

#5for5 brief: Protection



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

What are the different components of protection and why are they essential for healthy development?

Child protection is an important component of ensuring healthy development for children ages 0 to 5 and helps guarantee that each child has the safe, nurturing environment essential to thriving during the early years. In addition to physical protection from abuse, neglect, violence, and poor quality childcare, young children also need psychological protection from toxic stress and traumatic experiences, as well as structural protection from exclusion and exploitation. Further, young children are exceptionally vulnerable during emergencies and disasters, during which the need for protection services becomes all the more pressing.

Physical Protection. Child protection includes guaranteeing that young children do not experience violence, abuse, or neglect from caretakers, or endure constant insecurity and violence in their surroundings. This means ensuring parents have access to affordable, high quality child care options; providing support, training, and information to parents about positive discipline and healthy early childhood development; and establishing Safe Spaces in emergency settings, where children are protected from direct and indirect physical threats.

Psychological Protection. Babies and toddlers need protection from the negative impacts of stress and trauma. 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 counter these effects, children who experience toxic stress are at serious risk for inadequate brain development and difficulties learning, concentrating, and regulating emotions. Toxic stress 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.² Young children living through emergency situations are particularly at risk for toxic stress and psychological trauma.

Structural Protection. Child protection also means ensuring each child is officially registered at birth and provided with official documents such as a birth certificate.³ Birth registration is an essential first step in guaranteeing a child's rights. Without a birth certificate, children may be unable to enrol in public schools, sit exams, or access free or subsidised health services.⁴ Birth registration offers legal protection and a documented record of a child's existence. This proof of age and nationality is a crucial barrier against numerous forms of child abuse and exploitation, including child labour, child marriage, child trafficking, and child recruitment into armed forces. It is also important for school enrolment. Finally, as an adult, lack of a birth certificate can prevent an individual from securing legal employment, opening a bank account, taking out credit, acquiring a passport, or inheriting property.⁵ Poor rates of birth registration are also problematic for governments, preventing accurate determinations of population size and birth rates and hindering precise planning and delivery of key services, such as health care, vaccinations, and education.⁶

Children around the world are not receiving adequate protection.

Children around the world, especially in low resource and violent communities are not receiving the protection they need:

- In emergency contexts — violence, conflict, natural disaster, epidemics — babies and very young children are especially vulnerable. In 2015 alone, UNICEF estimated that as many as 16 million babies were born into conflict settings⁷, and according to UNHCR, half of the world's refugees today are children⁸. After five years of war in Syria, 3.7 million children — or one in three of all Syrian children — have only ever known life in a violent conflict, and 306,000 Syrian babies were born as refugees⁹. In disasters caused by climate change, around 250,000 children under the age of five die each year.¹⁰
- An analysis of 53 low and middle income countries found that roughly 35 million children ages 0 to 5 were left alone or supervised by another child in the past week.¹¹
- A 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.¹²
- A study of data from 31 countries found that in more than half, over 80% of children ages 2 to 4 had experienced violent discipline.¹³
- Despite the fact that every child has the right to be registered at birth and to have a nationality, around the world nearly 1 in 4 children under the age of five has not been officially registered with their government.¹⁴ The statistics are even worse when looking only at the least developed countries, where more than half of children under age five have not been registered.¹⁵
- Children born in emergencies and disasters, particularly those who have

been displaced as refugees, face even greater difficulties in obtaining birth certificates. However, birth registration is even more essential in these contexts as birth certificates can be necessary for accessing humanitarian assistance and protecting children from statelessness.¹⁶ Proper identification is also key to reuniting families that have been separated or displaced.

How can we provide protection through quality early childhood care?

Quality childcare. Parents that have to work to provide for their families and do not have access to affordable, quality child care options are often forced to leave their young children alone, supervised only by other children, or in poor quality care. Even if they avoid accidental injury, studies have shown children who are routinely left unattended do less well at school and later on in life. Access to affordable quality care for all is therefore key to ensuring child protection and development.

Caregiver support. Violent discipline, including physical punishment and psychological aggression, are very common throughout the world. A study of 31 countries conducted in 2012 revealed that at least 80% of 2 to 4 year olds had experienced violent discipline in over half of the countries.¹⁷ Early childhood protection programmes should include parenting classes, information, and support on positive discipline methods and parenting techniques, child abuse and protection, and healthy early childhood development to give parents the tools to support their children and not resort to violent discipline. Health care workers and teachers can also be trained to look out for signs of neglect and abuse in young children.

Safe Spaces. Young children are especially vulnerable to physical dangers in emergency contexts, including direct physical threats from violence or natural disaster, indirect threats such as poor nutrition, and increased domestic violence. Safe Spaces can offer young children critical protection during a crisis, supporting their physical health and safety. To learn more about safe spaces, access our Safe Spaces report at theirworld.org.

Nurturing Relationships. The best protection against the ill effects of toxic stress on young children is a stable, nurturing relationship with a parent or other committed adult. These types of relationships buffer the effects of stress, protect healthy development, and foster resilience in young children. Early childhood initiatives can teach parents and caregivers how best to support their children's physical, mental and emotional development and how to help children cope with trauma and stress. In cases where parents are unable to provide this type of support themselves, early childhood centres can offer children the nurturing relationships needed to protect their healthy development.

Registration Support. Children are not registered at birth for a variety of different reasons. Parents may be unaware of the importance of having a birth certificate or how to obtain one. The process itself may be complex, time consuming, and costly, which can be a significant barrier, in particular for poor families. Registration may take place in a centralised location, far from rural families, and require a difficult, expensive, and even potentially dangerous journey. In some places, cultural or historical traditions around birth and

naming may discourage registration. Children from poor and marginalised groups, including ethnic minorities, migrants, and street children, are among the least likely to be registered.¹⁸ By making registration more available, we can reduce the chances of children falling victim to numerous forms of child abuse.

What are the economic benefits of investing in child protection?

Investing in quality early childhood care that protects children and supports important elements of their development is great for economies, and the earlier the investment in a child, the greater the long term economic return. 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. Early childhood programmes have also 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, and convict rehabilitation programmes. 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 protection is an essential component of that investment²⁰.

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.

Every humanitarian response plan must include targets explicit in addressing babies and children aged 0-5 years across all relevant sectors, especially education and protection in addition to nutrition, health and WASH. Plans must provide for essential early childhood services beyond physical support, in particular childcare, psychological support, and early learning programmes.

#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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