

# Editorial

This edition of *Early Childhood Matters* is devoted to the Foundation's issue area 'Strengthening the care environment'. Regular readers will recall that the previous two editions introduced the other two of our three new issue areas, namely 'Successful transitions: The continuum from home to school' and 'Social inclusion and respect for diversity'.

Strengthening the care environment is about giving every child the chance to survive and thrive. As so often, the case for acting on behalf of disadvantaged young children can be based on both rights – as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which recognises a child's right to "full and harmonious development", along with General Comment 7 (GC7) of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child – and pragmatism.

The pragmatic case is this: working towards optimal conditions for a child's early years is one of the best investments that a country can make if it is to compete in a global economy based on the strength of its human capital. And yet, despite compelling evidence, early childhood development continually struggles to be taken seriously as a priority in the larger policy environment.

*The Lancet*<sup>1</sup> recently hinted at the scale of the problem: it estimated that at least 200 million children aged under 5 years are failing to reach their potential in cognitive and socioemotional development, due mainly to malnutrition and inadequate stimulation in the first five years of life. This is both a tragedy and a scandal, and it needs to be widely appreciated as such.

Our own thinking about the best ways of strengthening the care environment for disadvantaged young children – which must involve attention to both a child's 'near environment' of parents, caregivers and teachers, and the 'further environment' of systems, policies and public opinion – is laid out in the summary of our issue area framework document on page 3.

We are also pleased to have the opportunity to present CARE USA's complementary conclusions on the importance of taking a broad and holistic view of early childhood interventions (page 9): "an approach consisting of one or even two areas of intervention is not sufficient to address the varied, interdependent needs of very young children. Additionally, focusing only on children, or only on children and their caregivers, does not adequately address needs of the community or facilitate essential changes in national policy."

Further articles in this edition expand on various aspects of the care issue. Enhancing parenting skills is naturally a common approach, and an overview of what support to mothers specifically means from an academic perspective is on page 45. The CRC and GC7 both recognise that the survival, well-being and development of young children are dependent on close relationships with adults, and Joan Oates draws on some of the most recent findings from attachment research to tell us about the importance of a child establishing secure attachments in the first 12–18 months of life (page 17).

In Guatemala, the Childcare with Affection programme aims to raise awareness and educate parents and teachers on the impact of violent behaviour on children, particularly during early childhood (see page 14). Another example of improving parent–child interactions and strengthening parent–child bonds is the Roving Caregiver Program in Jamaica, a consolidated home visiting programme which focuses on strengthening the home environment (see page 25).

When families are exposed to poverty, social changes or migration, young children are at risk of insecurity that can delay or distort their physical and psychological development. This situation is common in urban contexts, the environment in which the Foundation for Slum Child Care provides support and training to caregivers in existing daycare homes in slum communities of Bangkok, Thailand (see page 36).



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The care environment has many layers which affect children's rights and learning. On page 21 we present an interview with Teresa González, Director of Programme, Monitoring and Evaluation at Right to Play, who highlights the lasting benefits of play as the way young children learn: "If young children can be brought up in an environment that is not only loving but also creative, then that sets the foundation for their holistic development and lifelong learning."

Conflict, natural disasters, HIV/AIDS, and rising poverty are among the issues leading to a growing number of orphans and vulnerable children with little adult care or supervision. Interventions which emphasise community-based care and psychosocial support are aimed at tackling that situation – for example, Action for Children in Uganda uses special outreach efforts to address the problems facing elderly caregivers of young children (see page 41).

By building on traditional knowledge of communities, a home-based programme approach is presented on page 30 as a vehicle for strengthening the care environment for children. A similar

approach is being carried out in a different context in the Colombian Amazons. Here, the project has an integrated intervention that recognises and promotes the community as the main agent for the care and protection of its children (see page 32).

The overall message to emerge from the articles collected in this edition is indeed that laid out in the foundation's framework document, as well as the "5x5" approach of CARE USA: it takes a holistic view of young children's development, and a recognition of the many different levels of the care environment, to create programmes that create significant positive change for children who are growing up in circumstances of social and economic disadvantage. As *The Lancet* makes abundantly clear, many children are in urgent need of just such change.

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**Note**

1 Jolly R (2007) Early childhood development: the global challenge. *The Lancet*, 2007;369:8-9