

Invest in linking needy young children to services

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SOUTH Africa's school results are generally appalling. Poor performance begins in the foundation phase, and the gap between rich and poor pupils simply keeps widening as children progress through school.

In an attempt to close the gap, the National Development Plan proposes an additional year of preschool education.

This has generated much media attention, which has detracted from the plan's important focus on the developmental needs of much younger children. For, without early intervention, an extra year of preschool may simply be too little, too late.

Investing in early childhood development has the potential to shift the life chances of those born in poverty, equalise opportunities and break the intergenerational cycle of inequality.

The first 1 000 days, from conception to three years old, are a particularly sensitive period for brain development. After this, brain development slows and builds on the base already acquired.

Therefore, good nutrition, health and stimulation are essential from the very beginning. Without this strong founda-

tion, children will not be able take full advantage of their preschool education.

So, intervening early is most effective and offers the greatest returns.

This is particularly true for children who experience multiple forms of deprivation, such as malnutrition, poor health, poor and overburdened caregivers and limited access to services.

Specific measures are needed to ensure that these vulnerable children are supported.

Although the government's National Integrated Plan for Early Childhood Development (ECD) provides for a comprehensive range of care and support services from birth to four years old, and prioritises the 2.6 million young children living in poverty, the sad reality is that ECD services are still not reaching the youngest and poorest children, and those with disabilities.

While about 80 percent of five-year-olds attend Grade R, including many of the poorest children, only 18 percent of children under three and about half of three- and four-year-olds attend preschools or crèches.

Children over three benefit from structured learning in groups and poor children get the greatest benefits from

exposure to good programmes. But only one in five of the poorest children attends a preschool, because families cannot afford fees, or no preschool is available.

Centres in poorer communities are often of poorer quality. While children with disabilities are a priority group for early-childhood services, they make up less than 1 percent of the enrolment in ECD centres.

It is usually better for babies and toddlers to be cared for at home, but there is a serious lack of affordable child care for working or studying parents.

Though most care takes place at home, there are few programmes to support parents with childcare, early learning and access to essential services.

Children under two are also the most vulnerable to malnutrition and stunting, which affects brain development.

In the absence of an effective public health programme to identify children at risk and provide adequate nutrition, the child support grant remains the main instrument for addressing children's basic needs.

While the grant is associated with improved growth and preschool attendance, children under two are less likely

to receive it than older children, primarily because their births have not yet been registered.

Ilifa Labantwana's Sobambisana programme has recently evaluated different strategies for increasing access to ECD services in vulnerable communities in four provinces.

The study found that the youngest children, and those least likely to access services, are best reached through programmes that work with families, either at home or in the community.

These programmes have proven effective in linking children to services and supporting early stimulation and responsive parenting.

The message is clear – if all young children are to realise their potential and right to development, we need to invest in young children and ensure that these services reach those children most in need.

● *Linda Biersteker is head of research at the Early Learning Resource Unit. She is a contributing author to the SA Child Gauge 2012, which was released this week by the Children's Institute at UCT. The publication focuses on children and inequality, and is available on www.ci.org.za.*