



Until we are all equal



Plan International

# Early Childhood Development



A snapshot of our evidence from 2024

Through our global strategy *All Girls Standing Strong*, Plan International works in over 80 countries and focuses programming in six priority thematic areas, as well as responding to humanitarian emergencies.

At the end of 2024, we reviewed the evidence available from projects and countries working in each thematic area – covering evaluations and results, key internal and external research and annual reporting metrics. This short snapshot summarises some of the insights from our evidence this year in early childhood development (with a particular focus on the areas of parenting and early learning) and what we can learn from it.

For Plan International, our work in early childhood development centres on ensuring that all young children grow up well cared for and equally valued. Core focus areas include:

- Gender responsive parenting and caregiving
- Maternal, newborn and child health and nutrition
- Sanitation and hygiene
- Early learning

Learn more about our work [here](#).



## Key insights



- **There remains a critical need to support the youngest children.** Inequalities start early, with children growing up in the poorest households and in rural areas further behind. In countries with data, 30 per cent of children are not developmentally on track. Global public spending on children is both too little and too late in their life course.
- **The home and family environment play a critical role in addressing inequalities in young children’s development.** Parenting interventions are effective, and the evidence shows that including fathers and other male caregivers has potential to improve maternal and paternal caregiving, couple relationships dynamics and early child outcomes. We need to continue to build awareness and buy-in among parents, caregivers, and communities for the role of play in education, in order to address entrenched views and social norms.
- **Evaluations of our programming this year have demonstrated the value of involving both male and female caregivers in terms of building understanding around child development, nurturing care and creating a positive home environment.** Projects are using an explicit gender lens at project design and deploying multi-pronged strategies, with key enablers including the collaboration between facility-based and community-based stakeholders to reinforce messaging and combining educational interventions with practical support such as linkages to health services or nutrition interventions.
- **Findings also reinforced the critical role of the wider family, community leaders, religious leaders and other community structures in taking a lead in facilitating men’s involvement.** These actors have a key role to play in terms of promoting positive parenting and the shared responsibilities that are essential for children’s holistic development.
- **We need to continue to increase the focus on combatting broader gender stereotypes.** Norms and stereotypes persist, including on roles and responsibilities for domestic work and decision making. We need to continue to advocate with donors and partners for longer term programming that facilitates progress in shifting deep-seated norms and attitudes.

# 2024

## figures at a glance

### Our global footprint in early childhood development



A better start in life for **8.6 million girls.**

(Annual reporting, July 2023 to June 2024)



**29.9 million** children and adults reached with early childhood development programmes.

### Men’s engagement in nurturing care

**82%**

of fathers and male caregivers we spoke to reported that they had engaged in at least two nurturing care tasks equally or more often than their female partners in the last month.



(Monitoring data from 337 participants in 4 projects)

### Advocacy in early childhood development

**35 influencing successes** included early childhood development as a cross-cutting theme, including:



**12 changes** or developments in laws, policies, regulations, or guidelines.



**5 wins** in promoting the implementation of existing laws, policies, regulations or guidelines.



**7 advances** in the adoption, replication or scaling up of programme models by duty bearers or collaborators.

(Annual reporting against our Global Advocacy Strategy, July 2023 to June 2024)



## What are some of the key issues? Selected findings from research

**There remains a critical need to support the youngest children.** In countries with data, 30 per cent of children are not developmentally on track.<sup>1</sup> Inequalities start early, with children growing up in the poorest households and in rural areas further behind. Global public spending on children is both too little and too late in their life course. Although development aid for pre-primary education has risen in recent years, it still remains a small share of overall education aid, at 1.7 per cent of total direct aid to education in 2022.<sup>2</sup>

**Children who attend early childhood education are more likely to be on track developmentally, but real progress on supporting equitable access to quality early childhood care and education remains elusive.** Achieving Sustainable Development Goal Target 4.2 by 2030 is off track; the enrolment rate for one year of organized learning before the start of primary school fell to 72 per cent in 2022 from 75 per cent in 2020.

“**Society might misinterpret the word ‘play’ and not understand that it can be a teaching tool. So, creating awareness in society is necessary.**”

Teacher, Ethiopia

Early learning remains under prioritised in emergencies.<sup>3</sup> Research conducted as part of our partnership in *Play Matters* also highlights the need to continue to build awareness and buy-in among parents, caregivers, and communities for the role of play in education, in order to address entrenched views and social norms.

**The home and family environment play a critical role in addressing inequalities in young children’s development.** In countries with data, more than 7 out of 10 children living in the richest households receive early stimulation and responsive care compared to less than half of those living in the poorest households.<sup>4</sup> Parenting interventions are effective, and we know

from evidence that including fathers and other male caregivers has potential to improve maternal and paternal caregiving, couple relationships dynamics and early child outcomes.<sup>5,6</sup> Analysis of 47 lower and middle income countries found young children were more likely to receive stimulating care from their mothers than their fathers. On average, 34.7 per cent of young children received four or more stimulating activities from their mothers compared to only 14.1 per cent from their fathers. The results also showed that gender stratification in a society influences the proportion of children whose mothers/fathers were engaged in stimulating activities.<sup>7</sup>

**Girls and women still face an undue burden of care work.** Girls’ unpaid care work has been an area of enquiry for Plan International’s *Real Choices, Real Lives* study since the cohort girls were five years old and demonstrates the critical importance of the early years in inducting girls into gender norms, attitudes and behaviours that will shape their decision-making and opportunities throughout their childhood and adolescence. This year’s report – *Out of Time: The Gendered Care Divide and its Impact on Girls* – revealed that care work in the girls’ homes was typically divided along gendered lines as the girls were growing up, and they were taught from an early age that doing this work is a ‘natural’ part of being a girl. Fast forward to 2024 and the girls now have very high levels of care responsibilities, which interferes with the time that they have available to complete their education, develop skills for their futures, build social networks, and enjoy leisure time.

“**My brother doesn’t do the housework because there are so many of us girls in the house.**”

Alice, 17, Benin



Girls play at child friendly space set up in an IDP camp in Somali region ©Plan International

<sup>1</sup>UNICEF. 2024. Global Report on Early Childhood Care and Education: The Right to a Strong Foundation.

<sup>2</sup>ibid

<sup>3</sup>Moving Minds Alliance. 2023. Born Learning: Expanding learning opportunities for the youngest children in crisis settings.

<sup>4</sup>UNICEF. 2024. Global Report on Early Childhood Care and Education: The Right to a Strong Foundation.

<sup>5</sup>Cuatas, J et al. 2023. Family play, reading, and other stimulation and early childhood development in five low-and-middle-income countries. *Developmental Science*, Vol. 26, No. 6, e13404.

<sup>6</sup>Jeong, J., Sullivan, E.F. and McCann, J.K. 2023. Effectiveness of father-inclusive interventions on maternal, paternal, couples, and early child outcomes in low- and middle-income countries: A systematic review. *Social Science & Medicine*, Volume 328

<sup>7</sup>Kitamura, K., Cappa, C., Petrowski, N. et al. 2023. Gender Stratification and Parental Stimulation of Children: Exploring Differences in Maternal and Paternal Practices. *J Child Fam Stud* 32, 1411–1424.



## What have we learned? Selected findings from evaluations

**We reviewed 13 evaluations of Plan's early childhood development programming this year, covering 15 countries in four regions.**

**Across various projects, interventions have shown involvement of both parents and caregivers contributing to positive trends in understanding (and in some cases practice) around child development, nurturing care and creating a positive home environment.** Projects are using an explicit gender lens at project design and deploying multi-pronged strategies, including with a specific focus on the engagement of men in nurturing care. Key enablers were identified as the collaboration between facility-based and community-based stakeholders to reinforce messaging, engagement of wider family, and combining educational interventions with practical support such as linkages to health services or nutrition interventions. For example:

- In **Bangladesh**, at the end of a project, high proportions of parents and caregivers demonstrated an understanding of key development milestones or could describe nurturing care practices. Fathers demonstrated increased contributions to childcare and household duties, as well as dedicating time to playing with children. During discussions, women expressed that men were more engaged in their children's development, recognising the importance of providing nurturing care and a healthy environment to support their children's physical and mental growth. The project used a diverse range of strategies to promote these gains, including video shows, billboards, songs and theatre, as well as Fathers' and Grandparents' Cafes and training, and engagement of local religious leaders.
- In **Tanzania**, the LEARN Plus programme incorporated six parenting sessions as part of a 12-week school preparedness intervention, and positively impacted parental engagement in supporting early education at home. At the midpoint of the project, children that were part of the intervention were significantly more likely to

have had an adult engage with them in activities such as reading, storytelling, and playing, all of which are important for early learning.

- Over the course of a multi-country *Joining Forces for Africa* programme, there were decreases in the proportion of parents believing that physical punishment is necessary to bring up, raise and educate children. The project deployed parenting skills sessions with over 34000 parents and caregivers, through approaches such as Parenting without Violence.

**Findings also reinforce the critical role of the wider family, community leaders, religious leaders and other community structures.** These groups are key actors who can take a lead in facilitating men's involvement and influencing positive parenting, in terms of promoting shared parenting responsibilities that are essential for children's holistic development. For example, during projects in Bangladesh and Senegal, evidence showed that increased support from extended family members such as male family members like uncles, brothers, and grandfathers played a pivotal role in helping new mothers to cope positively with infant care, through a collective approach to the well-being of newborns and their mothers.

**Projects focusing on maternal, newborn and child health and nutrition have seen improvements in many metrics around healthcare-seeking behaviour and knowledge around good practices for maternal and child health.** For example, in Guatemala, there were increases in knowledge around good feeding practices and attendance at health services for children under five, and results indicated that most mothers believed their children under five had adequate weight and height. Cash-based interventions have been deployed, and valued by recipients, in meeting needs for food during crises. Good practices include linking cash transfers with other support services, such as health and education,

to ensure a comprehensive approach to household well-being and child development. However, evaluations also highlighted the barriers that remain – notably, persistent cultural beliefs, gender norms and challenges with the quality and accessibility of maternal, newborn and child health services, particularly for rural and harder-to-reach communities.

**Multisectoral interventions are highly relevant and valued in responding to the diverse and interlinked needs of communities.** Various programmes have designed interventions to encompass a range of interventions and services, including parenting support, food security, nutrition supplementation, healthcare, protection and early education. This strategy worked well in holistic support, strengthening families and community systems. Evaluations also identified the central role of comprehensive needs assessments and context analyses in ensuring that interventions align with the specific socio-economic and cultural contexts of the target communities; for example, ensuring that the design of gender-responsive parenting and maternal healthcare interventions considers local gender norms and health system capabilities. This resonates with the findings from some of our research, which highlighted the value that respondents placed on support that reflects the multitude of needs – for example, educational, financial, physical, psychosocial – that children and young people, their families, and service providers have, including during emergencies.

**Early learning facilitator (or teacher) training has been effective in improving early learning outcomes in various countries.** While we had comparatively few evaluations this year, results were promising where they were available. For example:

- In **Bangladesh**, after training and support to promote gender equality in their teaching practices and curriculum, over 85 per cent of early child development facilitators were observed to provide child centered opportunities for learning.
- In **Tanzania**, as part of LEARN Plus, sessions were delivered by community teaching assistants with links and regular weekly meetings with the local primary school, resulting in promising results in terms of outcomes for children. At the midpoint of the project, children receiving the intervention showed significantly better outcomes in various

development domains (for example, oral vocabulary, numeracy and motor skills) compared to those that did not.

- In **Cambodia**, project interventions combined training for teaching and learning with support to build links within communities, and to advocate for early childhood education. This was perceived to have improved teaching and learning environments, in addition to attendance at early childhood development centres. The opportunities for refresher training were also particularly valued.

**We also saw some key successes in relation to influencing for early childhood development.** For example, this year (building on efforts from previous years), the Human Rights Council adopted a landmark resolution establishing an open-ended intergovernmental working group on the development of an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the rights to early childhood education, free pre-primary education and free secondary education. Along with other partner organisations, and led by the Dominican Republic, Luxembourg, and Sierra Leone, Plan International advocated for the adoption of the resolution, especially in emphasising the importance of child participation in the elaboration of the protocol and the multiplier impact it would have on girls' rights and their future. Currently, the Convention on the Rights of the Child does not address early childhood education, and this resolution is a critical step towards addressing these gaps in international law and ensuring that every child has access to comprehensive education.



Children have fun drawing at the pre-school in their community in Cambodia ©Plan International/606 Digital



## Where we need to keep going deeper....

The evidence available this year has informed insights which are relevant for Plan International but also the wider sector, in terms of how investment is targeted and how programmes are designed, to achieve gains in early childhood development:

**We need to continue to increase the focus on combatting broader gender stereotypes.** Norms and stereotypes, including on roles and responsibilities for domestic work and decision making persist. Our projects have shown some developments in this area, but this is uneven. We need to continue to advocate with donors and partners for longer term programming that facilitates progress in shifting deep-seated norms and attitudes.

**We need to continue to strengthen our focus on responding to the needs of the hardest to reach.** Rural communities that are further away from services, and parents and children living with disabilities, are among some of the groups that face particular barriers to participation and engaging men can be a challenge, in the face of conflicting pressures such as employment or other income generating activities. Maximising the coverage and effectiveness of programming implies focused efforts on working with target groups during the design of the content and the delivery modalities, to ensure that they align to the realities and priorities in the context.

**We need to continue to build the evidence base.** The extent of available data on health, nutrition and developmental outcomes, as a complement to knowledge or self-reported practice, has varied this year. To continue to build the evidence base around effective programming approaches, this is an area that needs to be developed.



Reshmin, 4, (left) and her friends at the early learning centre in Bangladesh ©Plan International/Mushfiqul Alam



Until we are all equal

## About Plan International







Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organization that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

## We won't stop until we are all equal.

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**Cover photo:** Girls learn while having fun at Good Start (Buen Comienzo), a project that has set up 40 Early Childhood Development centres in Dominican Republic. ©Plan International

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