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A UNICEF
PRIORITY FOR
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EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT (ECD)

THE ISSUE

The years from pregnancy to a child turning 3 years old are critical and lay the foundation for lifelong health and learning. In the first few years of life, the brain grows rapidly: more than 1 million new neural connections are formed every second. The brain doubles in size in the first year and keeps growing to about 80 per cent of adult size by age 3 and 90 per cent – nearly full grown – by age 5.

Quality support in early life is efficient and cost-effective, with long-term benefits such as reductions in violence, depression and social inhibition, and improvements in adult health, learning and productivity. In China, nearly 17 million children under 5 years old are unable to reach their full potential and are at risk of early developmental delays and disability. Children from disadvantaged communities may be at greater risk of deprivation of care and limited access to healthcare, early learning, social welfare and protection.

UNICEF is working with partners to increase investment in ECD care, help parents understand the importance of ECD, and encourage governments and employers to enact policies that support ECD. Evidence shows that young children benefit most when their family is the core provider of early childhood development support, and UNICEF advocates for policies and programmes that empower parents to be the primary caregivers for children 0-3 years of age.

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UNICEF'S KEY MESSAGES



Investing in ECD offers substantial returns in terms of **children's long-term health**, well-being, learning and productivity. National programmes that will expand access to quality ECD care are urgently needed.



Parents have an important role to play in **supporting their children** in these crucial early years.



UNICEF has resources available to empower parents to learn **new skills**. Parents can also share that information and their experiences with their peers, and provide support to other parents in need.



UNICEF is calling for national and local governments, as well as employers, to implement **family-friendly policies**, including:

- Maternity leave and paternity leave
- Flexible working hours
- Support for childcare – by providing services directly, or financial support to parents of young children.



For parents: providing children with nutrition, health and hygiene, opportunities for learning, and protection from harm and pollution enables them to be physically healthy, mentally alert, emotionally secure, socially competent and able to learn.



Parenting should match **children's stage of development**, with nutrition, stimulation and protection that is appropriate to their needs.



A father's early, active and engaged participation in a child's early years and beyond is good for their development.