

# NURTURING CARE

## FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

A FRAMEWORK FOR HELPING CHILDREN **SURVIVE** AND  
**THRIVE** TO **TRANSFORM** HEALTH AND HUMAN POTENTIAL





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**THRIVE** TO **TRANSFORM** HEALTH AND HUMAN POTENTIAL



Nurturing care for early childhood development: a framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential

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# Foreword

What is one of the best ways a country can boost shared prosperity, promote inclusive economic growth, expand equitable opportunity, and end extreme poverty? The answer is simple: Invest in early childhood development.

Investing in early childhood development is good for everyone – governments, businesses, communities, parents and caregivers, and most of all, babies and young children. It is also the right thing to do, helping every child realize the right to survive and thrive. And investing in ECD is cost effective: For every \$1 spent on early childhood development interventions, the return on investment can be as high as \$13. Early childhood development is also key to upholding the right of every child to survive and thrive.

We now understand that the period from pregnancy to age 3 is the most critical, when the brain grows faster than at any other time; 80% of a baby's brain is formed by this age. For healthy brain development in these years, children need a safe, secure and loving environment, with the right nutrition and stimulation from their parents or caregivers. This is a window of opportunity to lay a foundation of health and wellbeing whose benefits last a lifetime – and carry into the next generation.

Meanwhile, the cost of inaction is high. Children who do not have the benefit of nurturing care in their earliest years are more likely to encounter learning difficulties in school, in turn reducing their future earnings and impacting the wellbeing and prosperity of their families and societies. Current estimates are that nearly 250 million children aged under five years in low- and

middle-income countries – or more than four in every ten – risk missing critical development milestones due to poverty or stunting.

The new Nurturing Care Framework draws on state-of-the-art evidence on how early childhood development unfolds to set out the most effective policies and services that will help parents and caregivers provide nurturing care for babies. It is designed to serve as a roadmap for action, helping mobilise a coalition of parents and caregivers, national governments, civil society groups, academics, the United Nations, the private sector, educational institutions and service providers to ensure that every baby gets the best start in life.

The Framework builds on the foundation of universal health coverage, with primary care at its core, as essential for all sustainable growth and development. It articulates the important role that all sectors, including the health sector, must play to support the healthy development of all children to develop optimally and reap maximum benefit from pre-school and formal education.

As we work together to realize the vision of the 2030 Goals to leave no one behind, we must act urgently now to make investing in early childhood development a priority in every country, every community and every family. On behalf of our organizations, we commit to be part of the movement to create an inclusive and sustainable world, starting with investment in the earliest years – to realize the right of each and every child to survive and thrive, to build a more sustainable future for all.

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Chair  
Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health



*If we change the beginning of the story,  
we change the whole story.<sup>1</sup>*

The Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health (2016-2030)<sup>2</sup> is at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>3</sup> Its vision is a world in which every woman, child and adolescent realizes their rights to health and well-being – both physical and mental. That is a world in which they have social and economic opportunities, and are able to participate fully in shaping prosperous and sustainable societies. And an essential part of this vision is that young children's human rights guarantee them the conditions they need to survive and thrive.<sup>4</sup>

**We know why this is important.** The period from pregnancy to age 3 is when children are most susceptible to environmental influences.<sup>5</sup> That period lays the foundation for health, well-being, learning and productivity throughout a person's whole life, and has an impact on the health and well-being of the next generation.<sup>6,7</sup>

**We know what threatens early childhood development.** The biggest threats are extreme poverty, insecurity, gender inequities, violence, environmental toxins, and poor mental health.<sup>6</sup> All of these things affect caregivers – by which we mean parents

**We know what children need to develop to their full potential.** They need nurturing care – the conditions that promote health, nutrition, security, safety, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning. Nurturing care is about children, their families and other caregivers, and the places where they interact.

**We know what strengthens families and caregivers' capacity to support young children's development.** An enabling environment is needed: policies, programmes and services that give families, parents and caregivers the knowledge and resources to provide nurturing care for young children. Community participation is a key part of this environment, which also needs to consider the diversity of children and families.

## A framework for nurturing care

The Nurturing Care Framework provides a roadmap for action. It builds on state-of-the-art evidence about how early childhood development unfolds and how it can be improved by policies and interventions.<sup>8</sup> It outlines:

- why efforts to improve health, well-being and human capital must begin in the earliest

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