

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD PEACE CONSORTIUM

GLOBAL CALL TO ACTION IN RESPONSE
TO COVID-19 FOR CHILDREN IN FRAGILE
AND CONFLICT AFFECTED SETTINGS

*The Promise of Early
Childhood Development*

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INVEST IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AS A FOUNDATION FOR PEACE AND SECURITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE.

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The COVID-19 outbreak is exacerbating existing crises around the world and where inequalities are becoming starkly evident, further violating the rights of vulnerable children. The pandemic severely affects young children's physical and mental health, their social and emotional development, safety, economic security and more, particularly in conflict-affected and fragile settings. In areas with the most severe disruptions in health systems and essential services, it is estimated that an additional 6,000 children under the age of 5 could die every day over the next six months, half of whom would be new-borns ([The Lancet](#)).

In this global call to action, the Early Childhood Peace Consortium entreats governments, policy makers and community leaders to safeguard the increasingly undermined rights of young children living in fragile contexts and to prioritize investment in their survival, development and protection. We stand in solidarity and collaborate with the United Nations and the wider international community in the global response to this pandemic-induced humanitarian crisis.

Early childhood development strategies and services are now more important than ever, to mitigate the immediate and long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis and its indirect consequences on the most vulnerable young children and families. Supporting and empowering them today can not only interrupt cycles of racial injustice and inequality, but build a strong foundation for peace and security, resilience, social justice and social cohesion. We invite you to join us in this global call to action, to ensure young children are not forgotten amidst this pandemic and to invest in their – and our – shared futures in a just world.

Who We Are

The **Early Childhood Peace Consortium (ECPC)** is a global movement of United Nations agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations, academia, practitioners and the private sector focused on sharing scientific and practice-based evidence on how investment in early childhood development (ECD) can contribute to sustainable peace, social cohesion and social justice. We recognise that investing in ECD is a powerful and cost-effective strategy for reducing violence, poverty and exclusion and for building peaceful societies.

The Consortium upholds the urgent calls from world leaders to prioritise peace as humanity grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic. We join the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in his COVID-19 call for an immediate Global Ceasefire in all corners of the world ([United Nations](#)), a message echoed by world leaders, and most importantly, by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore, who urged warring parties to stop fighting to safeguard the lives of children living in conflict-affected areas ([UNICEF](#)).

The ECPC strongly supports
the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' appeal to protect the rights of children and safeguard their well-being during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

We stand in solidarity and collaborate with the UN Secretary-General, UNICEF, WHO and all other United Nations Agencies, as well as with Governments, Religious Leaders, Non-Governmental Organizations, academia, Early Childhood Networks and civil society as a whole in the response to the global pandemic humanitarian crisis, to mitigate its impact on families and young children living in situations of conflict, military occupation, and displacement.



Impact on the Most Vulnerable Children

The COVID-19 outbreak and containment measures exacerbate existing crises and further violate vulnerable children's rights. The pandemic severely affects young children's physical and mental health, their social and emotional development, safety, economic security, access to education, play, recreational activities and more ([United Nations](#)).

250M children live in areas affected by conflict. UNICEF

An estimated **3.7M** children live in refugee camps or collective centres. IOM

60% of all children (1.4 billion) live in countries with a full or partial lockdown due to COVID-19. UNICEF

29M babies globally were born in areas affected by conflict in 2018. UNICEF

An additional **6,000** children under 5 could die every day over the next 6 months if coverage reductions are severe. THE LANCET

CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED AND FRAGILE SETTINGS

Children and their parents/caregivers living in conflict-affected and fragile settings already struggle with limited access to health services, including vaccinations. Virus-related containment measures negatively impact their already volatile safety and access to education (UNHCR). With school and childcare centre closures, young children's learning, nutrition and hygiene suffer. For hundreds of millions of children, these closures can mean going without daily school meals, clean water and sanitation facilities (United Nations).

Measures to contain the pandemic, including movement restrictions lead to economic insecurity which is likely to result in increased child labour, sexual exploitation and trafficking, thereby perpetuating cycles of violence. Lockdown measures also increase the risk that children will suffer or witness violence and abuse (UNHCR; UN News). Furthermore, more children and abusers than ever before are online, heightening the risk of exposure to cyberbullying, hate speech, sexual exploitation and abuse (EVAC; UN News). Childcare and school closures weaken or eliminate important early warning mechanisms for child abuse and neglect detection and reporting. Hence, there is an urgent need to protect children from violence amidst the pandemic.

What Does Science Teach Us on the Importance of Early Childhood Development in the Context of COVID-19?

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to contain it has produced huge societal public health and economic challenges across the globe. Although there is still a great deal we do not know, infectious disease experts have clearly outlined the steps we all need to take to limit the spread of the coronavirus (WHO Advice for Public).

Although most children are less likely to be symptomatic with COVID-19 compared to adults (Ludvigsson), data is now emerging that a small percentage of children can develop a novel pediatric multi-system inflammatory syndrome (PMI) that can be deadly (Kendou). In addition, there is no question that there are and will be many other life-threatening adverse consequences of the pandemic for millions of children across the globe. Children are, in many ways, the hidden victims of the pandemic.

Parents/caregivers are the first line of response to protect and support their young children's health, learning and socio-emotional development, particularly in a crisis such as a pandemic (UNICEF COVID Guide for Parents). Consequently, separations from primary attachment figures (parents/caregivers) due to illness, quarantine, hospitalization or death will have immediate, harmful, and long-term effects on a child. Adverse effects also result from economic losses from lost wages and jobs of parents/caregivers, associated food insecurity, and the potential loss of housing. These factors are compounded by the

In a statement, 22 leaders of UN agencies and international organizations called on governments to provide child protection case management and emergency alternative care arrangements, and to ensure that all virus containment measures include social protection systems that support children's rights (EVAC).

CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

Even in the absence of a pandemic, uprooted children, mothers, mothers-to-be and families – those living as refugees, migrants or internally displaced persons (IDPs) – face immense barriers to accessing health services and sanitation (UNICEF). The rapid spread of COVID-19 and the containment measures are worsening this already precarious situation, making migrants, refugees and their children, disproportionately vulnerable to exclusion, xenophobia, stigmatization and discrimination.

In camps or in overcrowded detention centres, the uprooted often live in deeply unsafe and highly stressful environments with no possibility of social distancing (CRC COVID-19 Statement). This pandemic also poses greater challenges for migrant and displaced families and children as they are faced with higher rates of deportation and mass expulsions; these practices threaten children's rights and are a risk to public health.

psychosocial stress experienced by parents/caregivers – especially mothers – which seriously undermines their mental health and ability to provide nurturing care (Lundberg; Barroo-Castellano). The unique challenges of uprooted families or those living in conflict-affected settings greatly exacerbate these adverse effects. As a result, hundreds of millions of children are now growing up in environments conducive to "toxic stress" which can impair their neurological development and will likely prevent them from reaching their full developmental potential (Shonkoff). Sadly, this can cause lifelong challenges and become a self-perpetuating and intergenerational cycle (Shonkoff).

The good news is that developmental neuroscience has led to a revolutionary shift in assessing the interplay between genetic alterations in the developing brain and early life experiences, both positive and negative. The neuroscience and other multiple disciplines, such as epigenetics, psychology, and economics, indicate how ECD services can prompt members of high-risk groups to rebuild trust, re-connect, and develop long-lasting resilience (Donaldson). The science heralds a new era, asserting that ECD is a vital opportunity for building a sustainable future fit for the world's children and empowering them through promoting 'The Culture of Peace, as called for by the United Nations (UN Resolution A/RES/74/21).

430% of all

under 5 years of age in the world are at risk of not achieving their developmental potential.

BLACK

Because of the pandemic, a much **higher percentage of children are at risk** for having devastating physical, socioemotional, and cognitive consequences over the course of their entire lives.

LUNDBERG

How a child is **parented** provides a legacy that transcends their genes (epigenetics) and can **directly affect the development of the child's brain**, their cognitive and socioemotional skills, as well as their mental and physical health.

BLACK

Confinement and/or crowded conditions can also **increase child abuse and exploitation** as well as domestic and gender-based violence.

The **costs of inaction** in early childhood, which can lead to poor health, nutrition, and inadequate learning, are estimated to be as great as **26% of the annual adult income**, trapping families into transgenerational poverty. As a result, countries may forfeit up to twice their current GDP expenditures on health and education.

THE LANCET

13.70% rate of return

Investing in ECD can have a rate of return of 13.7%. ECD programmes have been shown to markedly reduce government expenditures in health care, public aid, child protective services, and the criminal justice system.

UNICEF.US.GOV

Recommendations

IMMEDIATE

- **Maintain** and further **invest** in quality programmes and services for families and their young children that live in situations of conflict, military occupation ([Watchlist](#)) and displacement during the COVID-19 response efforts ([LEEDS](#)).
- **Ensure** that essential child protection services are recognised as lifesaving and continue to be provided and made accessible to all children even during lockdowns, quarantines and other types of restrictions.
- **Prioritise** protection of young children, who in this time of crisis are highly susceptible to neglect, abuse, violence, exploitation, and stigma as their parents/caregivers experience increased instability and stress, which may result in long-term and irreversible negative consequences.
- **Use mass media** – radio, television and social media – to promote psychosocial support, cognitive development, nutrition and physical activity. Ensure existing online resources are accessible and address pre-existing inequalities in fragile and conflict affected settings. Ensure children's experiences are safe and positive during the COVID-19 pandemic ([UNICEF](#)).
- **Invest** in new research to understand the impact of COVID-19 on children and their families: (i) the adverse impact of the pandemic on parents/caregivers and their ability to provide nurturing care for their children; (ii) the social-emotional impact of the virus and (the measures to control it) on children; (iii) the role children play as vectors of the infection; and (iv) the underlying biology and optimal treatment for the newly identified PMI syndrome that is associated with COVID-19. A more evidence-based understanding of these issues will help governments in their decision making about opening or closing ECD centres and schools at various stages of the pandemic.

MEDIUM-TERM

- **Ensure** an inclusive approach for all children and their families living in situations of conflict, military occupation and fragility, including migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons, who have a right to the highest attainable standard of health ([OHCHR](#)). Those children should be entitled to protection for themselves and their families, including having access to testing and early detection for COVID-19, and the means to physically distance, self-isolate and take other appropriate physical and mental health measures ([IASO](#)).

- **Uphold** the rights of vulnerable children and their families as we emerge from this pandemic into recovery. It is vital to have ECD programmes that are multileveled, benefiting the child and parents/caregivers; the community, and institutions at national, regional and local levels. Programmes should be safe, protective, inclusive, accessible and most importantly, culturally sensitive, to allow children and their families the space they need to be the driving force for social change.

- **Protect** women's and girls' rights, without discrimination, and support community-based action through gender-based analysis to favour their empowerment and social inclusion.

LONG-TERM

- **Build** on the extensive body of international research on the power of ECD to promote peace and sustainable development.
- **Invest** in strengthening systems (e.g. through financial resources, capacity building, personnel training) with a holistic and whole-of-government (multi-ministry) approach.

Call to Action

- 1 **Reaffirm** commitment to human rights and the rights of children that are being undermined during the global pandemic crisis.
- 2 **Prioritise** investment in the survival, development and protection of children living in situations of conflict, military occupation, and displacement.
- 3 **Protect** and **prioritise** investments in Early Childhood Development programmes and services in the global pandemic response and recovery efforts.
- 4 **Ensure** that gender equality, inclusion and empowerment of children, parents/caregivers, families and communities be at the centre of COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.
- 5 **Implement** more effective and **inclusive** policies and practices in all countries, ensuring that early childhood programmes and services are essential in promoting The Culture of Peace ([UN Resolution A/RES/74/21](#)) and in sustaining peace.

In this global pandemic that warrants the participation of all members of society for containment, and where inequalities become starkly evident and pose greater risks to the vulnerable, engaging families and children is imperative. ECD services can be a cost-effective and sustainable way to empower families and communities to interrupt cycles of poverty and violence, as well as build resilience and social cohesion.

Endorsees: The Members of the Early Childhood Peace Consortium—ECPCC

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RESOURCES / MATERIALS

For evidence-based resources including information and policy briefs developed by our Consortium of global experts, please visit "Future Child" by the Early Childhood Peace Consortium (ECPCC) at [futurechild.org](#).

CONTACT US

To receive print copies of this Call to Action and/or to schedule a brief virtual or in-person presentation by a consortium member having expertise in your area of interest, please contact us at covid-19@ecppcpe.org. We will be pleased to meet you, provide you answers to questions, as well as supply you with additional materials to help you Build Back Better after Coronavirus COVID-19 using early childhood development strategies.

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Supporting Organizations



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 16

“Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.”

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IS THE BEGINNING.



#ECD4peace

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