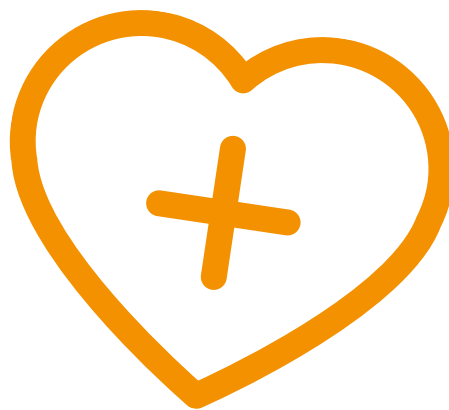


#5for5 brief: Health



By the time a child reaches five years old, 90% of their brain has already developed – which means the progression from birth to school is the most important time of a child’s life¹.

But around the world children from poorer and marginalised households are unable to access support and are put at a disadvantage. For example, those who start school at five without early years support have a limited vocabulary and ability to learn, impacting their opportunities in later life.

Theirworld’s 5 for 5 campaign focuses on the 5 elements of quality nurturing care needed by every child under five: health, nutrition, play, learning and protection. Even though the importance of these interventions has been thoroughly proven, investment in the 0 to 5 age group is still far too small.

This briefing explores the issue of health and is part of a series of briefings examining the 5 key elements of quality nurturing care, available at theirworld.org.

What does support for health encompass and why is it essential for early child development?

The first five years of a child’s life are critical for laying the foundations for healthy adulthood. In the first five years, children are growing faster and shaping the future of their health more definitively than at any other point in their lives². In the first year of life alone, babies grow on average 25 centimeters and triple their initial birth weights³. However, this period of rapid growth and development is also a period of major vulnerability. During this time children need ongoing nurturing support if they are going reach their full developmental potential, and supporting good health for kids means providing access to good healthcare, good nutrition, clean water, and a sanitary environment.

Are children around the world receiving adequate healthcare?

Although meaningful progress has been made in controlling diseases associated with high child and maternal mortality rates and increasing life expectancy⁴, access to healthcare is still marked by extreme inequality around the globe, and millions children are not getting access to the services that they need.

The World Health Organization (WHO) claims that for every 10,000 people in a country, there should be a minimum of 23 physicians, nurses, and midwives available. However, many countries throughout the world do not have enough health care workers⁵. For example, Sub-Saharan Africa needs 1.8 million more health workers to reach the minimum threshold set by the WHO – a

staggering deficit that is expected to rise 4.3 million over the next 20 years⁶.

How can we support children's health through quality early childhood care?

All countries have agreed to ensure every child has the right to enjoyment of the highest attainable level of health and should take appropriate measure to achieve this.⁷ Investing in quality childhood care programmes can significantly reduce the inequality found between the richest and poorest children, and they are most effective when they include the following essential services:

Support for pregnant women. An estimated 20% of chronic malnutrition in children begins in the womb⁸. Mothers who are malnourished themselves and not receiving the correct nutrients or prenatal care will not be able to pass on the nutrients needed to support the healthy growth and development of their babies.

By providing support to pregnant women such as micronutrient supplements and trained birth attendants, early childhood care programmes can significantly improve the health of children under 5. Micronutrient supplements can help pregnant women stay healthy and give their babies the nutrients they need to become healthy and strong, and skilled birth attendants and the essential pre and post natal care that they provide significantly increase the chances of safe delivery.

Nutrition Interventions. Good nutrition is more than just having enough to eat – it also means having the right balance of foods and sufficient nutrients, and it is especially important for infants and toddlers, whose bodies and brains need good nutrition for healthy growth. Inadequate nutrition increases the risk of serious illness.

Programmes that support adequate nutrition include promoting exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, providing food and nutrient supplements to mothers and older toddlers, and making sure children have access to clean water and sanitation facilities. To learn more about nutrition interventions, access our nutrition briefing at www.theirworld.org.

Vaccinations and disease prevention. Vaccinations and disease prevention are essential components of tackling deadly diseases. For example, measles vaccines have prevented nearly 15.6 million deaths since 2000, and tuberculosis prevention, diagnosis and treatment interventions have saved approximately 37 million lives⁹.

Routine check ups . Regular check-ups are an important intervention because they make it possible to spot health problems early.

Treatment of chronic and acute illness. Epidemics like HIV/ AIDS flourish where fear, discrimination and poverty limit people's access to health services¹⁰. Promoting public health education and preventative strategies, together with ensuring that every child has access to medical treatment despite their social or financial status is essential for the health of children.

Water and Sanitation. Around the world, 2.4 billion people lack access to fundamental sanitation services, such as toilets,¹¹ and as a result at least 1.8 billion people drink from water contaminated by fecal matter¹². Exposure to

unclean water, to food prepared in unsanitary conditions, or to poor hygiene practises can result in diarrhoea and other water-borne diseases and lead to dehydration and malnutrition. For these reasons, quality early childhood care programmes that provide access to clean drinking water, hand washing practises, toilet facilities and proper disposal of diapers can help children thrive.

Mental health services. Mental health services for both mothers and children are an essential part of providing quality early childhood care. In developing countries, 15.6% of women experience a mental disorder (primarily depression) when they are pregnant and 19.8% experience a mental disorder after they give birth¹³. In severe cases, mothers may even attempt suicide. Mentally ill mothers cannot provide children with necessary support, and this negatively affects children's development. Providing mental health services for mothers and pregnant women is an essential part of supporting the healthy development of children.

Mental health support for children is also very important. Serious or prolonged exposure in early childhood to high levels of stress from trauma, violence, neglect, or deprivation — called “toxic stress” — can inhibit the healthy development of brain architecture. Without the proper response to mitigate these effects, children who experience toxic stress are at serious risk for inadequate brain development and difficulties learning, concentrating, and regulating emotions. Toxic stress in early life also has a long-term impact, increasing the risk for illness such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, depression, and substance abuse, and affecting social behaviour and interpersonal relationships.¹⁴

What are the economic benefits of investing in early childhood health care?

In addition to the harm to individual children and families, poor healthcare and malnutrition can impact the economic progress of a country. For example:

- The 2016 Global Nutrition Report explains that inadequate nutrition costs Asia and Africa an average of 11% of GDP every year — “greater than the loss experienced during the 2008–2010 financial crisis.”¹⁵
- In the next 15 years, noncommunicable diseases alone will cost low- and middle-income countries more than \$7 trillion.¹⁶
- Further, the global costs of not breastfeeding are roughly \$230 billion each year in high-income countries and \$70 billion in low and middle-income countries.¹⁷

Conversely, countries who choose to invest in health see major economic benefit. According to the United Nations, “in the past decade, improvements in health and health care led to a 24 per cent increase in income growth in some of the poorest countries”.¹⁸

Additionally, early childhood programmes have been proven to be more effective and cost-efficient than later interventions aimed at reversing early disadvantages for adolescents or adults. Studies show that every \$1 invested in early childhood care and education can lead to a return of as much as \$17 for the most disadvantaged children¹⁹. Investing in children's health is essential to a sustainable future.

Action needed:

Every country must invest in quality care for all under fives, including protection, safe places to play, nutrition, health, and early learning opportunities, with special emphasis on the poorest, most marginalised, and vulnerable children, including those living in the midst of conflict and other humanitarian crisis.

#5for5 - the 5 crucial things every child under 5 needs for the best start in life.
Join the movement and stand up for kids who haven't mastered standing.

www.theirworld.org

Endnotes:

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