

# The first years are the most important

Report sheds light on early childhood development, and the irony of poorer, younger kids not benefiting

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**T**HE FIRST 1 000 days of a child's life are the most vital for brain development.

The period from the moment a child is conceived to the age of two is a sensitive time for brain development. After this phase, brain development slows and builds on the base that's already acquired.

The SA *Child Gauge 2012* report, published annually by the University of Cape Town's Children's Institute, explored early childhood development (ECD) services, among other things, and found that how a child fares at school is largely influenced by the nutrition they receive while they're still in their mother's womb, their home environment and the stimulation they're exposed to in the formative years of their lives.

The report provides insight into the status of SA's children. It found that ECD services, which encompass pre-natal care, nutrition, psycho-social and health services and early-learning stimulation, have proved to enhance school readiness, enrolment and retention – that's staying in the education system and not dropping out – and improve academic performance.

Apart from the educational benefits, research also shows that ECD is an effective way of reducing poverty and dealing with inequality.

The report said: "Evidence from neuroscience and of the economic returns of early intervention have led to the realisation that supporting early development through services and programmes for young children and their families is one of the most promising approaches to alleviating poverty and achieving social and economic equity."

In SA early childhood development services are provided through child grants, clinics, home-based care and support for children and their caregivers. This is usually through



civic organisations such as NGOs and ECD facilities like crèches, day-care centres, nursery and pre-primary schools.

The dominant form of providing services is ECD centres, which are available for children from birth to six years old.

Despite this, a study by the SA Institute of Race Relations shows that only 32 percent of SA children attend formal ECD centres.

The study, which was published in February last year, showed that 68 percent of children under four years old did not attend an ECD centre.

## While younger children stand to gain more, they have least access

Gauteng had the highest attendance by children in this age group at 43 percent, followed by the Western Cape with 39 percent.

The Northern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal had the lowest attendance figures, with 20 and 25 percent respectively.

The study, as others have also shown, also found that attendance figures varied across race groups.

"Some 55 percent of white children attended an ECD centre, compared to 37 percent of Indian children, 31 percent of African children and 27 percent of coloured children."

The institute's Jonathan Snyman, a researcher, said the fact that less than a third of children from this age group attended ECD centres was a

major cause for concern.

"Access to ECD centres is critically important to aiding a child's social and mental development and also helps them prepare for foundation phase education," he said.

The report showed that while the same age group of children attending the centres was increasing, "service quality tends to be worse for younger and poorer children".

"While data quality may be limited, the General Household Survey 2010 shows that only 18 percent of zero- to two-year-olds access centre-based care. This is not necessarily a bad thing as very young children are usually better off cared for at home than in large centres which may be of poor quality.

"However, this does suggest a lack of affordable child care for employed or work-seeking mothers," the report found.

It further said that by ages three to four, educational programmes outside the home became important for developing social skills and learning readiness, but only 52 percent of children in this age group accessed such services.

For children with moderate to severe disabilities, the situation is much worse. Of the total number of children in ECD centres, disabled children make up only 4 percent.

Another factor that influenced access to services and the quality of the services, the report found, was fees.

"While younger children stand to gain more, they have least service access. Grade R has been much more successful in reaching poor rural communities, but by the age of five years an essential developmental opportunity has been lost."

The report recommended that different approaches to access be developed to increase the number of children ECD services reach.

"Given the limited funding and infrastructure, it is particularly difficult for ECD services to reach the poor, vulnerable and rural children whose care-givers are often struggling to meet basic needs."