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Technical briefing on investing in early childhood development

Wednesday, 13 September 2017

13:00–14:30, Bartók

Background

Why invest in early childhood development?

1. With child mortality declining globally, more attention has been focused on the development of children. This is evidenced by the inclusion of early childhood development in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically target 4.2.
2. Globally, 43% of children under five years of age – an estimated 250 million children – are at risk of suboptimal development due to poverty and stunting. Risks to early childhood development remain high also in developed countries due to social inequity, poverty, neglect and lack of developmental stimulation and opportunities. Consequences of a poor start in life can lead to poor health, nutritional deficiencies and inadequate learning, resulting in low adult earnings and increased social inequalities and tensions. Thus, the impact of early childhood development continues into adulthood and may even extend to the next generation. Due to this poor start, affected individuals are estimated to suffer a loss of about 25% of the average adult income per year, while countries may forfeit up to twice their current gross domestic product expenditures on health and education. The burden and cost of inaction is high.
3. Young children need nurturing care from the start. Early childhood is not only a period of special sensitivity to risk factors, but also a critical window of opportunity for benefits of early interventions and reducing negative risk effects. Initially, young children receive warm and nurturing care from parents, other family members, caregivers and community-based services, which means a stable and stimulating environment to promote children's health and nutrition, opportunities for early learning and protection from threats. Adverse childhood experiences due to maltreatment and household dysfunction can impair the full developmental potential of the child. Families need support to care for and provide warm and nurturing environments for young children, including material and financial resources, family support policies at the national level and the provision of multisectoral services in health, nutrition, education, and child and social protection.

4. The health sector plays an important role in promoting, providing counselling, monitoring children's development, supporting parents to protect children from harm, responding to needs and concerns, and providing investigations and remedial action where there are concerns about a deviation from good healthy development.

What governments and civil society can do?

5. Promoting health and well-being across the life-course requires interventions provided by multiple sectors and a supportive framework of policies, cross-sectoral coordination and financing. Government leadership and political prioritization are prerequisites. It is also a matter of equity: uptake of interventions that support early childhood development is almost always higher for those who are better off.

6. Multisectoral interventions, with health services as an entry point, are particularly well placed to reach children early with services that support families to deliver nurturing care and to promote, protect and support early childhood development. Interventions that promote nurturing care can feasibly build on existing health, developmental and nutrition services.

7. Families' ability to provide nurturing care for their children can be strengthened through quality health services and transdisciplinary cooperation with other sectors, such as social services and education, that provide antenatal care, health, nutrition, child developmental assessment and advice, and immunization services. Health services may provide counselling and training for parents with key interventions to optimize the stimulation of children, such as the Care for Child Development and Parenting initiative for life-long health.

8. Parent support programmes that promote positive parenting and nurturing care, particularly those that include behaviour change techniques, can substantially amplify the positive effects that basic health, developmental, nutrition, education and protection interventions have on early childhood development. Coordination with the education sector is needed to promote learning and with social services and child protection sectors to reach the most vulnerable populations. Such programmes require proportionate universalism in order to ensure access to sections of the population that are difficult to reach.

9. Services and interventions to support early childhood development and to assist parents in protecting children from harm are essential to ensure that each child reaches his or her potential through the life-course and into the next generation – a vision that is core to the SDGs.

***Intersectoral Development of Early Childhood Intervention:
the Hungarian approach to early childhood development***

10. Early periods of life require special attention. Some risks and disorders can be identified at very early stages of life that can have an essential influence on the quality of life in both child and adulthood. Developmental delays can often be corrected before they lead to severe problems through appropriate development, therapies and targeted socialization. The aim of early childhood intervention is the earliest possible recognition and professional treatment of such disorders as well as providing help and support to affected families.

11. The Hungarian Government prioritizes the detection of early development disorders. However, some children and their families encounter difficulties in accessing the proper services or in matching the individual child's needs with appropriate services available in the system. The Hungarian Ministry of Human Capacities has launched a new programme aimed at providing solutions to these challenges.

12. The main goal of the Intersectoral Development of Early Childhood Intervention programme is to improve the provision of services for pre-school children and their families. The programme focuses on helping families with children who need special attention and early intervention. The overall aim is to follow the path of a typical child in the system, which conform with existing regulations and protocols. The focus is to produce a detailed description of the child's trajectory through the institutional system from the prenatal and perinatal periods throughout the development phase after birth until the child enters the education system. The programme includes all stakeholders engaged in service provision at each respective phase of development, as well as the roles and connections among them, which are defined by the relevant legal instruments currently in force.

13. The programme focuses on improving the effectiveness of the work and the interdisciplinary cooperation of experts in the field of early childhood intervention: special needs teachers; psychologists; nursery governesses; kindergarten teachers; social workers; health visitors; paediatricians and general practitioners. The programme also aims to achieve a high-quality service by improving methodology, education and information technology. The programme assists parents by developing their parenting skills and supporting them to be more competent and aware of their parental role from the earliest stages of life.

Objectives

14. The objectives of the technical briefing are:

- to share the Hungarian experience and other country experiences of early childhood development interventions; and
- to share the work of WHO in the area of early childhood development in the context of the SDGs, Health 2020, and the implementation by Member States of Investing in Children: the European Child and Adolescent Health Strategy and the European Child Maltreatment Prevention Action Plan adopted by the 64th session of the Regional Committee for Europe in September 2014.

Expected outcomes

15. The scope and purpose of the technical briefing is to share the experiences of promoting early childhood development at the country level and to report on regional and global developments supported by WHO in this area.

16. In a report to the Seventieth World Health Assembly for agenda item 16.3 (Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health (2016–2030): adolescents' health), the WHO Secretariat had proposed that early childhood development should feature in a future report on implementation of the Global Strategy to the Executive Board, and should explore what needs to be done in this area. The technical briefing will report on recent developments.

Provisional programme

Time	Topic	Chair/speaker
5 minutes	Welcome and introduction by the Chair	Katalin Novák Secretary of State, Hungary
5 minutes	Early childhood development in the life-course and in the Sustainable Development Goals	Dr Gauden Galea WHO Regional Office for Europe Director, Division of Noncommunicable Diseases and Promoting Health through the Life-course
10 minutes	Early childhood interventions: the European situation	Professor Dr Manfred Pretis Hamburg, Germany
20 minutes	Current status of early childhood interventions in Hungary: need-oriented findings and developments at the cross-sectoral level	Dr Barbara Czeizel Hungary
10 minutes	Early childhood development: the concept of nurturing care and global WHO approaches	Dr Bernadette Daelmans WHO headquarters Coordinator, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health
35 minutes	Interventions by Member States, followed by discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developmental screening: how much is adequate, or are we over-medicalizing variations of normal development? • Pre-school education: too much of a formal thing? • Astrid Lindgren's Emil (Michel) from Lönneberga: are children deprived of free play and are we hindering their creativity? 	
5 minutes	Summary	Dr Martin Weber WHO Regional Office for Europe Programme Manager, Child and Adolescent Health and Development

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