

DIGGING DEEPER

Child Development



Photo: Compassion

Introduction

A big part of Tearfund's work is in child development with our partner Compassion International and local churches around the world. In our resource *Introduction to Child Development*, we gave a brief overview of why and how we work in this space. This resource takes a deeper dive into the topic of child development. It is critical to their ability to thrive in the long term that this process unfolds properly.

In case you've jumped in here and have not read the *Introduction to Child Development*. Here is a brief recap:

An estimated 386 million children live in extreme poverty around the world (living on less than \$1.90 a day) and many millions more will be added as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Poverty causes children to struggle with frequent illness, chronic malnutrition and impaired physical and mental development. It denies children access to basic health care and education, weakens their protective environment and leaves them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

We believe that every child in the world has basic human rights and that they deserve to be known, loved and protected. Despite the injustice we witness, we refuse to accept that poverty is an inevitable part of our broken and hurting world. Rather than seeing it as something that's too complex, or insurmountable, we focus on tackling it one child at a time.

Our model of linking one child with one sponsor is a reflection of this approach and is how we seek to release children from poverty in Jesus' name. In partnership with Compassion International thousands of people from around the world sponsor children. While there is no quick fix to global poverty, by changing the life of one child we can create a ripple effect in their family, community and nation.



Photo: Compassion

Factors that influence success and growth

We want all children to succeed and be the best they can be. Research tells us that two main factors influence how a child succeeds and grows.

Genes

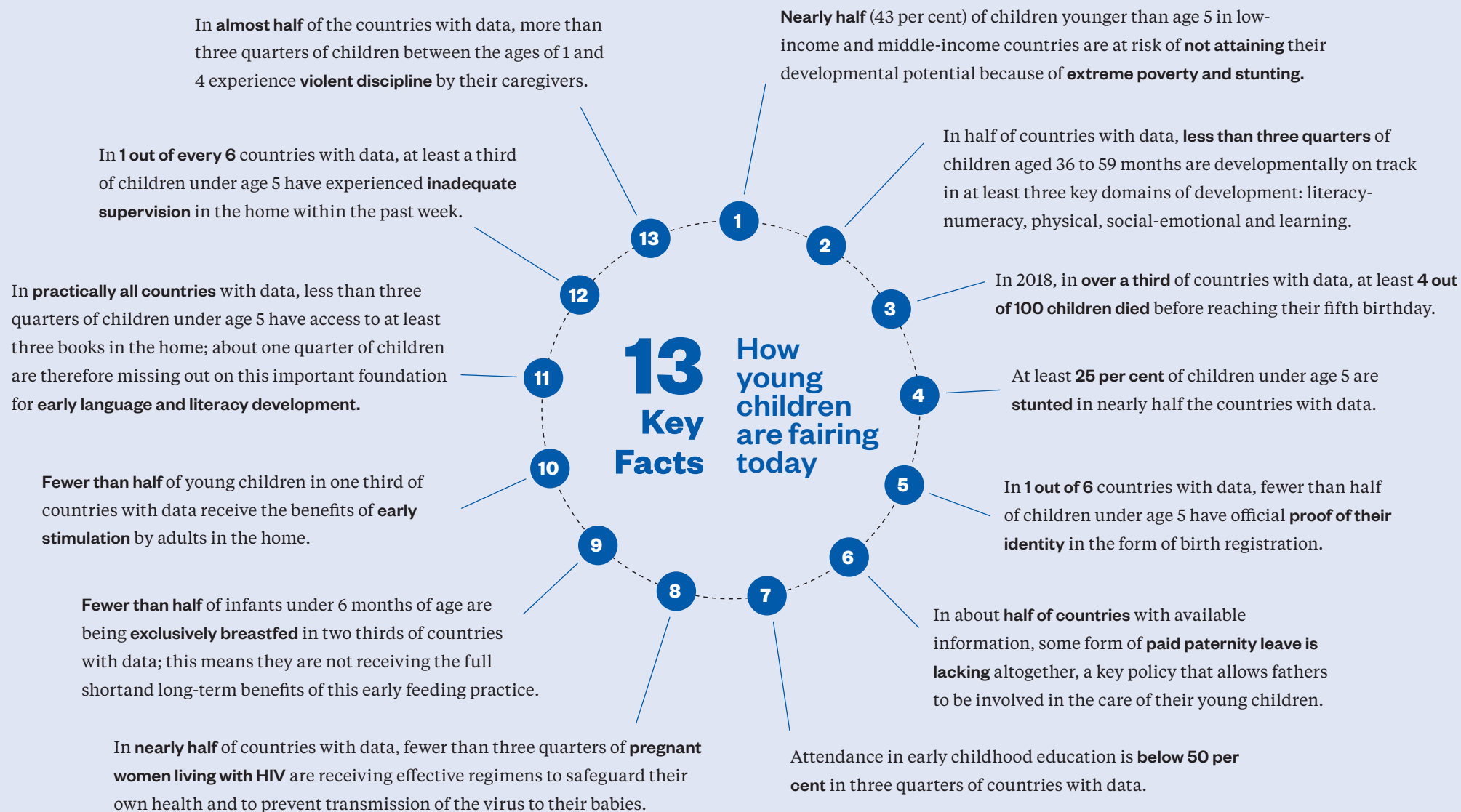
Genes are what is passed from parent to child. Children are born with their genes in place. These genes are the blueprint for characteristics a child may have. For example, genes determine if a child will have blonde hair or brown hair; they also determine if a child will be left or right-handed.

Environment

The other factor influencing a child's development is their environment. This is essentially what happens at home, childcare, school and the people around them. Adults have the power to manipulate a child's environment to engage and stimulate their development.

When talking about child development, the first 1000 days are often referred to. This is the window of time between conception and a child's second birthday. It's viewed as the best time for intervening in a child's life to ensure they develop well and thrive later in life. With this view, the well-being of the mother and baby are intertwined right from the start.

In the first 1000 days, a child's brain grows and develops more quickly than at any other time in their life. Nutrition plays a significant part in cognitive development but so does the socio-emotional environment of a child. Unstable and unsafe environments or lack of nurturing are also big barriers to healthy development.



This is why the statistics of children affected by poverty are so alarming. Environmental factors negatively affect the development of the 386 million children who live in extreme poverty and the millions more who live in poverty or other forms of deprivation. However, the good news is that we can positively influence this aspect of a child's development—all is not lost!

Developmental Stages

All children go through typical and predictable changes called developmental stages. Three broad stages of development are recognised: early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence.

The stages build upon one another and more importantly, children progress through them at their own pace. It's important to note that society's ideas about childhood shift over time, and research has led to new understandings of the development that takes place in each stage.

- Early Childhood (Birth to six/eight years)
- Middle and late childhood (Six/eight years to eleven years)
- Adolescence (Childhood to early adulthood)¹

While growth and development milestones are useful for caregivers, teachers and parents, they offer little beyond 'some' kind of age range or guide to 'what's normal'. Progress can be delayed for all kinds of reasons. Temporary delays can be caused by sickness or premature birth. Some disabilities can cause a permanent delay. A child's development can also suffer because of the environment.

Normal child development can be relative as it varies across cultures and environments, since expectations and parenting strategies may differ not only among countries but among cultural, ethnic or religious groups within the same country.

For instance, all babies develop in a fixed chronological order but at completely different rates. This means that more advanced stages are based on earlier ones and advancement results in a

1. Santrock, John. Child Development: An Introduction (p. 14). McGraw-Hill Education. Kindle Edition.



Photo: Compassion

“reorganizing” of various earlier skills. One seven-month-old might be crawling around and chattering madly; another might be playing silently in a corner.

Development Growth Processes

Child development is broken into three processes: cognitive, socio-emotional and biological growth.

At Tearfund, we look at child development holistically so we consider language/speech and spiritual development very important too. Children develop as they go through life and interact with others and as they grow and mature, their needs, abilities, interests and challenges change.

Cognitive development

A child’s ability to learn and solve problems

A baby who started crawling is exploring his/her environment while a five-year-old is learning to read and write. The tasks of watching a bird on the deck, putting together a two-word sentence, memorising a song, solving a maths problem, understanding a scientific experiment and imagining what it would be like to be grown-up, all involve cognitive processes.

Social and emotional development

The child’s ability to interact with others

A social development skill for a baby is to learn to smile, while for an older child, it is organising and leading a game at school or an adolescent’s joy and excitement at the school ball. These all reflect socio-emotional development.

Biological Development

Speech, language and physical development

The child’s ability to both understand and use language includes all stages of talking, reading and communicating. Consider a 12-month-

old saying his first words, a two-year-old naming parts of her body, or a five-year-old learning to say “feet” instead of “foots”.

The development of the brain, height and weight gains, development of motor skills, and the hormonal changes at puberty are all major parts of physical development. Motor skills are broken into two categories: fine motor skills are the ability to use small muscles (hands and fingers) to pick up small objects, hold a spoon or use a pencil to draw; and gross motor development is about bigger movements like walking or running.

If a child is living in an environment that is deprived of the resources required for a child to physically develop, or the social and emotional investment required for other areas of development, these development growth processes can be stunted or damaged.

For example, malnutrition can lead to physical stunting for a child. The effects of malnutrition are not just limited to small physical stature. Stunting in early life results in poor outcomes across the board later in life including poor cognition, low educational performance, lower productivity and chronic disease later in life.²

Measuring Child Development

We know children benefit from adequate and enriching environments in which they can survive, thrive and develop to their fullest potential.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child highlights the importance of early child development in articles 6 and 27. Article 6 states, a child has a right to develop to “the maximum extent possible”. Article 27 states, “State Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development”.

The importance of early child development and its measurement is recognized by the international community through the inclusion of a dedicated target within the Sustainable Development Goals. The target is that “by 2030, all girls and boys have access to quality early

2. https://www.who.int/nutrition/healthygrowthproj_stunted_videos/en/

childhood development, care and pre-primary educations so that they are ready for primary education.”³ For those not familiar with the Sustainable Development Goals, they are a collection of 17 global goals designed to build a better and more sustainable future for the world.

Measuring children’s development is a complex undertaking. To capture information on children’s achievements of some universal developmental milestones across countries, UNICEF along with a technical advisory group developed, within the context of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), a set of specific questions posed to mothers/caregivers to measure the overall developmental status of children within the domains of physical, literacy-numeracy, social-emotional and learning. This 10-item index—the Early Childhood Development Index, or ECDI— was added to the MICS in 2009, and has since been used in over 70 countries.

More information about the index and measurement can found on UNICEF’s reporting and data website.

Conclusion

Working in the area of child development is arguably one of the most valuable ways we can contribute to our world’s future. It is a work that Tearfund is deeply committed to through all our programme work and specifically through our partnership with Compassion International. Together we can change this world for children, one child a time!

**“Children are the living messages we send
to a time we will not see.”**

- Neil Postman

3. <https://indicators.report/targets/4-2/>

