



## THRIVE COALITION RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION ON GLOBAL EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

*The Thrive Coalition is a community of 41 organizations dedicated to optimizing U.S. government support for global early childhood development.*

### THE VISION

The next Administration will undertake an integrated, global agenda for young children, ensuring that every child (age 0-8) has the conditions to survive and thrive, to promote healthy development and learning through nurturing family-based care, and protection from violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect.

As President-elect Biden seeks to ensure access to high-quality, affordable child care and universal preschool in the United States, it will be imperative to also make a concerted and coordinated effort abroad to improve access to early childhood development services for children and families living in poverty around the world.

### BACKGROUND

Early childhood development (ECD) includes a child's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development beginning prenatally and extending through eight years of age.<sup>1</sup> Nurturing care, the conditions necessary to ensure healthy development, include access to quality healthcare, nutrition, sanitation, responsive caregiving, early learning, play, and protection from harm. Nurturing care is the holistic support that enables children not only to survive, but to thrive. Culturally relevant and inclusive ECD programs strengthen health systems, enhance social protection, and promote stability in vulnerable families and communities. Vulnerable children and families face increased risks from the COVID-19 pandemic, underpinning the importance for urgency to scale-up investment.

The early years — in particular the first 1,000 days between pregnancy and age two — set the stage for healthy growth and development. During this crucial period, good nutrition and health support a child's physical and cognitive development and lay the foundation for life-long health, productivity, and well-being. Nurturing care helps to buffer the effects of adversity and toxic stress caused by poverty, violence, neglect, and abuse. All children need nurturing care, and it is particularly critical to support the most vulnerable children to ensure they are not left behind. Children with disabilities or developmental delays, children from disadvantaged families and communities, and children living through crises and emergencies such as conflict and natural disaster must all be included.

### CURRENT CHALLENGES

While more children are surviving than ever before, too few of them are thriving because of the worst aspects of poverty. The Lancet estimates 250 million children under five in low- and middle-income countries (43 percent)

<sup>1</sup> Early child development. (2020, July 22). Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/topics/early-child-development/en/>.

are at risk of poor development outcomes.<sup>2</sup> These children are not reaching their full potential due to inadequate nutrition; lack of stimulation, learning, nurturing care; and exposure to toxic stress. One in three children worldwide under age five is not growing well due to poor nutrition and lack of cognitive stimulation.<sup>3</sup> An estimated 53 million children under the age of five have developmental disabilities that require timely and appropriate support to prepare children to achieve their full potential.<sup>4</sup>

COVID-19 has created additional challenges for vulnerable children and their families - both the direct effects of the disease and the indirect effects including social isolation, lost or reduced household income, and separation of the family. Closures of schools and childcare centers, as well as isolation at home, has added stressors to households and may interrupt optimal child development. The disruption of school and daycare-based learning, play, health care, immunizations, developmental screenings, and nutrition will severely affect families with fewer resources. This includes families experiencing homelessness, low-income or ethnic minority families, and families of children with disabilities, where options for distance learning or home-schooling may be out of reach.

Children exposed to considerable and prolonged stress are at risk of health and social consequences later on in childhood, as well as in adulthood. Millions of children continue to live without protective and nurturing family care. An estimated one billion children across the world are exposed to physical, sexual, or emotional violence each year<sup>5</sup>, and in 2018, one in five babies were born into conflicted-affected areas.<sup>6</sup> Children in such circumstances often experience abuse, neglect, discrimination, poor nutrition, and lack of stimulation - a constellation of adverse experiences that can lead to toxic stress and prolonged developmental delays, stunting, and disabilities.

Children who do not meet developmental milestones are expected to lose approximately 25 percent of their average annual income once they become adults.<sup>7</sup> Failure to invest strategically and proactively in the early years has serious repercussions for national economies as well as global trade and security.

## OPPORTUNITIES

Opportunities for achieving this vision exist across various levels and sectors of government, presenting the next administration with powerful leverage for cultivating the world's most precious resource- the next generation. Investments in ECD interventions are cost-effective, produce high economic returns, and are more impactful than "catch up" programs later in life.

Studies show that investment in quality early childhood development interventions can produce up to a 13 percent return on investment per year by improving health outcomes, boosting salaries, improving the economy, and reducing a country's deficit, which lead to more peaceful and prosperous communities. Cost-effective strategic investments made during children's early years can mitigate – and often overcome – the deleterious effects of poverty, social inequality, and discrimination, ultimately resulting in long-lasting gains that reap benefits for children and youth, families, communities, and nations.

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<sup>2</sup> Lu, C., Black, M. M., & Richter, L. M. (2016). Risk of poor development in young children in low-income and middle-income countries: An estimation and analysis at the global, regional, and country level. *The Lancet Global Health*, 4(12). doi:10.1016/s2214-109x(16)30266-2.

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF (2019). *The State of the World's Children 2019: Children, food and nutrition* [fact sheet]. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/Fact%20Sheet%20-%20UNICEF%20State%20of%20the%20Worlds%20Children%202019.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Olusanya BO, Wright SM, Nair MKC, et al. (2020). Global Burden of Childhood Epilepsy, Intellectual Disability, and Sensory Impairments. *Pediatrics*. 2020;146(1):e20192623. Retrieved from <https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4657497/1/Bolajoko-et-al-2020-Global-Burden-of-Childhood-Epilepsy.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Hillis, S, Mercy J, Amobi A, & Kress H. (2016). Global prevalence of past-year violence against children: A systematic review and minimum estimates. *Pediatrics*, 137(3): 1-13.

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF. (2019). *Born into conflict: Threats beyond the front lines*. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/stories/born-conflict-threats-beyond-front-lines>.

<sup>7</sup> Heckman, J. et al. (2014). Labor market returns to an early childhood stimulation intervention in Jamaica. *Science*, 344(6187), 998-1001.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Convene a White House Commission and a Global Conference on Children in 2022.** As we Build Back Better, The Thrive Coalition recommends the Administration convene a White House Commission (with a sunset provision) and a Global Conference on Children to frame and amplify commitments to cultivating our most precious resource – our next generation of the world’s children. The Commission and Conference would reignite historical U.S. advances for child and family well-being and foster whole-of-government planning and implementation of policies and programs aimed at optimizing healthy development of children in the U.S. and around the world.
2. **Convene donors and stakeholders to develop a long-term strategic plan to prioritize ECD globally.** The Thrive Coalition encourages the Administration to use the established Commission and Conference to demonstrate championship on the world stage, convening donors, multilaterals, and implementing countries to incentivize expanding national ECD policy planning, governance, investments, and implementation. The US government is well positioned to share best practices, set guidelines and targets, monitor and evaluate progress, and develop a method for identifying development assistance spent on ECD. The Administration should also elevate ECD coordination and investments within global policy setting bodies including but not limited to the G7/G20, World Bank, World Health Organization, UNICEF, Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait, the Partnership on Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health, the SUN Movement, and the Cluster System.
3. **Significantly expand funding for U.S. foreign assistance programs impacting young children and their families.** The Thrive Coalition encourages the next Administration to prioritize investment in maternal and child health, nutrition, WASH, education, and child protection accounts as well as significantly expand funding for the vulnerable children account, which currently receives a modest \$25 million per year, though not at the expense of other life-saving humanitarian and development programs. Across accounts and missions, ECD funding should be tracked based on an agreed upon definition or set of metrics. We also urge the Administration to include ECD in funding and programmatic response and recovery efforts related to COVID-19 and other emergencies such as humanitarian crises.
4. **Integrate ECD into current foreign assistance programs supporting young children and their families.** The Thrive Coalition recommends that the next Administration provide guidance to agencies on effective ways to integrate ECD and nurturing care into current foreign assistance programs in alignment with the Global Child Thrive Act and Nurturing Care Framework. Agencies should use pre-existing or newly allocated financing in health, WASH, and nutrition to support greater embedding of ECD services into standing programming, shifting to undertake a multi-sectoral approach. For example, integrating contextually relevant messaging for responsive caregiving on play, communication, and safe spaces; or prioritizing the inclusion of early childhood intervention programs for children with disabilities and developmental delays, and their caregiver. The integration of ECD in foreign assistance programs must span the humanitarian-development nexus, prioritizing vulnerable communities such as children and caregivers who are experiencing a disruption of essential services due to forced displacement, migration and resettlement in a new setting, such as a refugee camp, or integration within host communities.
5. **Protect 10 percent of HIV/AIDS funding for Orphans and Vulnerable Children during PEPFAR reauthorization.** The Thrive Coalition encourages the next Administration to protect funding for orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) during the reauthorization process of the President’s Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) in 2023 and ensures the Administration spends the full 10 percent on mitigating the impact of HIV on OVC.