

A smiling woman with dark hair, wearing a pink top and a necklace, is holding a baby. The baby is wearing a light blue patterned shirt and a red hood. The background is a bright blue, slightly textured surface.

unicef 
for every child

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

in the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2018–2021

Early childhood development is defined as the period from conception up to school entry. It is a unique window of opportunity for children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development, which occurs as the result of the interaction between the environment and the child.¹



Photo: UNICEF St. Kitts and Nevis/Christine Nesbitt ©

Early Childhood Development

A UNICEF priority for every child

While children's lives have certainly improved in recent decades, persistent inequities and a lack of opportunities endanger the futures of millions of children around the world. An estimated 43 per cent of children – some 249 million – under 5 years of age in low- and middle-income countries are at risk of poor development due to extreme poverty and stunting.² Millions more are deprived of the caring and nurturing environment they need to thrive.

To improve children's chances in early childhood and to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, including Goals 2.2; 3.2, 16.2. and particularly Goal 4.2, efforts will now have to outpace the rate of progress achieved in the past. The good news is that promising evidence points to early childhood interventions that can potentially achieve these goals.³

Building brains and futures

In recent decades, advances in neuroscience have provided insight into the way babies' brains develop. In the early moments of life, children's brains develop at a speed of over 1 million new neural connections per second, a pace that is never again repeated.⁴ Evidence has also shown that the brain-building process is fuelled by adequate nutrition, protection from violence and environmental toxins, and responsive stimulation, as core elements of Nurturing Care.⁵ These insights have illuminated the links between ECD and a child's future health, well-being and earnings as an adult. For example, investment in ECD initiatives can lead to better individual adult incomes of up to 25 per cent.⁶ The rate of return on ECD investments can be more than 13 per cent.⁷



The Sustainable Development Goals

In 2015, world leaders adopted 17 goals aimed at creating a more peaceful, prosperous and sustainable planet for all.



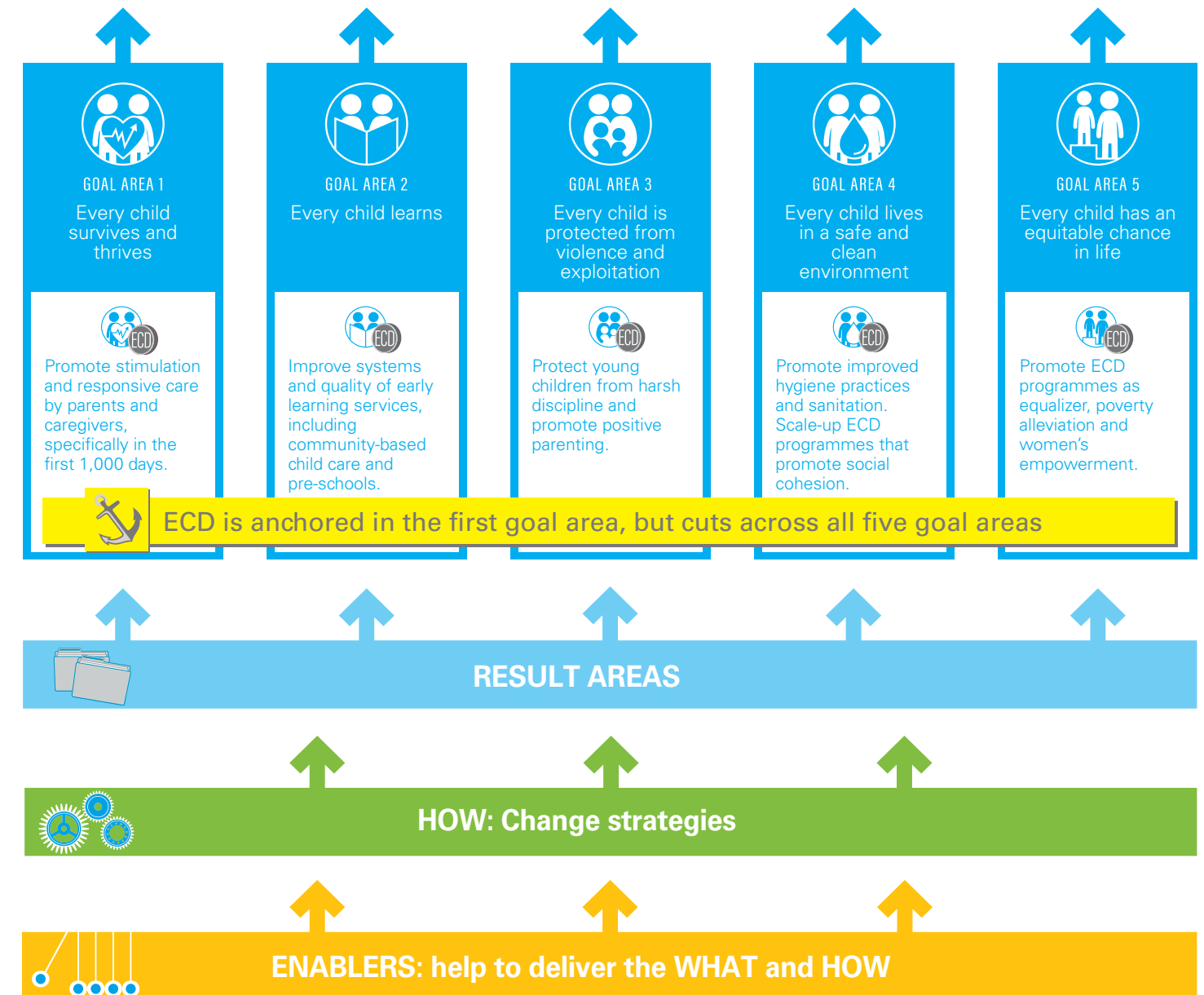
ECD and the UNICEF Strategic Plan

The UNICEF Strategic Plan 2018–2021 takes effect as the global community intensifies its work towards achieving the SDGs. The SP recognizes the importance of the early years and the need to work across sectors to achieve impact on ECD outcomes and the catalytic role of a strong early childhood for a bright adolescent future. The SP describes the results to be achieved by UNICEF and key partners by 2021 (the 'what') and outlines the change strategies necessary for the achievement of these results (the 'how').

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EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN UNICEF'S STRATEGIC PLAN 2018-2021

Realizing the rights of **every child**, especially the most disadvantaged



The What: Results

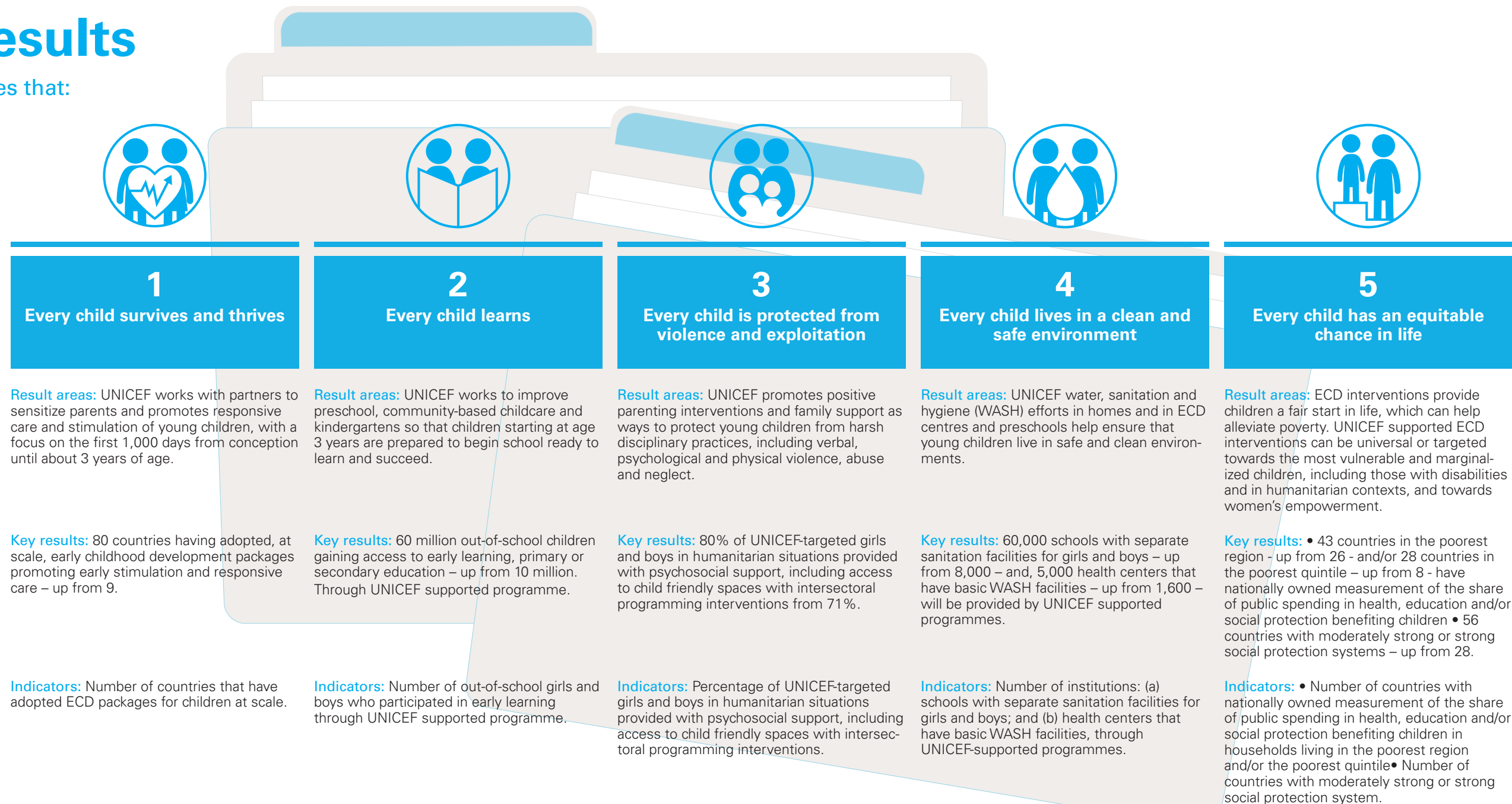
UNICEF's vision⁸ for ECD states that:

All children from conception to the age of school entry, especially the most disadvantaged, achieve their developmental potential, including in humanitarian settings.

To achieve this vision, UNICEF focuses on the following two outcomes⁹:

1. Providing all young children, from conception up to the age of school entry, with equitable access to essential quality health, nutrition, protection and early learning services that address their developmental needs; and
2. Supporting parents, caregivers and families and encouraging them to provide their children with nurturing care and positive parenting.

This vision and focus are firmly embedded in the five goal areas established in the new UNICEF Strategic Plan. ECD is anchored in the first goal area, but cuts across all five goal areas, as follow:



The How: Achieving results

The UNICEF Strategic Plan identifies seven change strategies to drive results for ECD. These strategies include:

1

CHANGE STRATEGY

FOSTER MULTISECTORAL PROGRAMMING

With its vast experience and expertise in multiple sectors, UNICEF is uniquely placed to support multi-sectoral “Nurturing Care” programmes that enhance existing services in health, nutrition, education, protection and WASH. As an example, ECD services are delivered through health, education and community platforms, using tools such as the ‘Care for Child Development’ package to train frontline workers.¹⁰ UNICEF also promotes national policies, budgeted action plans, and coordinated and accountable management frameworks that support multisectoral interventions.

2

CHANGE STRATEGY

IMPROVE THE DELIVERY OF ESSENTIAL SERVICES THROUGH SYSTEM STRENGTHENING

Strengthening service delivery systems – an essential part of fostering ECD programmes – involves ensuring that health workers, nutrition counsellors, preschool teachers, social workers, child protection workers and frontline workers in humanitarian settings are adequately trained, equipped and supported to deliver interventions that foster healthy brain development. UNICEF also provides capacity support in child-friendly policies to government leaders and technical decision makers.

3

CHANGE STRATEGY

PROMOTE CAREGIVING BEHAVIOURS, DEMAND FOR SERVICES AND SOCIAL NORMS FOR POSITIVE PARENTING

Around the world, UNICEF with ECD networks of civil society and partners focus on family and community empowerment and increasing demand for inclusive, quality services. Efforts include Communication for Development (C4D) behaviour and social change interventions on exclusive breastfeeding, nutrition, responsive stimulation, positive discipline, protection from toxic stress, fathers’ engagement in caregiving and gender equity. These efforts highlight a focus on young parents, many of whom are adolescents.

4

CHANGE STRATEGY

USE ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATIONS TO SUPPORT PROGRAMMATIC GOALS

UNICEF advocacy and communication efforts, such as the four-year campaign #EarlyMomentsMatter, aim to convince political leaders, policymakers, decision makers and donors to commit to and invest in ECD. Efforts also focus on building partnerships with the private sector to strengthen family friendly policies of businesses.

5

CHANGE STRATEGY

BROADEN DATA AND EVIDENCE GATHERING SYSTEMS

Data are critical to providing effective ECD programmes that reach the children and families most in need. UNICEF provides support to countries with tools that capture and code ECD indicators. UNICEF is the custodial agency for SDG target 4.2.1, which measures “Proportion of children under 5 years of age who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being, by sex”.

6

CHANGE STRATEGY

STRENGTHEN PUBLIC FINANCING FOR ECD

UNICEF works with governments, development banks, finance institutions and the private sector to identify cost-effective and equitable ways to fund and deliver ECD services. UNICEF offers advice on shaping national investment plans and leveraging financing for the best results for children and develops monitoring and tracking tools for national investments in ECD.

7

CHANGE STRATEGY

LEVERAGE PARTNERSHIPS FOR ECD

UNICEF leverages global and local partnerships with countries, funds and the private sector to strengthen the quality of ECD services around the world. UNICEF also leads initiatives that increase the reach and influence of ECD programmes, through advocacy, policies and service models through mechanisms such as the ECD Action Network (ECDAN)¹¹, which UNICEF announced with the World Bank in 2016.



Differentiated country contexts

UNICEF tailors its ECD interventions to the needs of different country contexts as determined by the availability of data, country capacity, the level of understanding of the importance of ECD, and the scope and quality of existing services. UNICEF provides and supports ECD interventions in five contexts:

High capacity & conditions

Adequate ECD fiscal resources; family-friendly policies with effective governance and coordination at national and decentralised levels; adoption of standards leading to quality improvements and regular monitoring and reporting; equity challenges among sub-populations; social awareness of ECD leading to changes in behaviour and demand

Medium capacity & conditions

Unclear coordination and governance for ECD; limited fiscal resources; adopted standards for ECD are not implemented consistently with data gaps; equity challenges among sub-populations with limited coverage of services to vulnerable groups; ECD packages developed but not integrated into delivery platforms; some knowledge of ECD in communities and families but limited changes in behaviour

Low capacity & conditions

Weak governance and accountability for ECD; insufficient fiscal resources; limited data and understanding of ECD; lack of training on ECD for frontline workers to deliver interventions at scale; insufficient standardisation of services for ECD

Fragile

Areas with post-conflict or prolonged crises where the capacity and conditions are significantly inadequate to meet the population's expectations and needs or manage changes in expectations and capacity through political process

Emergency

A situation that, due to exceptional burden on existing resources, threatens the lives and well-being of large numbers of a population and requires extraordinary action to ensure their development



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Developed with the support of the H&M Foundation.