

**Overview**

**Highlights**

The sustained benefits of early childhood interventions are well established in developed countries. Early development plays a major role in subsequent school performance, health, socialization, and future earnings. For children born into poverty, the equity enhancing impact of early childhood interventions hold the promise of overcoming social disadvantages and breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty. The World Bank’s support to early childhood development (ECD) is well aligned with the Bank’s twin goals of reducing extreme poverty and promoting shared prosperity.

This evaluation by the Independent Evaluation Group examines the Bank’s design and implementation of projects across sectors supporting ECD interventions to inform future operations and provide inputs to the new Global Practices and Cross-Cutting Solution Areas. Its overarching messages are:

- The Bank’s analytical work fosters an awareness of the rationale to invest in people early. This work expands the knowledge base, addresses key operational challenges, and pushes the frontiers of research on child-related policies and interventions. Overall, there is a balance between an integrated concept of early childhood development, child health, and child nutrition. In looking to the future, more attention is needed to create knowledge related to scale, quality models for early learning, financing of ECD, cost-effectiveness, and capacity building at all levels of government.

- The Bank lacks a strategic framework and an organizational structure to support a coordinated approach across Global Practices toward the development of children. In its absence, the Bank depends on the knowledge, initiative, and skills of individual staff members, leading to significant variation in approaches and intensity of investment across countries.

- Based on what is known from research, the impact of the Bank’s work could be increased by changing its focus on health and survival to include child stimulation and development interventions in health, nutrition, and social protection. These sectors that would support an expanded focus have early entry points to reach vulnerable children and families beginning with the prenatal period. The Bank has made this shift in a few of the countries examined.

- The role of parenting in child development is critical. More emphasis is needed on support for parent education and assistance programs, treatment of maternal depression, early detection of disabilities and developmental delays, and affordable quality childcare to enable workforce participation.
The findings and recommendations of the evaluation are drawn from 16 field and desk case studies as well as analyses of the World Bank’s early childhood development (ECD) portfolio and other sources of evidence to triangulate findings. Other sources of evidence are review of economic analysis; analytic work including Bank-supported impact evaluations; country strategies; results frameworks; Human Resources data; synthesis of ECD systematic reviews; and key informant interviews. The case studies were central to assessing experiences with the benefit of understanding the country context.

The period of evaluation covers the Bank’s support to early childhood development interventions for young children and their families found in its lending and analytic and advisory work from FY00 to FY14. The evaluation examines the design of operations for consistency with the growing body of research around efforts that are likely to lead to beneficial changes in children’s physical, cognitive, linguistic, and socioemotional development, and improve their readiness for school. Twenty-six systematic reviews related to ECD interventions were analyzed to assess whether the Bank is financing evidence-based interventions. In parallel with this evaluation, the Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) conducted a systematic review examining the impact of early childhood interventions on later outcomes, and some of its results are integrated herein.

Findings

Bank lending to support ECD interventions has increased since FY00, with ECD projects or components of projects in 106 countries. The lending was predominantly from Education; Health, Nutrition, and Population; and Social Protection sectors, but it is also increasingly from others such as Agriculture, Poverty Reduction and Governance, Social Development, and Water.

Country experience points to progress with immunization and infant and child mortality, while high rates persist for maternal mortality and stunting within many of the examined countries. Stunting is associated with diminished development and extreme poverty. It is found in one-third to one-half of children under the age of five in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, and the Republic of Yemen. This suggests the continuing need for Bank support targeted to the development of children beginning at the prenatal stage.

The Bank has produced a body of analytical work devoted to topics such as maternal and child health, nutrition, and early childhood development.
This knowledge work gives rise to subsequent lending, which shows the value of analytical work in creating awareness of the benefits of investing in young children. Country experience revealed the importance of the Bank’s policy dialogue, suggesting that it can be leveraged in countries where the Bank has limited involvement to help other governments understand the importance of promoting the development of children.

In looking to the future, several areas remain for the Bank to undertake to address key ECD operational challenges, such as cost effectiveness, scale, and quality models for early learning, stimulation, and childcare that support child development. As well, much more understanding is needed of the later-life effects of ECD interventions in low- and middle-income countries. Until investment occurs in longer-term monitoring of interventions, the Bank will not fully understand which interventions have sustained impact and greatest potential to stop the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

**Breaking the Cycle of Poverty**

The Bank invests heavily in maternal and child health interventions especially to improve both survival rates and physical development. To truly break the cycle of poverty, however, children must also have the cognitive, linguistic, and socioemotional maturity to be able to succeed in school and in the workforce. Child stimulation in the first three years of life, parenting education and support, screening and treatment for disabilities, and reduction of maternal depression are largely overlooked by the Bank and other development partners. To apply the lessons learned from the findings of 26 systematic reviews and several influential impact evaluations, the Bank will need more investment in interventions such as parent support programs, childcare, early learning, and stimulation that lead to better cognitive and linguistic development as a necessary complement to health, nutrition, and social protection efforts. The challenge for the Bank and its partners will be to go beyond a focus on maternal and child health to ensure that health systems advance children’s development.

The World Development Reports of 2006, 2013, and 2015 highlight the importance of stimulation and giving parents the tools they need for optimal parent-child interactions. The World Development Report of 2012 highlights the importance of twin-generational approaches to women’s economic empowerment and support to their children’s development through quality childcare. However, synergies have not been established between the Bank’s work in gender and early childhood development. Parental support programs that teach parents how to stimulate their
children’s development and childcare are contained in few Bank operations, suggesting the need for more attention. Within several of the countries examined for this evaluation, opportunities to advance country capacity to support the early development of children (prenatal to three years) were missed.

Interventions promoting children’s development were more evident for children three years and older through investments in preprimary education. However, these programs are typically for three, four, five, and six year olds, which is a late entry point to begin to stimulate children’s language, cognitive, and socioemotional development, particularly if other services are not available. A notable design shift has occurred in preprimary education operations. They are comprehensively trying to improve quality, but more work is needed to develop quality models that can be brought to scale. Issues related to salary and retention of preprimary teachers emerged in several countries.

Several African countries have received little to no nutrition support, despite stunting rates ranging from 39 to 55 percent. Thus, there is need for alignment between the Bank’s interventions and country needs to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty, to equalize opportunities for human capital development, and to contribute to economic growth. There is also a need to properly integrate ECD interventions into the Bank’s planning cycle in country partnership frameworks.

Organizational Challenges

One challenge to advancing coordinated ECD work is the organizational structure of most development agencies, including the Bank, partnership programs, and most government ministries. Sector-based structures tend to look for sectoral entry points for engagement and work with the relevant public sector authorities. A review of ECD standalone projects (FY00–14) that have IEG ratings suggests the Bank has moved away from integrated programming to operations dealing with one ministry, which has facilitated improved performance ratings. Analysis of the portfolio and Human Resources data show that the Bank predominantly implements ECD interventions on a sector-by-sector basis, including design and implementation, with the exception of operations containing child protection interventions. With sectoral implementation, an internal structure within the Bank doesn’t yet exist to coordinate sectoral interventions and capitalize on opportunities to create synergies between initiatives in gender and child development as well as integrate interventions for the poorest and most vulnerable within existing entry points whether in their homes, communities, or health clinics.
When cross-sector coordination does occur, it derives from staff initiative rather than organizational structure, inhibiting broader adoption of best practice.

The Bank has sector strategies around health, education, and social protection that feature early childhood development and individually address elements. Other sector strategies note their direct or indirect contribution to children’s development, but gaps remain, and some aspects are unclear. Thus, sectors show considerable variation in their approaches and in the presence of specific interventions to support child development. There is also a marked disparity in the attention given across Global Practices and Regions to development of the youngest children, those up to three years of age. Overlapping implementation of ECD interventions has occurred across Global Practices, suggesting the need for clear lines of responsibility and coordinated approach for ECD in the Bank. Under the new Bank reorganization, a first step has been taken by the Education Global Practice to create an ECD global solution area by formalizing the ECD Community of Practice with a global lead.

There is significant need for more harmonized monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of ECD interventions across the Bank. This evaluation is not able to provide any aggregation of changes in outputs or outcomes because no consistency exists in the Bank’s M&E. The Bank also tends to focus on outputs of service provision, rather than outcomes, as ECD interventions typically comprise a portion of the project. This sharply limits the ability to draw out evidence from its work, particularly in relation to piloting and scaling up. It should be recognized that impact evaluations of Bank operations demonstrated changes in the nutritional status of children. Three out of four projects evaluated showed improvements across several domains of children’s development. These findings suggest that when interventions are implemented well, they can have a life altering impact on children.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Diagnostics about children and their development were not inputs to the preparation of the country strategies, except in one country. The Bank’s new model of country-level engagement and systematic country diagnostics can provide a mechanism both to assess the situation of children and ensure the Bank’s support is reaching countries with high stunting rates and to identify a government’s interest. Many country strategies made no mention of ECD interventions in countries where the Bank financed them; most of these cases where in relation to nutrition with half of them in the Africa Region.
Regional experience reveals promising aspects of the Bank’s engagement in ECD, such as using social protection programs to reach vulnerable families to improve the early development of children—those younger than three years old. As well, the Child Health and Development Passport was used by health care workers in Jamaica to provide parents with a regular assessment of developmental milestones and screening of disabilities during well-child health clinic visits. The work in the Latin America and the Caribbean Region may serve to provide lessons learned for other Regions. All of the countries examined included early entry points with child development interventions aimed at vulnerable families and have capitalized on work across sectors. All of the available evidence points to the importance of the quality of parenting, yet most of the parental support programs financed by the Bank are contained in operations in the Latin America and the Caribbean Region. The Region uses more multisector teams in its ECD operations. It supports a balanced set of interventions, and the level of nutrition support was aligned with country need. The variation across Regions may point to disparities among deployed staff in relation to their understanding of how to advance child development.

The Sustainable Development Goals are expected to have early childhood development and stunting targets, which is a signal from the international community to countries about the importance of supporting the development of young children. One implication for the Bank and other partners is that they will need to provide support across health, nutrition, social protection, and education—as well as other Global Practices and Cross-Cutting Solution Areas—to reach these targets. This represents an opportunity for the Bank to play a leading role with its partners and capitalize on the complementary work with its partners that was evident in countries visited by IEG.

**Recommendations**

The IEG makes four recommendations based on the major findings of the evaluation. They are directed to Senior Bank Management, Global Practices, Country Management Units, the Development Economics Vice Presidency, and Impact Evaluation Hubs in the Bank (see chapters for details). They aim to enhance effectiveness of the Bank’s future work on early childhood development and thus contribute to the attainment of its twin goals and the Sustainable Development Goals.

- Ensure that future organizational arrangements for ECD, such as the proposed “ECD global solution area” are able to provide a well-
coordinated and strategic framework for ECD, with clarity on leadership, ability to join up on issues across Global Practices and Cross-Cutting Solution Areas, and appropriate staff and resources for effective ECD programming.

- Adopt the practice of using diagnostics in the preparation of systematic country diagnostics to determine ECD need—identifying when ECD should be made a country priority and coordinating the relevant support across Global Practices and Cross-Cutting Solution Areas.
- Increase knowledge to address key ECD operational challenges with respect to scaling up, cost-effectiveness, quality models to promote early learning and stimulation, financing of ECD, and capacity building at all levels of government.
- Improve monitoring and evaluation of ECD interventions during and after project closure to strengthen evidence on their medium- and long-term impact. Common ECD indicators should be developed and tracked across Bank operations to permit aggregation of results across Bank projects. In addition, follow-up studies should be undertaken to better understand the long-term impact of ECD interventions.