



**Cross Country IDELA findings fueling progress
on ECD access, quality and equity**

Executive Summary

Windows into Early Learning and Development

Introduction

The first five years of a child's life is a time of great promise and rapid change, when the developing brain is most open to the influence of relationships and experiences. However, millions of children across the world are at risk of not reaching their full potential, because they do not get the care and early stimulation they need.

The [Windows into Early Learning and Development](#) report presents research on early childhood development (ECD), and makes recommendations about what is needed to improve children's exposure to care, stimulation, and play in the early years that will impact their lifelong development.

The report uses recent IDELA (International Development and Early Learning Assessment) evidence to investigate factors influencing child development, and ECD approaches that work for children in low- and middle-income countries. It provides lessons learned from existing ECD programs and identifies strategies and approaches that are improving learning and development for the world's most deprived children.

IDELA

Evidence presented in this paper uses the [International Development and Early Learning Assessment, or IDELA](#). This metric is a holistic, rigorous, open source, direct child assessment that is easily adapted and used in different national and cultural contexts. Save the Children began developing IDELA in 2011 and the tool was released for public use in 2014. Since then, IDELA has been used for evaluations by Save the Children and over two dozen partner organizations in 35 countries. IDELA is also the focus of ongoing psychometric analyses with New York University's Global TIES (Transforming Intervention Effectiveness and Scale) for Children.

Four Lessons from IDELA: Evidence to Action

The learning from Save the Children's programs provides four strong indications of how to move forward the ECD agenda, especially for the most deprived children.

1. To reach the most vulnerable children, we need to go beyond preschools.

To reach the SDGs and ensure that all girls and boys, especially the most deprived, are developmentally on-track

requires continued investment in interventions beyond preschool walls. As countries work towards universal preschool coverage, transitional strategies are needed to support children who need an early learning boost where there is no preschool.

2. Caring and stimulating environments – at home and in centers – improving child development.

High quality caregiving must be supported both in homes and in centers to build strong foundations for young girls and boys. Parents' daily interactions with their children are a critical factor impacting a child's development. Center-based ECD programs need to have a primary focus on the quality of activities and interactions with young children.

3. Serious focus and investment is needed to close the early gaps for the most vulnerable young children.

Rural, linguistic minority and refugee children are falling behind those who have a more stable environment and need urgent support. These gaps can be addressed with targeted early interventions. The effects of adversity on child development are cumulative, so the interventions need to address the various risk factors and support early learning as well as social protection. Early childhood interventions need to be equalizing and target the most deprived.

4. Start Early!

This is Save the Children's first principle of literacy. The earlier children receive learning support at home or in centers, the less likely they are to be at risk for poor developmental outcomes. Through our preschool work in many countries, we have learned that interventions for older children can open doors and foster dialogue about early learning and development for children under the age of three.

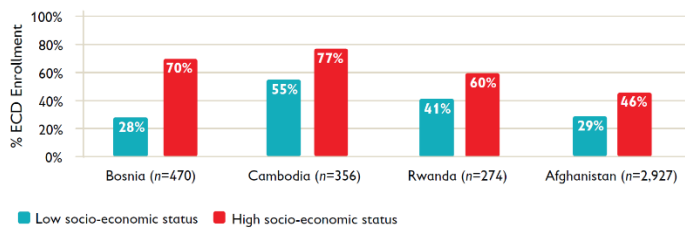
The most vulnerable children are not in preschool

Global indicators suggest that as of 2014, 18 percent of children in low-income and 50 percent of children in lower middle-income countries have access to pre-primary education. However, these national participation rates mask vast underlying inequities. The absence of ECD enrolment data from many low-income countries conceals a much lower rate of access for children in the poorest countries. Moreover, within countries that do report information on ECD enrolment, access is often substantially lower in rural than in urban areas and most limited for the poorest children (Figure 1).

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Figure 1: Children from wealthier families in program sites are more likely to be enrolled in ECD programs



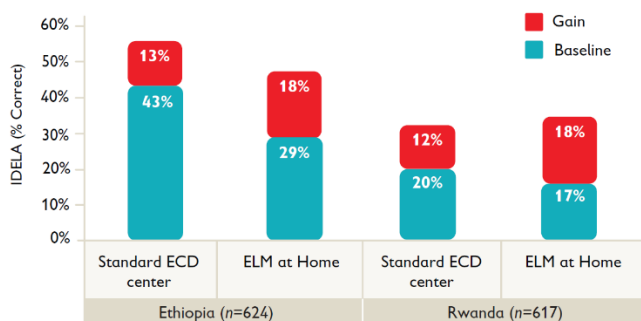
Note: Family wealth is defined as a sum of commonly owned assets, which are different in each context.

Both global monitoring data and results from Save the Children's ECD work around the world highlight the inequity in access to ECD programs. In contexts ranging from low- to upper middle-income countries, the children who are least likely to be accessing ECD programs are the poorest and most marginalized. While many governments around the globe are making strides towards improving access to preschool classes, it will take many years for these aspirations to be realized. In the meantime, children in the most marginalized communities are falling further and further behind their more advantaged peers.

Promising impact of ELM at Home

Two studies of Save the Children's Emergent Literacy and Math (ELM) at Home programs from eastern Africa highlight the successes possible through home-based ECD support. In both Ethiopia and Rwanda, Save the Children has implemented ELM at Home to teach and empower parents to engage in play-based literacy and math activities at home. The results were powerful: children in both country sites made greater progress than peers in standard center-based ECD.

Figure 2: With high quality stimulation at home, children make comparable gains to those enrolled in ECD centers

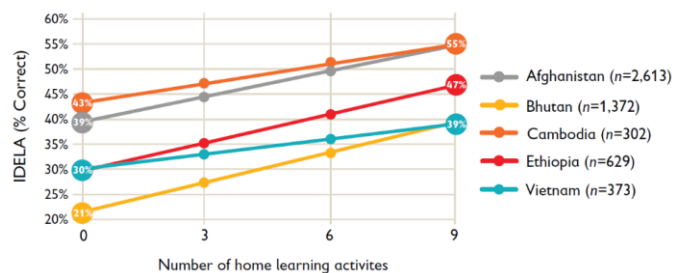


The cases of Ethiopia and Rwanda are not unique. Governments in many LMICs are adopting policies aimed at providing more access to ECD centers. However, it will take many more than 15 years to mobilize the resources necessary for the full scope of these policies to be realized.

Quality interactions boost early development

While the quality of center-based settings is very important, the quality of a home environment is what children experience from birth and what they come home to after a morning spent at an ECD center, if they are lucky enough to attend one. This means that these environments are of tremendous importance for early development and learning.

Figure 3: Early learning and development among 5-year-old children is supported by play/learning activities at home



First and foremost, home environments need to be safe for children, with parents providing nurturing care. Research has shown that negative experiences in early childhood can change the structure of the brain and weaken the foundations for learning, health, social skills, and productivity. Therefore, Save the Children promotes quality interactions at home from birth to promote early stimulation and learning.

Evidence that quality in preschool centers promotes learning and development drives Save the Children and partners to actively intervene to enhance quality and thus early learning and development. IDELA data alongside measures of center-based quality in Rwanda and Bhutan show that the higher the quality, the greater the learning.

Save the Children advocates for the increase children's learning through play, cooperation, and exploration with supportive attention from adults inside their homes and at ECD centers. This simply means that adults engage with children frequently – talking to them, playing with them, exploring the world around them – in an environment free from violence and abuse. Experiencing quality early stimulation not only promotes children's development in early childhood but holds equal promise for tomorrow's schoolchildren to enter school more prepared to interact, explore, and learn.

The equalizing potential of ECD

Poverty, geography, ethnicity and language, and refugee status can all negatively impact children's healthy development. Effective early childhood interventions are a proven means to avoid and reverse these deficits. Save the

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Children use the IDELA and caregiver questionnaires both to begin examining inequities in the communities we serve and as a means to measure our progress in bridging them.

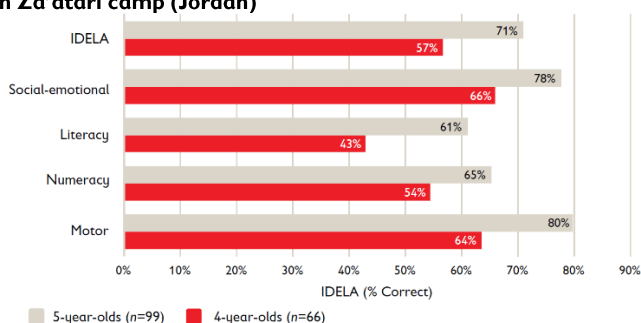
POVERTY during childhood has severe and negative consequences for early learning and development. In the Afar Region of Ethiopia, a 2016 IDELA study found that children from low socio-economic status families are years behind their more affluent peers. A six-year-old child from a low socio-economic status family was predicted to have the same developmental level as a four-year-old child from a high socio-economic status family.

Simply due to their hard-to-reach status, **RURAL** populations are often overlooked and benefit less from the development of the country as a whole. The findings from a national IDELA study in Bhutan demonstrated that rural children lagged nearly 50% behind their urban peers

Children from families who speak the majority language of a country or are part of its majority **ETHNICITY** grow up in a learning environment that is, quite literally, designed for them. The same is not true for many minorities worldwide. Children of minority ethnic groups often face the challenge of learning in an unfamiliar language and IDELA data from Vietnam and Lao show they lag behind their peers in literacy skills.

REFUGEE children require special attention and care. The psychological stress of conflict and constant movement and a lack of formal educational opportunities lead to drastic consequences for early childhood development. In Za'atari refugee camp, Save the Children uses both home and center-based options to promote early learning and development and IDELA baseline data (Figure 4) will enable development and testing of supportive home and center-based programs.

Figure 4: Average learning and development of 4- and 5-year-olds in Za'atari camp (Jordan)



We must focus our attention on improving outcomes for the most marginalized children to foster a more equitable society for all. Solutions to inequitable situations require testing and measurement to ensure they work at achieving this goal.

Call to Action

To ensure that all children will be developmentally on track and that once in school they learn, we must start early. Unless governments, donors, non-governmental organizations, and development agencies make investments in children's early learning foundations right now, it will be impossible to achieve SDG 4, and many of the other SDGs, by 2030. Early childhood serves as the foundation for human capital development and as a strategy to break the inter-generational cycles of poverty and inequity. Urgent action is needed to:

INVEST in the early years, especially for the most deprived. Investments must provide early learning opportunities for the most vulnerable girls and boys while they build towards the goal of all children having access to at least one year of formal pre-primary education. Regardless of context, we cannot afford to invest only in pre-primary structures while the most vulnerable are excluded. Further, urgent investment is needed to support the youngest refugee children and mitigate the effect of adversity on their development.

MONITOR and build stronger evidence for young children. We need to learn from the lessons of primary education that children attending schools does not necessarily mean that they are learning. Strong monitoring, along with a strategic research agenda, are essential to ensuring that programs work and that they work for the most vulnerable. Stronger evidence can enable us to be a stronger voice for children. Countries must ensure that mechanisms are in place to monitor child development outcomes in order to know if they are actually making progress and whether they are reaching the most deprived children.

SCALE-UP approaches that work and document their cost effectiveness and impact on equity. High quality preschool programs and learning opportunities that go beyond preschools improve outcomes for children. Save the Children's innovative programs have demonstrated models to support parents and communities in improving children's development. Given what we know about the lifelong impact of adversity and violence on young children, approaches must also address the risks children face and work with mothers, fathers, and families to end violence in homes and communities. Investing in early learning and care builds the foundations to improve later education outcomes and close equity gaps, but more evidence of such models at scale, their cost effectiveness, and their ability to close equity gaps is needed.