

CLOSING THE GAP IN A GENERATION EXTRACTS ON THE IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN

*The Commission on the Social Determinants of Health released its report to the World Health Organization on 29 August 2008¹.
The following are extracts from that report*

Our children have dramatically different life chances depending on where they were born. It does not have to be this way and it is not right that it should be like this. Where systematic differences in health are judged to be avoidable by reasonable action they are, quite simply, unfair. Reducing health inequities is an ethical imperative. Social injustice is killing people on a grand scale.

Three principles of action:

1. Improve the conditions of daily life – the circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age.
2. Tackle the inequitable distribution of power, money, and resources – the structural drivers of those conditions of daily life – globally, nationally, and locally.
3. Measure the problem, evaluate action, expand the knowledge base, develop a workforce that is trained in the social determinants of health, and raise public awareness about the social determinants of health.

Equity from the start

Early child development (ECD) – including the physical, social/emotional, and language/cognitive domains – has a determining influence on subsequent life chances and health through skills development, education, and occupational opportunities. Through these mechanisms, and directly, early childhood influences subsequent risk of obesity, malnutrition, mental health problems, heart disease, and criminality. At least 200 million children globally are not achieving their full development potential. This has huge implications for their health and for society at large.

Evidence for action

Investment in the early years provides one of the greatest potentials to reduce health inequities within a generation. Experiences in early childhood (defined as prenatal development to eight years of age), and in early and later education, lay critical foundations for the entire lifecourse. The science of ECD shows that brain development is highly sensitive to external influences in early childhood, with lifelong effects. Good nutrition is crucial and begins *in utero* with adequately nourished mothers. Mothers and children need a continuum of care from pre-pregnancy, through pregnancy and childbirth, to the early days and years of life. Children need safe, healthy, supporting, nurturing, caring, and responsive living environments. Preschool educational programmes and schools, as part of the wider environment

¹ CSDH (2008). *Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health. Final Report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health*. Geneva, World Health Organization.

that contributes to the development of children, can have a vital role in building children's capabilities. A more comprehensive approach to early life is needed, building on existing child survival programmes and extending interventions in early life to include social/emotional and language/cognitive development.

What must be done

A comprehensive approach to the early years in life requires policy coherence, commitment, and leadership at the international and national level. It also requires a comprehensive package of ECD and education programmes and services for all children worldwide.

Commit to and implement a comprehensive approach to early life, building on existing child survival programmes and extending interventions in early life to include social/emotional and language/cognitive development.

- Set up an interagency mechanism to ensure policy coherence for early child development such that, across agencies, a comprehensive approach to early child development is acted on.
- Make sure that all children, mothers, and other caregivers are covered by a comprehensive package of quality early child development programmes and services, regardless of ability to pay.

Expand the provision and scope of education to include the principles of early child development (physical, social/emotional, and language/cognitive development).

- Provide quality compulsory primary and secondary education for all boys and girls, regardless of ability to pay. Identify and address the barriers to girls and boys enrolling and staying in school and abolish user fees for primary school.

Achieving health equity within a generation is achievable, it is the right thing to do, and now is the right time to do it.

Reducing health inequities is an ethical imperative. Social injustice is killing people on a grand scale.

These extracts from *Closing the Gap in a Generation* have been brought to you by the Public Health Association of New Zealand. www.pha.org.nz



EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT: A POWERFUL EQUALIZER

This is a copy of the text of the political briefing from Early Child Development: a Powerful Equalizer (Final report for the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Determinants of Health²)

The early years of life are crucial in influencing a range of health and social outcomes across the lifecourse. Research now shows that many challenges in adult society — mental health problems, obesity/stunting, heart disease, criminality, competence in literacy and numeracy — have their roots in early childhood.

Economists now assert on the basis of the available evidence that investment in early childhood is the most powerful investment a country can make, with returns over the lifecourse many times the amount of the original investment. Governments can make major and sustained improvements in society by implementing policies that take note of this powerful body of research while, at the same time, fulfilling their obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Research now shows that children's early environment has a vital impact on the way their brains develop. A baby is born with billions of brain cells that represent lifelong potential, but, to develop, these brain cells need to connect with each other. The more stimulating the early environment (social interaction), the more positive connections are formed in the brain and the better the child thrives in all aspects of his or her life, in terms of physical development, emotional and social development, and the ability to express themselves and acquire knowledge.

We know what kinds of environments promote early child health and development. While nutrition and physical growth are basic, young children also need to spend their time in caring, responsive environments that protect them from inappropriate disapproval and punishment.

They need opportunities to explore their world, to play, and to learn how to speak and listen to others. *Parents and other caregivers want to provide these opportunities for their children, but they need support from community and government at all levels.* For example, children benefit when national governments adopt "family-friendly" social protection policies that guarantee adequate income for all, maternity benefits, financial support for the ultra-poor, and allow parents and caregivers to effectively balance their time spent at home and work. *Despite this knowledge, it is estimated that at least 200 million children in developing countries alone are not reaching their full potential.*

Political leaders can play an important role in guaranteeing universal access to a range of early child development services: parenting and caregiver support, quality childcare, primary healthcare, nutrition, education, and social protection. In the early years, the health care system has a pivotal role to play, as it is the point of first contact and can serve as a gateway to other early childhood services. To be

² Irwin LG, Siddiqi A, Hertzman C. (2007). *Early Child Development: A powerful equalizer*. Final report for the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Determinants of Health. http://www.who.int/social_determinants/resources/ecd_kn_final_report_072007.pdf accessed 2 September 2008

effective, services at all levels need to be better coordinated and to converge at the family and local community in a way that puts the child at the centre.

These kinds of family-friendly policies and practices clearly benefit children and families, but they also result in economic benefits to the larger society. Globally, those societies that invest in children and families in the early years – rich or poor – have the most literate and numerate populations. These are the societies that have the best health status and lowest levels of health inequality in the world.

Success in promoting early child development does not depend upon a society being wealthy. Because early child development programs rely primarily on the skills of caregivers, the cost of effective programs varies with the wage structure of a society. Regardless of their level of wealth, societies can make progress on early child development by allocating as little as \$1.00 in this area for every \$10.00 spent on health and education.

Child Survival and Child Health agendas are indivisible from Early Child Development. That is, taking a developmental perspective on the early years provides an overarching framework of understanding that subsumes issues of survival and health. A healthy start in life gives each child an equal chance to thrive and grow into an adult who makes a positive contribution to the community – economically and socially.

This extract from *Early Child Development: A Powerful Equalizer* has been brought to you by the Public Health Association of New Zealand. www.pha.org.nz



Some illustrations of inequities for children in our own area are:

1. An infant in NZ can expect to live eight years longer than one in Tonga, Niue or the Cook Islands.
2. A mother in Samoa can expect four times the risk that her baby will die before they reach age five compared with Australia or New Zealand; whereas a mother in Tuvalu can expect more than eight times the risk.
3. A baby living in Kohimarama, Roseneath or Bryndwr can expect to live about eight years longer than a baby in Glen Innes, Levin, Naenae or Linwood.