

# GLOBAL CHILDREN'S INITIATIVE

## Center on the Developing Child HARVARD UNIVERSITY

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University was founded in 2006 on the belief that the vitality and sustainability of any society depend on the extent to which it expands opportunities early in life for all children to achieve their full potential and engage in responsible and productive citizenship. We view healthy child development as the foundation of economic prosperity, strong communities, and a just society, and our mission is to advance that vision by leveraging science to enhance child well-being through innovations in policy and practice.

Drawing on the full breadth of intellectual resources available across Harvard University's schools and affiliated hospitals, the Center generates, translates, and applies knowledge in the service of improving life outcomes for children in the United States and throughout the world. Specifically, the Center on the Developing Child is committed to the following four goals:

- **Building a multidisciplinary science of health, learning, and behavior** to elucidate causal mechanisms that explain the early roots of lifelong impairments in the full range of environments in which children live;
- **Advancing our understanding of how to reduce preventable disparities in well-being** through the design, implementation, and evaluation of innovative program and practice models in diverse social, economic, cultural, and political contexts;
- **Catalyzing the formulation and implementation of effective, science-based policies** through strategic relationships and enhanced capacity for knowledge transfer; and
- **Preparing future and current leaders to make science-based policy decisions** that advance the healthy development of children, families, and communities and bring high returns to societies, in the United States and around the world.

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In support of these broad goals, the Center's recently launched Global Children's Initiative is focused on three strategic objectives:

- **To reframe public discourse about the early childhood period** by educating high-level decision-makers about the common underlying science of learning, behavior, and health;
- **To support innovative, multidisciplinary research and demonstration projects** in selected countries or regions to expand global understanding of how healthy development happens, how it can be derailed, and how to get it back on track; and
- **To build leadership capacity in child development research and policy** among individuals and institutions in low- and middle-income countries in order to increase the number and influence of diverse perspectives that are contributing to the global movement on behalf of young children.

Guided by these strategic objectives, the Global Children's Initiative has begun to build a portfolio of activities in three domains: early childhood development; mental health; and children in crisis and conflict situations. Each of these domains is being guided by a faculty working group that will facilitate continuing cross-disciplinary collaboration; design and implement new projects; and engage additional faculty, students, and collaborators beyond the Harvard community. The initial set of activities currently being developed is outlined on the reverse side.

### Early Childhood Development

The first priority in this area is to adapt the successful work the Center has conducted in the United States for a broader range of strategically selected audiences, in an effort to energize and reframe the global dialogue around investments in the earliest years of life. To this end, we plan to educate the leadership of key international agencies, publish and disseminate papers to establish a strong scientific framework for global work, and conduct systematic communications research to identify the most effective ways to translate the science of child development for global policymakers.

The second priority is to generate and apply new knowledge that addresses the health and developmental needs of young children in a variety of settings. Initial projects that are in various stages of planning, fundraising, and implementation include the following:

- Assessing quality in early childhood environments and programs in diverse global contexts;
- Piloting assessments to measure child development outcomes linked to malaria control strategies in Zambia; and
- Expanding effective interventions to improve preschool quality in Chile.

The Center also plans to convene research forums to facilitate collaboration among a wide network of scholars globally to share findings and co-develop publications.

### Child Mental Health

Mental health concerns constitute a massively under-addressed issue that has significant implications for the broader health and development of children and societies. There is an urgent need to identify the scope of the problem within and across countries and to develop evidence-based approaches in policy and service delivery that are responsive to diverse cultural contexts.

To respond to this challenge, a working group of Harvard faculty is developing a focused agenda in research, education, and public engagement to address significant gaps in knowledge and service delivery. The following three initial projects have been selected to launch this effort, subject to sufficient funding:

- Assessing the state of child mental health services in China;
- Developing and evaluating family-based strategies to prevent mental health problems in children affected by HIV/AIDS in Rwanda; and
- Addressing child maltreatment and mental health outcomes in three Caribbean nations (Barbados, the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and Suriname).

To strengthen their policy relevance, each of these projects is being designed to include an economic component to analyze allocation effects in the supply and demand for services.

### Children in Crisis and Conflict Situations

The Global Children's Initiative is currently exploring potential synergies with the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and the François-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights at the Harvard School of Public Health, both of which have extensive experience working in emergency situations across the world. The goal of this effort is to foster interdisciplinary collaboration that incorporates a science-based, developmental perspective into the assessment and management of child well-being in a range of natural and man-made crises, focusing on both immediate circumstances and long-term adaptation. Two issues are the initial focus of activity in this domain:

- Exploring comparable approaches to surveying child status in post-earthquake Haiti and Chile.
- Bringing the science of child development into strategies for addressing acute malnutrition.

### Building Broader, More Diverse Leadership Capacity in Research and Policy

Finally, and central to the Center's core mission, an array of education and training activities will be incorporated into all of the thematic areas described above. The first dimension of this work focuses on building a sustainable infrastructure to support the productive engagement of Harvard students and faculty in a diversity of global settings. The second dimension focuses on developing opportunities to provide leadership training for individual researchers, policymakers, and institutions, primarily in the majority world.