



## Inclusion of Children with Disabilities: The Early Childhood Imperative

### Introduction

Worldwide, there are about 650 million persons with disabilities. This accounts for 10% of the global population, and constitutes more than 20% of the world's poorest people. Children with disabilities experience stigma from birth and are more prone to exclusion, concealment, abandonment, institutionalization and abuse. Mortality rates among children with disabilities are 80% even in countries where under-five mortality has declined below 20%.<sup>1</sup> Strikingly, 98% of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school.

A remarkable step toward recognizing people with disabilities as equal and active members of society has been made through the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which came into force in May 2008. The CRPD calls for enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by children and adults with disabilities, and points to the importance of early intervention as well as inclusion in the education system from an early age. This policy brief argues that early childhood care and education (ECCE) is a powerful means of nurturing diverse abilities and overcoming disadvantages and inequalities, and discusses main approaches to responding to developmental needs of young children with disabilities.

### Why is ECCE important for children with disabilities?

The early years offer a special opportunity to foster developmental gains in children as 80% of the brain's capacity develops before the age of three. The gains are shown to be highest for those with maximum disadvantage. Equally, early neglect has lasting disabling effects. Poor nutrition leads to early childhood stunting, and coupled with low stimulation, it contributes to the poor cognitive and educational performance of over 200 million under-five children who are 'not fulfilling their developmental potential'.<sup>2</sup>

Comprehensive ECCE providing care, stimulation, parental support and access to relevant services enhances the effects of interventions for children with disabilities. Positive transition from home to preschool is encouraged when the early childhood programme allows for child-centred pedagogy and necessary individualised support to effectively address the diverse learning needs and abilities of children with disabilities.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, early childhood programmes that are responsive to individual needs and

respectful of diversity benefit all children and contribute to building the foundations of an inclusive society.<sup>4</sup>

For ECCE to deliver these benefits and 'be effective, accessible and equitable, a society must invest in it'.<sup>5</sup> Key policy measures include investment in early assessment and intervention, universalizing access to early education and promoting inclusive, community based educational provision with reliable specialist support.

### How can ECCE be more responsive to children with disabilities?

#### Early Assessment and Intervention

Initiated well before children become eligible for preschools and schools, early assessment and intervention should be made available to identify and support young children 'at risk'. It is most effective when families are closely involved in the process, enabling them to seek appropriate diagnostic and therapeutic services to support their child's well-being and development. Through early assessment coupled with intervention, families gain relevant information, especially about what their child can do and about interventions that will optimize his/her learning potential. This also increases the chances that children with disabilities can participate and flourish in inclusive mainstream educational settings. Evidence suggests that one in three infants and toddlers who receive early intervention services do not present later with a disability or require special education in a preschool.<sup>6</sup>

While OECD countries offer several long-standing examples,<sup>7</sup> Belarus has recently initiated an Early Childhood Intervention programme. Implemented through eight Development Centres equipped with a full complement of specialists, it provides individualized, child-centred, family focused and integrated health, nutrition and developmental services. Parenting education is provided as an integral part of the programme and supports the needs of parents of children with disabilities. Children are supported with regular assessments, child and family development plans, careful tracking and follow-up.<sup>8</sup> In Vietnam, successful early intervention has encouraged full inclusion of children with disabilities in its school system.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> World Vision Armenia focus group discussions with teachers, specialists and parents, February 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Penn, H. 2004. CHIP Report 8, CHIP, London.

<sup>6</sup> Hebbeler, K. et al., cited in Jones, L. 2009. Making Hope a Reality. ZERO TO THREE Policy Center.

<sup>7</sup> Brambring, M., Rauh, H. & Beelmann, A. (eds). 1996. Early Childhood Intervention: Theory, Evaluation, and Practice. Walter de Gruyter.

<sup>8</sup> Vargas-Baron & Janson. 2008. Early Childhood Intervention, Special Education and Inclusion: A Focus on Belarus. UNICEF.

<sup>9</sup> Hodes, M. 2007. Early intervention in Vietnam, in Down Syndrome Research and Practice, v12 n1 p38-41 July 2007.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas P. 2005. Disability, Poverty and the MDGs. DFID.

<sup>2</sup> Grantham-McGregor, S. et al. 2007. 'Developmental potential in the first 5 years for children in developing countries', In Lancet 2007; 369.

<sup>3</sup> ISSA. 2006. Documenting Educational Reform: the Step by Step Case Study project. Open Society Institute & Soros Foundations Network.

