



NURTURING CARE
FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Improving early childhood development through health services during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond

The window for maximizing young children's health and development is narrow: up to age three, the brain develops faster than at any other time, laying the foundation for an individual's health, education, well-being and productivity throughout life. Young children's needs cannot wait, even during this time of global crisis. Now, more than ever, we need governments, communities and partners to strengthen health systems, provide adequate protection and support to health workers at all levels, and enable parents and caregivers to provide nurturing care for their children.



“Children facing acute deprivation in nutrition, protection or stimulation, or periods of prolonged exposure to toxic stress, during the critical window of early childhood development are likely to develop lifelong challenges.”

António Guterres,
United Nations Secretary-General

The COVID-19 pandemic is putting enormous strain on parents and caregivers, compromising their ability to provide young children with nurturing care in a safe and secure environment, including access to health care, immunisation, nutrition, opportunities for early learning, and interactions that are developmentally stimulating and emotionally supportive.

Health systems are also strained, diverting limited resources to the pandemic response. Evidence from past epidemics has shown that, as resources are diverted elsewhere, routine health services for pregnant women and children are disrupted or suspended which disproportionately affects the most vulnerable and those left furthest behind. Screening and treatment for maternal and child malnutrition decline, as do health-seeking behaviours.

While few children have died from the virus, evidence from past epidemics strongly suggests that they will be among its most numerous victims.

This crisis threatens to reverse hard-won gains for early childhood development, further jeopardizing the health and futures of hundreds of millions of children. For instance, according to recent modelling, weakened health systems and reduced use of services may result in:

- 1,157,000 additional child deaths and 56,700 additional maternal deaths in 118 low- and middle-income countries;¹ and
- over five million additional children suffering from severe malnutrition, almost 40% more than the current numbers in 24 countries facing humanitarian crisis.²

The health, development and lifelong potential of millions of children around the world hang in the balance. Vulnerable children, including children with disabilities, sick children and families affected by HIV or living in conflict or humanitarian settings, are most at risk.

It is imperative that national budgetary allocations for women's and children's health and nutrition are not diverted and remain a priority during the COVID-19 pandemic. As recovery efforts proceed, further investments in strengthening health systems and expanding primary health care are essential. Strong health systems ensure health workers at all levels are protected, informed and equipped with the resources they need to support parents and caregivers to provide nurturing care. Strong health systems lay the foundation for children's health and development, educational achievement, economic productivity and resilience.

¹ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3576549

² <https://www.wvi.org/publications/report/coronavirus-health-crisis/covid-19-aftershocks-secondary-impacts-threaten-more>

Governments, communities and partners must work with and through each country's health system to:

- 1** **Ensure that all pregnant women have timely access to high-quality and respectful care before, during and after childbirth, by:**
- maintaining and increasing human and financial resources for maternal and newborn health and nutrition services;
 - communicating the measures in place to ensure safe maternal health services during COVID-19; and
 - supporting all new mothers – including those who test positive for COVID-19 – to breastfeed safely, provide skin-to-skin contact and practice rooming-in with their baby.

- 2** **Ensure continuing access for all children to high-quality essential primary health-care and nutrition services, by:**
- minimizing disruptions to essential health services (e.g. immunization, treatment of illness, nutrition counselling, and screening and treatment for malnutrition, developmental delays and disabilities);
 - mobilizing and supporting community health workers to safely provide services in communities, using digital and online platforms (e.g. telehealth) whenever feasible; and
 - regularly assessing the food security and nutritional status of highly vulnerable populations, and strengthening linkages between health, nutrition, water and sanitation, and child protection services.

- 3** **Support parents and caregivers to take care of their physical and mental well-being, so they can better provide nurturing care for their children, by:**
- providing social protection mechanisms now and in the COVID-19 recovery phase to meet basic needs and lessen stress due to economic hardship, using an equity lens to identify and support the most vulnerable;
 - ensuring access to mental health services and psychosocial support for all those in need; and
 - equipping parents and caregivers with age-appropriate play-based games and activities to reduce anxiety, promote positive parent-child interactions and support early learning.

- 4** **Enable health workers to safely identify and respond to signs of stress, isolation and poor mental health among parents, caregivers and children, by:**
- providing health workers, including community health workers, with the necessary personal protective equipment, psychosocial support and training to maintain continuity of services;
 - ensuring that health workers are trained and supported to provide information about and referrals to relevant social protection services; and
 - training health workers to identify and respond to the particular needs of children and families with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.

- 5** **Develop and enhance health system mechanisms to ensure the safety and security of children and their caregivers, by:**
- including, as part of routine health services, mechanisms to identify and respond to signs of intimate partner violence and violence against children, as well as exploitation, neglect and abuse;
 - prioritizing child protection efforts that identify and reach out to children at risk and strengthening referral systems between health and social welfare services; and
 - maintaining the health and safety of childcare settings.

These key messages were developed by the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health in collaboration with:

Bernard van Leer Foundation
 Conrad N. Hilton Foundation
 Early Childhood Development Action Network
 Early Opportunities
 Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance
 PATH
 Promundo
 Save the Children
 Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement
 UNICEF
 World Bank Group
 World Health Organization
 World Vision International

FOR MORE INFORMATION

nurturing-care.org
[#NurturingCare](https://twitter.com/NurturingCare)
[@NurturingCare](https://twitter.com/NurturingCare)