

Discussion

1. What, in your opinion, is the most important impact of policies on early childhood development?

Some examples:

Process and policy

- Availability of early education and care systems
- Child rights approaches
- Good relations with education and social sectors
- Parental leave (maternity or paternity leave)
- Structured parenting programmes

Outcomes

- Closing the inequality gap
- Improved adult health later in life
- Improved antenatal and perinatal care
- Improved rates of exclusive breastfeeding
- Reduced health systems costs over time

2. Define the **one** key action you would initiate as a first step.



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Ministerial lunch: The effects of investing in early childhood development

Tuesday, 16 September 2014
12:30, Lounge Area 1

World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe

UN City, Marmorvej 51, DK-2100 Copenhagen Ø, Denmark

Telephone: +45 45 33 70 00 . Fax: +45 45 33 70 01

E-mail: governance@euro.who.int

Web: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/who-we-are/governance>

The effects of investing in early childhood development

Research has shown the critical importance of a good start in life for lifelong outcomes, including good health. The brain architecture is established early in life, through dynamic interactions between genetic and environmental influences; social policy and action can affect the latter. While health services have the main responsibility for ensuring health in pregnancy and safe births, social determinants have effects even at this early stage, including diet before and during pregnancy, smoking during pregnancy and early parenthood, poor housing and poverty.

Whether children do well or less well depends on their biological endowments and the context in which they grow up. A strong correlation exists between the nurturant context in childhood and socioeconomic status: children from poorer backgrounds are likely to grow up in environments that provide fewer opportunities and lead to poorer child outcomes and reduced life chances.

Child maltreatment is a hidden form of violence, and evidence shows that its prevalence is unacceptably high in the European Region. Child maltreatment is one of the more serious forms of adverse childhood experiences and may co-occur with household dysfunction, such as parental alcohol and drug misuse, mental illness among family members, violence between parents, parental separation or divorce, and imprisonment of a family member. Safe, stable, nurturing relationships with parents and other caregivers are central to a child's healthy development. Lack of safe, stable, nurturing relationships in childhood can cause stress, which can disrupt early brain development. Consequently, children exposed to maltreatment are at increased risk for behavioural, physical and mental health problems in adulthood, such as perpetrating or being a victim of violence, depression, smoking, obesity, high-risk sexual behaviour, unintended pregnancy and alcohol and drug misuse.

Child maltreatment has not only health and social consequences but also an economic impact, which includes the costs of hospitalization, mental health treatment, child welfare and longer-term health costs. Prevention programmes to stop maltreatment from

occurring in the first place and to reduce children's exposure to other adverse childhood experiences can therefore have wide-ranging public health benefits.

Inequalities associated with socioeconomic status form a gradient: children in the highest quintile do the best, those in the next quintile a bit less well, and so on. The problem is not, however, just that of the very poorest children; the context is by no means determinant. Many children from poor backgrounds beat the odds and grow into productive, healthy adults, perhaps by their own personal agency or because of protective factors within the family and/or community.

Countries vary widely in the provision of support at very early stages of life. The best systems are characterized by personalized, continuous support during pregnancy, a choice of birth arrangements, postnatal support and advice, and paid parental leave for mothers and fathers. Countries also differ in the provision of early childhood care and education before statutory school age. An ideal system provides high-quality, affordable, accessible child care that is sufficiently flexible to enable either parent to return to work. Evidence suggests that children over two years benefit from spending some time each week in stimulating, high-quality group care, which also helps to ensure that children from poorer backgrounds gain more. This is an important poverty-reduction strategy, enabling parental employment and increasing family income. Ideal provision includes multiple use of child care centres, including provision of advice and support on parenting, health and diet, and wider community use.

In brief:

Investing in early childhood is one of the most effective ways of improving children's health, as well as health in later years, with beneficial developmental and social outcomes. Action taken early in childhood can ensure that children reach their full potential. Health systems have a critical role to play in ensuring a level playing field to help children reach their full potential as they embark on the journey through the life-course. It is a sure way of reducing health and social inequalities.