Celebrating... The 25th Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

On the 25th anniversary of The Convention on the Rights of the Child, a historic milestone, we can rightly celebrate the impressive gains achieved for the children of the world, to mention...
Achievements

Some of the gains:

- About 90 million children who would have died if mortality rates had remained at their 1990 level, have instead, lived past the age of 5.1.

- Deaths from measles among children under 5 years of age fell from 482,000 in 2000 to 86,000 in 2012, thanks in large part to immunization coverage, which increased from 16 per cent in 1980 to 84 per cent in 2012.

Since 1990 ...

- Improvement in nutrition has led to a 37 per cent drop in stunting.
- Nearly 1.9 billion people have gained access to improved sanitation.
- Primary school enrolment has increased, even in the least developed countries.
  - In 1990, only 53 per cent of children in those countries gained school admission.
  - By 2011, the rate was at 81 per cent.

Supporting Children’s Full Potential

We can build on those efforts, by exerting more efforts and attention, not only on saving children's lives, but also on supporting their development to their full potential.
Unfortunately, we know that ...

Over 200 million children under 5 years of age in low- and middle-income countries - and increasing numbers in OECD countries and in emerging economies - will face inequalities and fail to reach their full development potential because they grow up with a broad range of risk factors, including:

- Poverty
- Poor health, including malnutrition and infection with HIV
- High levels of family and environmental stress and exposure to violence
- Abuse, neglect and exploitation
- Inadequate care and learning opportunities

This is compounded by the situations of migration, war and conflict and extreme violence to which families are exposed.
Every year, hundreds of millions of children are exposed to and are victims of domestic violence, many of them exposed at an early age.

Indicators of violence in the home measured across 24 low- and middle-income countries show that nearly two thirds of children, ages 4 and under, experience mild physical and psychological aggression by parents.

Other forms of violence occurring in families include witnessing violence between parents or other family members and sexual violence (including rape or other sexual abuse).
Violence Exposure

Sadly, exposure to violence at an early age can be extremely detrimental to a child’s development and is causally related to a broad range of negative outcomes across a lifespan, including major emotional and behavioral problems.

Indeed, to varying degrees, violence can become self-perpetuating.


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A Critical Time

Despite a notable increase over the past decades in the provision of Early Childhood Education and Development services, our duty to guarantee quality programs and environments early in life that enable every child’s full developmental potential remains unfilled.

Several intergovernmental initiatives are currently taking place to frame the post-2015 agenda for the Millennium Development Goals.

Therefore, this is a critical time to define policy, program and research priorities as well as use evidence and information sharing to place Early Childhood Development at the center of the sustainable development agenda.


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Changing The Tide of Violence
What Science Says
Advances in neuroscience are influencing a revolutionary shift in the way we think about early child development, as we learn about the impact of both positive and negative experiences – and the interplay of experience and genetics – on the developing brain.

These developments have significant implications for the future of millions of the world’s most disadvantaged children and their societies. (UNICEF, Neuroscience Symposium, 2014)
In the 1st year of life, the brain grows at the pace of 700-1000 new neural connections per second, a pace that is never achieved again.

By age 3, a child brain is twice as active as an adult brain.

It is early life experiences that determine the capacity of the brain.
Building a Better Brain

Stimulation and care
- Spark neural connections across multiple regions of the brain to increase capacity and function. It relies on the cues from caregiving to create these neural connections that may change brain function for life.

Early childhood education
- Programs to provide early cognitive and language skills, build social competency and support emotional development

Health and nutrition
- To nourish the architecture of the body and brain during sensitive periods of development

Safety and protection
- To buffer against stress, violence and abuse to allow absorption of nutrients and growth and development of a healthy nervous system and brain

Oxytocin and vasopressin, two neuropeptides that are synthesized and released from the hypothalamus, appear to be key elements in the neurobiology of affiliation.

Similar to other species, early in life children form emotional attachments to familiar caregivers. When these caregivers are sensitive and responsive to the child’s needs, the caregivers provide a secure base from which a child can explore the world.

The formation of these attachments early in life contributes to the child’s later emotional and cognitive development as well as their investment in future interpersonal relationships.

What is Epigenetics?

Epigenetics refers to the study of changes in the regulation of gene activity and expression that are not dependent on gene DNA sequence.

Epigenetics: Transformative Potential

Parental behavior as a source of behavioral plasticity in the offspring?

Parental care ➔ Epigenetic marks ➔ Gene expression ➔ Behavior of the offspring as parents

Genes provide the blueprint for brain development, but the **environment shapes it**.

**Parenting** can alter the expression of their child’s genes – literally turning the gene and its related function on or off.

**How children are nurtured** by parents and caregivers in the early years can affect brain function for the rest of their lives, and may even effect future generations.

The importance of the **Nature of Early Caregiving** is **crucial**. Individual differences in maternal behavior matter and can be transmitted across generations.

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Early Childhood Development and Positive Parenting

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Positive - responsive Parenting occurs when parents (Mothers and Fathers and other caregivers) do their best to invest in their children and meet their emotional, cognitive, nutritional, and physical needs during gestation and the early years.


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Parents and other caregivers play a critical role in determining children’s chances for survival and development, and they can empower children to become architects of their own lives.

Evidence shows that early stimulation, caregiving, attachment, bonding and creating safe contexts for children all have a positive influence on their brain development and can help children grow, learn and thrive.

Given that the first 5 years of life is when the foundation of the brain’s architecture is put in place, and that experience during this time is one of the strongest influences on this development, we need to better understand how these different influences interact to affect brain development and function.

Programs designed to help parents become more responsive exist and can lead to *Opportunities for Transformational Change*: 

- A better brain and a more peaceful mind
- A more healthy body
- *Prevention of violence*
- A more peaceful family and community
- A more successful adult
- A positive economic impact in society

A large number of parenting programs have been developed across the globe - ranging from home visitation programs starting during pregnancy to working with groups of parents of preschool children.

Only a few programs have been rigorously assessed and almost all of these have been in High Income Countries. More impact evaluations of program interventions are needed.

Exemplar - AÇEV

Early childhood development is a potential pathway to violence reduction in the home and in the community.

Mission: promoting human development to its maximum potential, through investing in young children and families.
AÇEV has developed a series of parenting initiatives, including the Mother Child Education Program (MOCEP) that is built and revised by 20 years of research experience.

- MOCEP supports the mother with the goal of promoting the child’s overall development and mother’s empowerment and has a “Contextual”, “Functional”, “Whole Child” interactive approach that is culturally relevant. MOCEP is designed to promote harmony and democratic values and to reduce violence and abuse.

AÇEV reached over 600,000 mothers and their children and has promoted school readiness in Turkey.

Anecdotal reports by AÇEV also indicated that participation in the Father Support Program created friendships that *transcended cultural and religious divides*. 
Longitudinal studies of the AÇEV Mother Child Education Program (MOCEP) and other AÇEV programs have mostly demonstrated:

- Parents became more involved and more aware of the importance of early child development
- They use more positive communication and conflict resolution techniques
- Harsh parenting practices are reduced
- Families become more harmonious and peaceful

Yale University, in partnership with the Arab Resource Collective (ARC), is conducting an impact evaluation of the MOCEP in refugee camps in Beruit, Lebanon.

Goal: To reduce violence through the promotion of harmonious family relationships in refugee camps and other fragile settings.

Setting: In Lebanon alone, nearly 230,000 Palestinians live in refugee camps. Conditions in the camps lead to increased harsh punishment, negative intra-family relationships and violence in homes and communities. Adverse effects of this environment are particularly profound for children.

Partners: In refugee camps, a local NGO, Arab Resource Collective is implementing the AÇEV MOCEP 25-week curriculum program for mothers of children (4-6 years of age) focusing on strengthening child well-being and family relationships.

AÇEV: Beruit, Lebanon

Outcomes

- For children: improvements in cognition, literacy and executive function; behavior; violence reduction
- For mothers: improved parenting; maternal wellbeing; increased social capital
- For families: improved parent-child interactions and bonding; reduced couple violence; supportive group dynamics and social processes

Leverage the potential of partners and networks working to advance proven, sustainable ECD and parenting education program interventions

Link emerging knowledge from bio-behavioral and environmental sciences with existing programs

Include programs that account for the conditions of the caregivers

Increase investment in, advocate for and create local and sustainable programs for peace building through ECD

Generate new evidence and advocate for policies and practices that promote peace for young children, families and communities
The launch of the Early Childhood Peace Consortium was in September 2013 at the UNICEF Headquarters in New York City.

The ECPC joins forces with the international community, to advance global and national efforts, to prevent violence, laying the foundation of a sustained peace through the transformative power of Early Childhood Development.
Evidence Generation to Address the Gaps in Science

Pathways to Peace: Ernst Strüngmann Forum (Germany)

- **41 scientists** from diverse backgrounds (basic sciences, early child development, cross-cultural psychology, interfaith dialogue, and peace building) from **15 countries**: South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Ireland, Finland, the Netherlands, Canada, US and the UK, Germany, Switzerland, Turkey, Israel and Palestine, and Australia met in Frankfurt in October 2013 and a report will be published in November 2014 by MIT Press.
A Global Call to Action

- We have the science, the knowledge, the technology and experience to build a world without violence.

- What we need is an unfailing vision and an unwavering commitment by the Global community as well as a strong partnership for children and their families.

- Let us all together start putting building blocks of a peaceful future for children, thus changing the tide of violence.
Thank you