasive reasons to support services for children under-three.

Prioritising Child Health. The promotion of the holistic development of young children requires adequate attention to be given to both their care and education needs and ideally integrated ECCE services should be provided. However, the high under-five mortality rates in most developing countries indicate that promoting survival has to be a priority. Since the health sector is normally well established in most countries, governments must allocate sufficient resources to improve the health status of the under-threes through growth monitoring, supplementary nutrition programmes, vaccination campaigns, and through the provision of water and sanitation facilities.

Supporting Parenting Education. Well-prepared and competent parents are important for the healthy and holistic development of the under-threes. Investment in different forms of parenting education, including community parenting learning programmes, home-based early childhood programmes, and cash transfer parenting programmes, is an effective way to improve the very young children's home environment and facilitate their development and learning. Parenting education is important for all parents but particularly important for mothers with low levels of education who have less access to information on promoting child survival, health and development.

Improving the Quality of Childcare Services. High quality childcare services for the under-threes are especially important for working parents. Governments should exert efforts to improve the quality of these services and to establish appropriate systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Governments should also support the academic and professional development of care givers/early childhood educators to improve childcare quality.

Conclusions

Learning begins at birth and the first three years of life provide strong foundations for life-long development. Government investment in promoting the development of the under-threes by prioritizing child health, supporting parenting education, and improving the quality of childcare services, is necessary to achieve EFA Goal 1. ■

Recommendations for improving services for children under-threes:

1. Prioritising child health
2. Supporting parenting education
3. Improving the quality of childcare services

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