

A close-up photograph of a young girl with dark hair in braids, wearing a red sweater, holding a baby. The baby is wearing a light blue outfit and a white cap. The background is blurred, suggesting an indoor setting.

Early Childhood Development and the Childcare Crisis

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Childcare, especially for very young children, is often thought of as a problem for mothers and families to sort out and provide themselves. Many poor women, however, do not have the ability to stay home to care for their children, but must instead work to provide for their families and find alternative childcare arrangements. Yet in the poorest settings or in underserved communities, finding affordable, high quality childcare, can be difficult if not impossible. This has significant compounding effects on children, parents, communities and economies in both the short and long term.

High quality childcare supports healthy early childhood development and can improve school readiness and learning outcomes, while simultaneously freeing adults to work and older children to attend school. Alternatively, poor quality childcare leaves children at risk for neglect, abuse, accidents and inadequate cognitive, emotional, and social development.

Childcare is a women's issue, a children's issue, an education issue, and a health issue and should not be left solely as a problem for families and caregivers to figure out alone. Country governments, donors, and advocates must do more to support access to high quality childcare, including expanding provision of affordable early childhood care centres.



Not Only Mothers: The Reality of Childcare

Childcare is traditionally understood as “women’s work” and even today the burden of childcare falls disproportionately on women in both developed and developing countries.¹ A study of 37 countries found that women on average are responsible for 75% of childcare activities, though in some countries the proportion reaches as high as 93%.² However, in a single parent household, when both parents work, or when parents are not around, others often must fill the childcare gap.

The assumption seems to be that poor women are at home caring for their children because they are not ‘at work,’ but this is far from the reality. 50% of the world’s women age 15 and over — and 72% of women in low income countries — are currently in the labour force, either by choice or by necessity.³ In families affected by diseases of poverty like tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS and in female-headed households, women and families are often caught between the competing necessities of working so that their families can survive and providing childcare.

Finding safe, affordable, high quality childcare alternatives for very young children is difficult if not impossible for many, and as a result women may seek lower quality work in an informal sector such as agriculture — which allows them to work at or near home or to bring their children along — or leave their children with alternative, and sometimes unqualified or overburdened, caregivers. When care is unavailable, some families are forced to leave children unsupervised.

Coping strategies in the absence of quality childcare include:

Grandparents: In many families, grandparents and particularly grandmothers provide childcare. This arrangement occurs frequently in developing countries, ranging from about 30% of East Asian households to 75% of African households.⁴ Grandparents can also serve as sole caregivers when parents are not present, such as when parents migrate to find better work or have died. This is particularly the case in Sub-Saharan Africa, where an estimated 15.1 million children have lost one or both parents, primarily from HIV/AIDS.⁵

The presence of grandparents can improve school outcomes for children, especially girls, as they take over domestic and childcare responsibilities that would otherwise keep children out of school.⁶ Family care does not guarantee high quality care, however, as studies have reported some children experience harm or neglect at the hands of family caregivers. The burden of childcare can also cause significant hardships for grandparents, driving them into poverty since they can no longer work and have the added expense of school fees and child support, which can be stressful or hard on their health.⁷

Older siblings: Siblings are often enlisted to provide care for younger siblings in order to allow parents to work. Older children can also become caregivers when parents are ill or disabled or, in fewer cases, when children are orphaned and must care for their siblings. This situation has become especially prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa as a result of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.⁸ Caregiving duties most often fall to girls; in all countries, girls spend more time on unpaid childcare than boys do.⁹ In parts of Ethiopia, for example, more than half of rural girls ages 5 to 8 provide unpaid childcare every day.¹⁰

While this arrangement may help increase the total household income, it also has negative consequences for both the older and the younger children, especially in child headed households. There is greater risk for poor quality care, as older siblings are often inexperienced or too young themselves to provide quality supervision.¹¹ This situation also limits opportunities for the older children to go to school and

diminishes their future opportunities, trapping families in poverty. Studies have shown that “many children who undertake substantial or regular caring can experience significant restriction in their development, participation and opportunities, [and] educational attainment.”¹²

Unsupervised children: When parents are unable to find alternative childcare options, many feel they have no choice but to leave their children unsupervised while they work. In a survey of 53 low and middle income countries,¹³ an average of 20% of children under five were left alone or with a sibling for at least one hour every week. The proportion rises to almost half in the ten lowest income countries. This situation can be deadly for young children. One study in Botswana, Mexico, and Vietnam found that in families that left children alone or inadequately supervised, 57% of children had experienced accidents or emergencies while their parents were gone.¹⁴ Even if unsupervised children manage to avoid accidental harm, they miss out on essential interaction and cognitive stimulation. Studies have shown that children routinely left to care for themselves have lower school achievement, poorer developmental outcomes, and increased behavioural problems.¹⁵

Domestic workers. Another alternative for families is hiring paid carers to work in the home. While paid care could be a good solution for filling the childcare need and simultaneously employing women who need to work, the reality frequently looks different. Generally this work is in the informal sector and employs women, girls, and migrant workers, who provide services at the expense of their own education or taking care of their own children. Paid care does not guarantee quality, as many caregivers are untrained and have no other work alternatives, and as such, children sometimes experience abuse and neglect at the hands of their caretakers.¹⁶ In a vicious cycle, there is also significant evidence that such domestic workers are “very poorly paid, highly vulnerable to abuse and regularly made to work excessively long hours with no guaranteed days of rest.”¹⁷

Organised childcare: Organised childcare centres offer formal childcare to parents. This can take the form of fee-paying private childcare centres, childcare offered through employers, or public childcare that is either free or subsidised by the government. Participation rates in organised childcare vary widely between countries. For many families, however, this type of childcare is unavailable, either due to limited access or prohibitively high costs.

Informal versions of organised childcare also exist, such as day care provided for neighboring children by a local woman in her own home, but these are often unregulated and quality is not guaranteed. In some cases, these caregivers are charged with too many children or overburdened with other work, and so can only provide supervision, rather than the direct engagement and interaction required for children’s cognitive stimulation and development.

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Childcare and Learning Outcomes

Access to safe, high quality, affordable childcare is not only a social protection issue and a women's issue, it also significantly impacts learning outcomes. In their first few years, children are highly sensitive to stimulation and vulnerable to environmental issues. Neuroscience evidence demonstrates that the most substantial brain development takes place in the first 1000 days between pregnancy and a child's second birthday, but chronic stress and under stimulation can seriously hinder this development, impacting a child's later learning and cognitive abilities, as well as her health, behaviour, and social and emotional development.¹⁸

Children left unsupervised or in poor quality care situations therefore miss out on critical early cognitive stimulation and support and risk not reaching their full developmental potential. In contrast, studies have shown that "higher-quality childcare (in the form of responsive and stimulating care) is associated with better cognitive and language development, positive peer relations, compliance with adults, fewer behaviour problems, and better mother-child relations."¹⁹ In short, children who receive quality cognitive stimulation at a very young age are likely to do better in school and have greater opportunities for success.

Unfortunately, since pre-school generally begins at ages 3 or 4, the youngest children are often left out of formal care and early learning programmes. High quality, accessible care programmes can fill this gap and provide the stimulation and care necessary to ensure healthy brain development and support learning outcomes later on.²⁰ Early childhood centres offer not just a "drop-off location" for working parents,²¹ but also give children the chance to participate in important learning and social activities that prepare them for success in school. The positive effects of these early programmes on school outcomes have been shown to extend through primary school and beyond.²²

In addition to fostering cognitive development, language, and early learning outcomes, quality childcare centres can also support social and non-cognitive skills development through positive relationships with adult carers and other children. Nurturing relationships between young children and caregivers are essential for the development of a child's emotional and mental health, providing "an emotional refuge for children, [and] fostering the development of a healthy sense of belonging, self-esteem, and well-being" that is critical for children's health and achievement in the long term.²³ Increasing access to high quality childcare programmes helps ensure that all children, regardless of background, can develop these important social and emotional relationships and are not subject to abuse or neglect at the hands of an inadequate or overburdened caregiver.

Finally, access to affordable high-quality childcare also improves learning outcomes for older siblings, especially for adolescent girls, by freeing them from their childcare responsibilities so that they can continue going to school. Since the burden of childcare continues to fall disproportionately on women and girls, implementing policies that extend access to safe, quality childcare to poor families is critical to preserving and extending girls' educational opportunities.

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What should be done?

The issue of childcare can no longer be considered the sole responsibility of mothers or even families, but a shared responsibility for communities and countries. It is the first step in a child's educational journey and chance for a healthy life. Access to childcare affects everyone and more must be done to support families in providing safe, quality care for their children. Achieving universal access to quality childcare would help all young children fully develop their cognitive and non-cognitive skills, prepare them for success in primary school, and allow older children to continue their education instead of dropping out to care for younger siblings.

These recommendations draw on the Overseas Development Institute's comprehensive report on child care: *Women's Work: Mothers, Children, and the Global Childcare Crisis*. For a more in-depth discussion of this issue, see the full report.

1. Expand access to high quality early childhood care and education programmes to all children, targeting in particular the poorest and most marginalised.

Expansion of early childhood care services has thus far been uneven and these programmes remain unavailable for many children. Governments should work to achieve universal access to early childhood care programmes by 2030, as laid out in Sustainable Development Goal 4, in order to guarantee that all children — especially the poorest and most marginalised — are able to reach their full developmental potential and succeed in school. Childcare should be conceived of as a public good, just like health and education, and become "an essential part of the public service infrastructure."²⁴

Though public provision of childcare is essential for ensuring equitable access to high quality care for children from all backgrounds, expanding childcare services will require significant investment. In

some cases, private sector childcare services have worked to fill this gap, but this approach does not increase access for the poorest families who cannot afford such fees. Thus the private sector cannot offer the solution these families need. For the poorest families, more comprehensive national level strategies, policies and resources will be necessary. Governments could also consider implementing policies that incentivize employers to provide free or subsidised childcare services for their employees to help scale up access,²⁵ though this will only support those caregivers working in the formal sector.

Critically, numerous studies have shown that while high quality care brings significant benefits to young children, low quality care can do serious harm. Therefore, in working to expand access to childcare services, it is essential to focus not just on reaching more children but also on guaranteeing high quality care.

2. Implement labour market policies that improve parents' care options.

Parents continue to play an essential role as caregivers, so more policies should be put in place to support parents and improve their care options. This includes not only guaranteeing paid maternity leave to all working mothers, but also implementing paternity leave policies in order to take the child care burden off mothers. Expanding parental leave allows families to provide initial care for newborns without worrying about income loss and helps protect older siblings from being taken out of school to provide infant care. Though paid maternity care has been established in many countries, implementation is often lacking. Creating these policies is not enough if parents feel they cannot take parental leave without negative ramifications, so ensuring widespread application is also crucial. Problematically again, these provisions do not help the significant portion of mothers and caregivers working in the informal economy.

3. Expand social protection and social service programmes that take into account the realities of caregiving.

Numerous types of social protection and social service programmes aimed at poverty alleviation and learning outcomes already exist. Expanding and tailoring these programmes to address the realities of caregiving is an important step to improving quality of childcare for poor children. For example, in many developing countries, grandparents play a significant role in providing childcare, often at the expense of impoverishing themselves further and harming their health. Implementing better pensions for seniors and programmes supporting non-parent caregivers can help relieve the financial burden and improve the quality of life and quality of care for young children.

4. Expand collection and dissemination of data on childcare.

The data on access and quality of available childcare remains seriously lacking. Not enough is known about how parents in developing countries and poorer settings cope with the dilemma of balancing work and childcare and what care looks like for very young children before pre-primary or primary school starts. Further, the assumption that poor women have the luxury of staying home to care for their children remains very prevalent, when in fact many women need to work to support their families. A lack of information significantly hinders the creation and implementation of effective new policies and programmes aimed at addressing the childcare crisis.

5. Address the problem of childcare in emergency and conflict settings.

Though the issue of childcare is often overlooked in conflict, emergency or protracted crisis settings, young children living in these dangerous contexts are particularly vulnerable and in need of access to safe, quality childcare. In these settings, women are more likely to have to work outside the home or to become the head of the household or primary breadwinner, making the need for alternative safe childcare options even more acute. One avenue for expanding childcare services

in emergency settings could be through women and girls safe spaces, which have been set up to protect and empower women and girls affected by emergency situations like the Syrian crisis. UNFPA describes these safe spaces as a formal or informal place that provides “women and girls with a safe entry point for services and a place to access information. Safe gathering points also offer them an opportunity to engage with each other, exchange information, and rebuild community networks and support.”²⁶ The services provided in these safe spaces could be extended to include childcare options as well as provide girls and women with information on effective care and stimulation for young children.

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