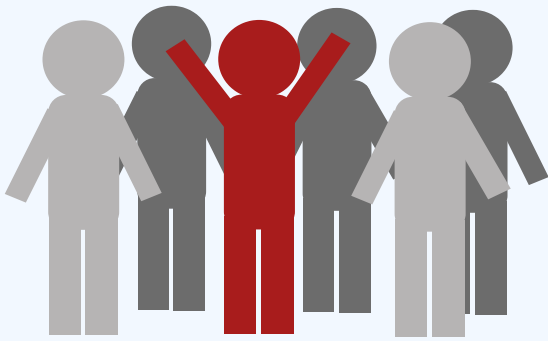


A pathway of opportunity and growth for all children

Why it Matters?



According to the 2022 UNESCO data, **244 million children and youth worldwide between the ages of 6-18 were unable to attend school in 2021** (UIS, 2022). This staggering number can often be a result of early exposure to adversity, lack of parental support, family cycle of poverty and illiteracy, or lack of adequate schooling opportunities. Although we tend to associate those issues with low resource countries, the detrimental effects of adversity on educational outcomes are not isolated problems. **Illiteracy costs the global economy \$1.9 trillion dollars annually and generates socio-economic issues related to job productivity, limited employability, health, crime, welfare and education** (WLF, 2023). Amongst low-income and middle-income countries, **increasing preschool enrollment rates to only 25% could already generate an estimated \$10.6 billion** (of future labor market productivity) with a benefit-to-cost ratio of 17:6 (Engle et al., 2011). As part of international cooperation, addressing those needs in developing countries is absolutely essential for promoting healthy developmental outcomes in children, reducing disparity and establishing safe, secure environments that allow youth to grow and flourish.

Young children go through intensive stages of development and therefore, require **support that integrates health, nutrition, education, care and protection** (Huebner et al., 2016). **During the first 1000 days of life a child's brain undergoes rapid development**, gains complexity and has the most plasticity, which makes it adapt to input from the environment. The dynamic interactions between the child and their environment, including nutrition and caregiver-child relationships, can shape brain development and provide a foundation for future learning, behavior and health. To ensure that all children reach their fullest developmental potential, intervention programs need to both focus on preventative care with regards to health and nutrition, as well as build children's resilience within family, school and community contexts.

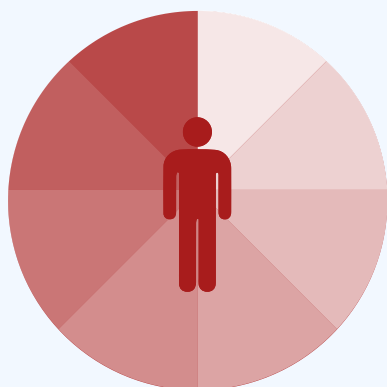
Recent research has highlighted the **need to consider all aspects that contribute to children's wellbeing holistically, with regard to the complexity of developmental processes, transactional dynamics between different social-ecological levels and the heterogeneity of developmental outcomes** (Cassen, Feinstein & Graham, 2009). Such an approach can help us understand how different environmental factors, such as socioeconomic status, parenting, schooling, or nutrition, all interact with each other and influence child development. Future interventions should focus on integrating social emotional learning, family and peer dynamics, education, and nutrition in order to effectively foster healthy development and promote child well-being.

Importance of Early Intervention



Whole Child Development

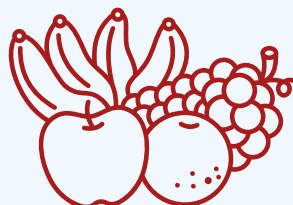
The whole child development framework is an integrative approach that addresses all core needs of child development - social, emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual and creative - in order to give each child an opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential (GC-DWC, 2020). Investing in those areas early on is significantly **more effective than intervening at an older age and can help reduce long-term effects of exposure to poverty, violence and adversity** (Carneiro & Heckman, 2003). Currently, much of the U.S. government funding goes towards **siloed approaches, which are limited in its scope and fail to encompass the multidimensional nature of child development**. Such programs tend to be tunneled in their vision - they often focus on short-term quantifiable outcomes (e.g. reducing child mortality rates) without considering long-term needs of the children, such as keeping them in school or improving their physical health (Huebner et al., 2016). Therefore, there is a growing need for sustainable programs that effectively address the needs of all vulnerable children, rather than categorize and further divide them according to their risks and vulnerabilities (Boothby et al., 2012).



Holistic Approach = Long-term Effects



Health



Nutrition



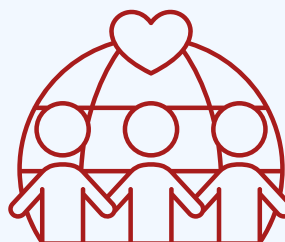
Family



School



Protection & Care



Community

Case Study 1

One example of a program grounded in the whole child development framework is the community-driven **L3 program in Haiti**, implemented by the Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child at University of Notre Dame. The program targeted three social ecological settings that children in Haiti have most contact with - **home, school and church** - and targeted children's holistic needs across those three domains. In order to address children's physical and emotional needs GC-DWC collaborated with community members to develop training sessions that would **facilitate positive parenting practices, such as providing consistent and responsive care, positive discipline, playful learning and healthy nutrition**. The initiative also promoted **SEL-based activities at schools** and trained teachers on a variety of practices that could promote healthy development in classrooms. Some of the main areas of focus included play based learning, classroom assessment and management, and active engagement activities like reading aloud. The program also worked closely with local parishes to integrate whole child development conversations into **baptism training**. The program was evaluated using the QuIP method, which made it possible to see the causal relationships between the different areas of focus that were addressed. The majority of parents and teachers found the L3 training to be an informative initiative that helped them be more supportive of their children's developmental needs. Two thirds of the participating parents reported that they stopped beating their children after the training. A majority of the parents also identified positive nutrition changes and a general improvement in their family well-being as a result of parent training. Teachers noted an increase in their knowledge regarding whole child development and learning, engaging in play-based learning with the children, and iterating the SEL framework into their classroom activities (GC-WCD, 2023).

This program shows a **direct causal link between trainings grounded in the whole child development perspective and an increase in parents' awareness regarding positive parenting practices and healthy child development**. Additionally, it informs school practices and by changing teachers' beliefs about effective classroom strategies, it ensures children will be supported not only in their home environments, but also in educational settings. The evidence provided by this initiative shows that in order to guarantee children's long-term growth and success, in low resource contexts, such as Haiti, it is essential to develop interventions that support children's needs across all levels of the ecosystem.

Case Study 2

Another example of a holistic WCD-grounded initiative is the **ASTUTE program** implemented in Tanzania. The intervention was designed with special consideration to the specific needs of the region and primarily focused on **improving child and maternal nutrition and promoting positive parent-child interactions and practices**. Some of the main areas of focus included: maternal health and nutrition; exclusive breastfeeding for children 0-6 months; complementary feeding for children 6-23 months; talking, singing and playing with children right from birth; water, sanitation and hygiene practices; and diarrhea treatment. The program was delivered through a series of home visits, support groups, community mobilization initiatives and broadcasting.

The results showed a significant increase in the number of mothers who ate more food during their last pregnancy and attended antenatal care. Women reported working less during pregnancy, but also receiving more support from their partners, especially if they were exposed to the campaign content. Mothers who listened to the radio campaign were more likely to have a diverse diet during pregnancy and engage with their children in early childhood development activities. Fathers exposed to the campaign showed increased engagement with their children and gained knowledge about maternal health. Overall, **ASTUTE is an example of an effective community-grounded initiative, which integrated key child development areas related to health, nutrition, safety and parenting practices, to facilitate positive changes** in behaviors known to contribute to healthy development and well-being of children and their caregivers.

What can DG DEVCO do moving forwards?



Invest in programs that are informed by the whole child development framework

The presented programs show clear evidence of the effectiveness of WDC approaches. Early investments in WDC programs are more cost-effective in the long run as they can spark positive developmental cascades and can lead to greater school readiness and socioeconomic attainment, ultimately benefiting people not only at an individual level, but also societies as a whole (Carneiro & Heckman, 2003; Huebner et al., 2016). In order to fully address the developmental needs of each child, it is critical that funding is directed towards initiatives that go beyond the tunneled vision and focus on long-term outcomes.



Direct funding towards adequate resources that ensure children have access to educational opportunities

In low resource settings it is particularly important that funding is allocated with the consideration of cultural contexts and needs of the community. By working closely with local schools, funding could be directed towards new training, monitoring programs and professional development opportunities for teachers to improve the quality of schooling. Additionally, programs should ensure that students have access to appropriate supplies, textbooks and resources in their languages. Because the barriers to completing school often stem from home environments, new initiatives should focus on revising existing curricula and including parents in the conversation by designing adult literacy programs and trainings that could incentivize parents to overcome negative attitudes towards schooling. Such holistic interventions would address children's educational needs both at a home and school level, improve school attendance and reduce attrition.

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