



The South African Child Gauge<sup>©</sup> 2024

# Policy Brief

## Invest early to boost national development



Finding Thabo is an innovative game that aims to promote responsive caregiving and early stimulation of young children. © Reach Trust



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# How are young children doing in South Africa?

## Clear commitments

As a country South Africa has demonstrated a clear commitment to ensuring that all young children are supported to reach their full health, growth and developmental potential:

- The National Development Plan recognises early childhood development as a key driver of socio-economic transformation and recommends two years of compulsory preschool education (Grade R and pre-Grade R).
- The National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy recognises early childhood development as a universal right and public good, and outlines government's commitment to ensure universal and equitable access to a comprehensive package of ECD services by 2030.

## A strong foundation

These policy commitments have been accompanied by significant investments in the well-being of pregnant women and young children including the provision of free health care, the expansion of the Child Support Grant, and near universal access to Grade R. This provides a strong foundation on which to build future health and prosperity.

## Early antenatal care<sup>a</sup>

70%

## Infants fully immunised at 1 year<sup>a</sup>

82%

## Birth registration in first year<sup>b</sup>

81%

## Access to the Child Support Grant<sup>c + d</sup>

61%

## 3 – 5-year-olds attending early learning programmes<sup>e</sup>

68%

## Early learning programmes receiving an ECD subsidy<sup>f</sup>

33%



7 million children under 6



71% live in poverty<sup>e</sup>



29% are stunted<sup>g</sup>



Only 45% of 4 – 5-year-olds are developmentally on track<sup>h</sup>

## Emerging challenges

But in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, families and government departments have come under increasing pressure as rising poverty and austerity cuts threaten young children's health, survival and development:

- One in every 25 children dies before their fifth birthday.<sup>4</sup>
- Of those that survive, 71% live below the upper-bound poverty line in households that do not have sufficient income to meet their basic needs.<sup>5</sup>
- Over one in four children under five are stunted – a sign of chronic malnutrition that compromises physical growth and brain development.<sup>6</sup>
- Less than half of 4 – 5-year-olds attending early learning programmes are developmentally on track.<sup>7</sup>

## A call to action

It is therefore vital to strengthen our commitment to young children, building on the leadership of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the National Planning Commission, and harnessing the fresh energy of the Government of National Unity to address current challenges and accelerate progress for young children.

<sup>a</sup> District Health Information System data. Available at [hst.org.za](http://hst.org.za) <sup>b</sup> Statistics South Africa, *Recorded Live Births* combined with *Mid-Year Population Estimates*. Pretoria: Stats SA. 2022 (analysis K. Hall) <sup>c</sup> Statistics South Africa, *Mid-Year Population Estimates*. Pretoria: Stats SA. 2022. <sup>d</sup> South African Social Security Agency, *Social Grants Statistical Reports*. Pretoria: SASSA. 2022. <sup>e</sup> Statistics South Africa, *General Household Survey 2022*. Pretoria: Stats SA. 2023. <sup>f</sup> Department of Basic Education, *ECD Census 2021*. Pretoria: DBE. 2022. <sup>g</sup> Simelane T, Mutanga SS, Hongoro C, Parker W, Mjimba V, Zuma K, . . . Marinda E. *National Food and Nutrition Security Survey: National Report*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council. 2023. <sup>h</sup> Giese S, Dawes A, Tredoux C, Mattes F, Bridgman G, van der Berg S, . . . Kotzé J. *Thrive by Five Index Report Revised August 2022*: Innovation Edge, Cape Town. 2022.

## Why invest in early childhood development?

Investment in early childhood development matters, not just for children today, but because it boosts their lifelong health, education and employment prospects.

A child's brain is built only once, and its development is shaped in powerful ways by children's experiences.<sup>1</sup> While positive relationships and healthy living conditions provide a strong foundation for healthy development; poverty, violence, malnutrition and neglect have an adverse effect on the developing brain in ways that become increasingly hardwired and difficult to change.<sup>2</sup>

The science is clear. If we want to break free from the intergenerational cycles of poverty, violence and ill-health, and boost national development, then we need to invest early – from

conception until children start formal school – as investments during this sensitive period of development are most effective and cost effective.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, investments in early childhood development can reduce gender inequality by enabling women to return to work, and by providing jobs for women in the care economy.

Intervene early to close the gap  
and maximise lifelong  
health and development



## What principles should guide our policies and practice?

### **Adopt a whole child – whole-of-society approach**

Children's health, nutrition and cognitive, social and emotional development are interdependent, and they need all five elements of nurturing care in order to thrive: good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, opportunities to learn, and caregivers who are sensitive and responsive to their needs.

The NIECD Policy builds on this foundation and provides for an integrated package of services including maternal and child health, nutrition support, social services, stimulation for early learning, and support for caregivers. It is therefore essential for the whole of government and the whole of society to work together to create a supportive and enabling environment to ensure that all children receive nurturing care and the full package of essential services.

### **Ensure early and sustained investment**

To build a strong foundation, we need to start early – during pregnancy or even preconception – to ensure a

healthy mother and healthy baby. This should be followed by sustained investments in the health, nutrition, care and stimulation of young children to ensure their optimal development. Services should be tailored to support the changing needs of pregnant women, infants and young children at each stage of their development. It is also essential to intervene as early as possible, to identify and support children and families in need of extra care, prevent further harm, and improve outcomes.

### **Maintain a strong focus on equity**

Finally, ECD services need to be of good quality and accessible to all children and families in order to improve outcomes and level the playing field. This includes prioritising interventions to support those children most exposed to risk and adversity – including children affected by poverty, violence and developmental delays – to ensure that no child is left behind.

<sup>1</sup> Richter L, Naicker S, Draper C. The science of early childhood development. In: Slemming W, Biersteker L, Lake L, editors. *South African Child Gauge 2024*. Cape Town: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town; 2024. <sup>2</sup> Walker SP, Wachs TD, Gardner JM, Lozoff B, Wasserman GA, Pollitt E. Child development: Risk factors for adverse outcomes in developing countries. *Lancet*. 2007; 369(9556):145-157. <sup>3</sup> Heckman JJ, Masterov DV. The productivity argument for investing in young children. *Review of Agricultural Economics*. 2007; 29(3):446-493. <sup>4</sup> Preliminary estimates by the MRC Burden of Disease Unit, published by UN Inter-Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation at <https://childmortality.org/all-cause-mortality/data?refArea=ZAF&indicator=MRY0T4>. <sup>5</sup> Statistics South Africa. *General Household Survey 2022*. Pretoria: Stats SA (analysis K Hall & N Segoneco). 2023. <sup>6</sup> Simelane T, Mutanga SS, Hongoro C, Parker W, Mjimba V, Zuma K, . . . Marinda E. *National Food and Nutrition Security Survey: National Report*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council. 2023. <sup>7</sup> Giese S, Dawes A, Tredoux C, Mattes F, Bridgman G, van der Berg S, . . . Kotzé



# Everyone has a role to play in stepping up early childhood development



Children need their caregivers, communities and country to work together to help them thrive.



## Maternal and child health care

Investments in maternal and child health care are essential for optimal health, nutrition and brain development. South Africa has made good progress in increasing the coverage of immunisation, antenatal and postnatal care, and the new Road to Health Book and Side-by-Side Campaign have helped broaden the package of services to ensure that young children not only survive, but thrive.<sup>8</sup>

To further improve outcomes, we need to:

- enhance care and support for pregnant women by providing respectful maternity care; intervening early to address

violence, substance use and mental health problems; and introducing a maternity support grant to improve maternal nutrition and mental health

- invest in community health workers and ensure a stronger focus on maternal, neonatal and child health and nutrition within their training and package of care
- strengthen early identification and support for children with developmental delays, disabilities and long term health conditions.

J. *Thrive by Five Index Report Revised August 2022*: Innovation Edge, Cape Town. [www.thrivebyfive.co.za](http://www.thrivebyfive.co.za); 2022. <sup>8</sup> Bamford L, Slemming W. Ensuring the mothers and young children survive and thrive: The role of the health sector. In: Slemming W, Biersteker L, Lake L, editors. *South African Child Gauge 2024*. Cape Town: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town; 2024. <sup>9</sup> Department of Basic Education. *ECD Census 2021: Report*. Pretoria: DBE; 2022. <sup>10</sup> Biersteker L, Dowdall N. Progress and pathways towards quality early learning: From the home to structured learning programmes. In: Slemming W, Biersteker L, Lake L, editors. *South African Child Gauge 2024*. Cape Town: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town; 2024. <sup>11</sup> Marlow M, Mawoyo T, Chideya Y, Mdluli L, Tomlinson M. It takes more than a village: Why children need their caregivers, community and country to work together to provide nurturing care. In: Slemming W, Biersteker L, Lake L, editors. *South African Child Gauge 2024*. Cape Town: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town; 2024. <sup>12</sup> Naicker S, Gwele M, Samuels A, Delany A, Lake L, Slemming W. All children need some support, but some families need all the support they can get: Achieving equity by providing extra care. In: Slemming W, Biersteker L, Lake L, editors. *South African Child Gauge 2024*. Cape Town: Children's



## Nutrition and food security

One in four young children are stunted, and a further one in four are overweight or obese.<sup>6</sup> This double burden of malnutrition is compromising children's immediate and long term health and education, and is driving a growing burden of adult non-communicable diseases (NCDs) that could overwhelm the health care system.

Political leadership through establishment of the National Food and Nutrition Security Council is therefore needed to fast-track implementation of the National Food and Nutrition Security Plan and ensure that it prioritises high-impact nutrition interventions for women, infants and children. Key interventions should include efforts to:

- restore the value of the Child Support Grant to the food poverty line so that it meets the costs of feeding a child
- introduce income support for pregnant women and ensure early access to the Child Support Grant
- intensify efforts to promote, support and protect exclusive breastfeeding and complementary feeding that is diverse and rich in nutrients
- regulate the marketing of unhealthy foods to young children and reduce the costs of a nutritious food basket
- strengthen nutrition support for young children attending early learning programmes.



## Opportunities for early learning

Babies are ready to learn from the moment they are born, and parents and caregivers are – and remain – the child's first and most important teachers. From 3 – 5 years old, children benefit from more structured early learning programmes (ELPs) including group activities that help them develop social skills – with an emphasis on learning through play.

South Africa has made good progress towards achieving two years of pre-primary education by 2030, with near universal attendance of Grade R, but ELPs are primarily provided by the private sector with insufficient state support. Stringent registration requirements and limited provincial budgets mean that only 33% of ELPs receive the ECD subsidy,<sup>9</sup> and its value is too low to cover the costs of running a centre, so most rely on fees. This chronic underfunding compromises both access and quality – especially for children living in poor households – while investment in the early stimulation of younger children continues to lag behind.<sup>10</sup>

To improve outcomes, it is essential to:

- provide information to deepen caregivers' understanding of how to stimulate early learning at each stage of their child's development.
- increase the value of the ECD subsidy to improve quality and learning outcomes (an estimated R34/child/day)

- simplify and speed up the registration process to enable more ELPs and children to benefit from the ECD subsidy
- support the education, training and professionalisation of ECD practitioners and centre managers (including their conditions of service and career paths)
- monitor and support ELPs to improve quality and child outcomes.



## Care and support for parents and caregivers

All children need nurturing care. But the capacity of parents and caregivers to support children's healthy development is often compromised by factors outside their control. This includes the ways in which poverty and a lack of resources and support impact on caregivers' physical and mental health, and the disproportionate burden of care carried by women.

It is therefore critical to extend our efforts beyond parenting programmes to address the social and structural barriers to nurturing care, by:

- encouraging men to play an active role in the care of young children
- providing maternity and parental leave and affordable childcare to enable women to return to work
- providing income support to alleviate stress and meet the costs of raising a child
- drawing on community networks and faith-based organisations in order to strengthen natural support systems that allow parents to share and support one another in finding solutions to common challenges.<sup>11</sup>



## Children in need of extra care

All children benefit from universal services such as primary health care, but far too many young children in South Africa are exposed to multiple adversities that compromise their health and development – including high levels of poverty, malnutrition, violence and neglect – that often co-occur in the same households.<sup>12</sup>

It is most effective – and cost effective – to intervene early in the life course to minimise harm and optimise outcomes. This requires:

- building the capacity of frontline workers to identify and respond proactively to danger signs
- strengthening referral systems and care pathways to ensure children and families are able to access the support they need and adopting an intersectoral approach to address multiple forms of adversity, and
- providing a continuum of care from specialised services to home- and community-based care that is able to respond to children and families' changing needs.

# Key ingredients of a strong ECD system

South Africa has put in place a comprehensive legal and policy framework to guide the delivery of ECD services, but robust systems are needed to drive implementation.

## 1. An enabling policy environment

The NIECD Policy provides a clear mandate and policy framework to guide provision of a comprehensive package of services for young children and families, and the current review of the Policy offers an opportunity for departments to reaffirm their commitments to young children and to step up service delivery. The proposed amendments to the Children's Act are a welcome step forward in streamlining the registration requirements for ECD programmes to enhance access and quality.

## 2. Strong leadership and coordination

Political will is essential to translate the NIECD Policy into action. The DBE is now responsible for providing leadership and strategic direction for the ECD sector as a whole – including health, nutrition and early learning. The recent meeting of the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Early Childhood Development should serve as a catalyst to establish similar coordinating structures at national, provincial and district level to enable effective collaboration across different sectors and services, and between government and civil society.

## 3. Finance

Financial allocations to ECD services are a clear signal of a country's commitment to its youngest citizens. Yet funding remains low and inequitable, favouring older children. The over-reliance on user-fees for ELP services is unsustainable and unjust, with those from the poorest households continuing to be most disadvantaged.<sup>13</sup> A substantial increase in government funding is needed to improve ECD services delivery. While some support can be leveraged from the private sector, the majority of funds should come from government in order to address inequalities, ensure sustainability and deliver services at scale.<sup>14</sup>

## 4. A skilled and professional ECD workforce

The delivery of quality services is dependent on a skilled ECD workforce including sufficient numbers of community health workers, ECD practitioners, health, allied and social service professionals. Yet nearly half of ECD practitioners (48%) do not have an appropriate qualification,<sup>9</sup> and the ECD subsidy is not sufficient to enable ECD practitioners to earn a reasonable wage, nor to develop and retain a skilled workforce. The function shift provides an opportunity to support their professionalisation and improve funding norms to enhance their conditions of service and career pathways.

Greater investment is also needed in community health workers to scale up community-based support for pregnant women, mothers and young children – including a stronger emphasis on maternal and child health within their training and package of care.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the training of social service professionals should include a dedicated focus on how to work with young children so that they are better equipped to intervene and support young children in difficult circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Integrated data systems

Good quality data is essential to support population-based planning, monitoring and evaluation. Recent initiatives such as the Thrive by Five Index and Early Childhood Administration and Reporting System (eCares) are enabling DBE to monitor access and the quality of early learning programmes. These efforts need to be coupled with the establishment of an ECD Dashboard and Outcomes Framework to monitor delivery across the broader package of ECD services and to guide decision-making at national and provincial level. Finally, it is important to collect child-level data to make it possible to track – and support – children across services and over time.<sup>16</sup>

## 6. Effective delivery systems

Realising the right to early childhood development requires strong delivery systems that make best use of available resources and that are responsive to local needs. A mix of delivery platforms is needed to ensure that essential services reach children and families in the right dose, in the right place, at the right time. Public-private partnerships are proving effective in mobilising resources and in achieving collective impact. Other fruitful approaches include integrating services at the point of delivery (for example by establishing additional Home Affairs offices at maternity and obstetric units to enable early birth registration); using home visits to extend support to children who live far from facilities or who need extra care; and establishing local networks and directories of services to strengthen collaboration and referral pathways. Proposed amendments to the Children's Act aim to strengthen the role of local government, requiring municipalities to develop ECD strategies and integrate them into their Integrated Development Plans and municipal budgets.

Creating an enabling environment for early childhood development cannot only happen from the top down, it also needs to be built from the ground up. Achieving progress will depend on strong leadership and political will at the highest level, coupled with the efforts of local champions who can breathe life into the system and make it work.

The *South African Child Gauge* is an annual publication of the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town, that tracks progress for South Africa's children. It aims to make the latest research accessible to decision-makers in order to inform evidence-based policies and programmes for children.

This policy brief presents the key findings of the *2024 Child Gauge* which focuses on early childhood development and the full book can be accessed at [www.ci.uct.ac.za](http://www.ci.uct.ac.za).

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