

#5for5 brief: Learning



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 learning and is part of a series of briefings examining the 5 key elements of quality nurturing care, available at theirworld.org.

What does early learning look like and why is it essential for healthy development?

Children begin learning the day they are born and the foundations of success in education – and later life - begin before a child has even set foot in primary school. Early learning is central to a child’s development, with participation in pre-primary education having a significant impact on a child’s future learning and life chances. For poor children – those most often missing out on pre-primary education - being denied early learning can limit the likelihood of enrolment in primary school, diminishes their ability to learn throughout school, and has a lasting negative impact on health and income in adult life.

From their very first day children are exposed to a range of different experiences and stimuli, learning from the world around them and through interactions with others. Learning occurs in multiple ways, including through play, as well as more structured interventions, enabling appropriate learning at different developmental stages. Pre-primary education, which is generally school-based and lead by qualified specialists, is a more structured form of learning that builds on the foundational skills learned in the first three years through play and other interactions.

Pre-primary education is the greatest levelling force, helping the most disadvantaged children get the best start in learning. In Mozambique, for instance, children in rural areas who had enrolled in pre-school were 24% more likely to enrol in primary school and show improved cognitive abilities and behavioural outcomes compared to children who had not (Martinez et al., 2012). A study from Argentina showed that the effect of having attended pre-school on test scores in the third grade was twice as large for children

coming from poorer households as compared to their non-poor counterparts (UNESCO, 2012). The 2012 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) found students from OECD countries who had been enrolled in more than one year of pre-primary schooling scored 53 points higher in mathematics at secondary level compared with students who had not attended pre-primary school. Not providing quality pre-primary education for the poorest children will perpetuate inequality, limiting their opportunity to escape the poverty that may have trapped their families for generations.

Do children around the world have access to early learning?

- 85% of children in low income countries do NOT have access to pre-primary education. Compare that with high-income countries, where 82% ARE in pre-primary schools.
- Lack of equitable access to pre-primary education means more than 200 million children under the age of five in developing countries are at risk of failing to reach their full potential.
- Where a child is born has a significant impact on their chance of early learning; a child born in the Latin America and Caribbean region is twice as likely to be enrolled in pre-primary education than if born in the Sub-Saharan Africa region.
- Even within countries, where a child lives can be a major factor. Pre-primary facilities in rural areas of many nations are often scarcer and of sub-standard quality compared to urban areas
- Despite its proven benefits, governments in low income countries are failing to support pre-primary education: Low income countries spend only \$7.99 a year on pre-primary education for each child – just two cents a day. That amounts to an average of only 2.9% of total education spending for low income countries, against a recommended 10% of the total education budget.
- Donors are also neglecting early learning, only 0.6% of total ODA (aid) to education was spent on pre-primary education between 2012 and 2015
- Pre-primary education receives the lowest per-capita amount per annum than any other education sector and rather than tackling inequity in education, governments and donors are perpetuating. Approximately 85% of the 46 low and lower middle income countries with data, spend a larger share of the total education budget on tertiary education than pre-primary education, despite only a minority of students ever reaching this level.

What actions must we take to ensure early learning for all children?

Caregiver Support. Support and learning opportunities for caregivers are critical, to help parents of all economic backgrounds and situations understand the importance of play and responsive communication and how they can best support the healthy early development and learning of their babies and toddlers.

Quality affordable childcare. In low-resource settings, where parents may work long hours and struggle just to provide for their children's basic physical needs, access to age-appropriate toys and the ability to prioritise learning through

play can be seriously limited.² These parents and caregivers need support and increased access to early years services, including access to quality, affordable childcare and early learning programmes.³

Universal access to pre-primary education. Access to pre-primary education directly impacts later learning, with research showing that the effect of having attended pre-school on test scores in the third grade was twice as large for children coming from poorer households as compared to their non-poor counterparts.⁴ Current trends suggest that 69% of school-aged children in low-income countries are not expected to learn basic primary level skills by 2030; the equivalent for middle income countries is 21%⁵ with the most disadvantaged disproportionately affected. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the poorest rural girls are seven times less likely to finish school than non-poor urban boys.⁶ Pre-primary education is critical for tackling the intertwined challenges of the learning crisis and inequality faced by many education systems - failure to invest in pre-primary education will make it impossible to meet the goal of Sustainable Goal for Education (SDG4) by 2030.

Between now and 2030, the cost to roll out universal and free pre-primary education in low and lower middle income countries is estimated at \$44 billion per annum. Current estimates on spending by governments and donors on pre-primary spending equate to just over \$11 billion. Financing recommendations presented below propose ways in which more and better resources are available to meet the financing needs to ensure universal access to pre-primary education by 2030. These recommendations are based on the Education Commission's call to for full public financing for two years of pre-primary education in all countries.

- National governments should increase the overall share of national resources for education and begin reorienting their education budgets to ensure two years of free pre-primary, with funding in place by 2020 to allocate at least 10% of their education budget to this sector.
- ODA resources (aid) to pre-primary education should increase in volume and sufficiently target resources to benefit the poorest, with at least 10% of all education ODA targeted to pre-primary, including in humanitarian crisis.
- All humanitarian response plans should include targets holistically addressing the needs of children ages 0-5, and Education Cannot Wait, the recently launched fund for education in emergencies, should prioritise pre-primary education and early cognitive support as part of initial emergency investments and long term strategy.
- Establish the International Finance Facility for Education (IFFEd) to increase overall available resources for education globally, and the IFFEd must mobilise, front-load and better target resources to pre-primary education.

What are the economic benefits of investing in early learning?

Investment in pre-primary education is staggeringly low, with low-income countries currently spending only US\$8.00 a year on pre-primary education for each child and only 1% of all donor aid to education going to pre-primary. These paltry amounts cannot deliver on the promises governments and their international partners have made to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all".⁷

Supporting a child's early learning is the best investment a government can make – for the child and for their country. Each dollar invested in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) can lead to a return as high as seventeen dollars for the most disadvantaged children⁸. 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, such as small class sizes, adult literacy and job training. Beyond the direct benefits in test scores, pre-primary education has been found to provide the foundations necessary for attaining basic skills necessary for good employment opportunities.

While it is never too late to improve the lives of disadvantaged children and adults, the earliest interventions have the greatest chances of long-term impact, and support for learning is an essential component of that investment⁹.

Action needed:

Every country must invest in quality care for all under fives, including nutrition and health, protection, safe places to play 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.

Governments and donors alike need to both increase and reorient their spending to support pre-primary education and allocate at least 10% of their education budget to this sector. Without it millions of children will fail to reach their full potential and education will perpetuate existing inequities in education and beyond.

#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

1. Zero to Three. (2014). When is the Brain Fully Developed?
2. Global Business Coalition for Education. 2016. "Opportunities for Impact: The Business Case for Early Childhood Development."
3. Ginsburg, Kenneth R. (2007). Op. cit.
4. Based on data from Argentina, UNESCO, 2012
5. Education Commission, 2016.
6. Rose, P., Sabates, R., Alcott, B and Ilie, S. (2016). Overcoming Inequalities Within Countries to Achieve Global Convergence in Learning. Background Paper for the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity
7. UN. (2015). Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. United Nations, New York.
8. CGECCD. (2013). The importance of early childhood development to education. Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, Prepared for the Global Meeting of the Thematic Consultation on Education in the Post-2015 Development Agenda, Dakar.
9. Heckman, James J. "The Case for Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children." Big Ideas for Children: Investing in our Nation's Future. (Pp. 51).