

Inequities in Early Childhood Development

What the data say

Evidence from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys



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Early childhood: Years of wonder

Early childhood, which spans the period to 8 years of age,^{1,2} is critical to a child's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. Events in the first few years of life – and even before birth – play a vital role in shaping health and social outcomes.³ They also establish a foundation for building human capital, since healthy and socially adjusted children are more likely to grow into economically productive adults.⁴

During early childhood, billions of highly integrated neural circuits in the brain are established through the interaction of genetics, environment and experience. Contrary to popular belief, genes do not set a child's development in stone. They dictate when circuits are formed, but how those circuits unfold depends to a large extent on a child's experiences. Thus,

while genetic factors exert a potent influence, environmental factors have the ability to alter inherited traits.⁵

The early years are formative because the newly developing brain is highly plastic: Its responsiveness to change is greatest in early childhood and decreases with age. Although windows of opportunity for skill development and behavioural adaptation remain open for many years, trying to change behaviour or build new skills later on requires added work. Because of the exceptionally strong influence of early experiences on brain architecture, the first years of life are a time of tremendous opportunity and equally great vulnerability. Optimal brain development requires a stimulating environment, adequate nutrients and social interaction with attentive caregivers.⁶

Measuring early childhood development

Early childhood development has many dimensions, encompassing myriad aspects of a child's well-being. Measuring it, therefore, is an imprecise science. In 2007, estimates published in the *Lancet* showed that more than 200 million children under the age of 5 in developing countries fail to reach their full potential.⁷ The estimate was based on 'proxy' indicators, namely stunting and poverty, simply because no other indicators for child development in developing countries existed at the time.

UNICEF is working with countries to close this knowledge gap – and to develop a composite picture of the status of child development in the early years – through the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS). With UNICEF support, more than 100 countries have participated in this household survey programme since 1995, producing statistically sound and internationally comparable estimates in the areas of health, nutrition, education, child protection and HIV/AIDS. Early childhood development indicators were introduced into MICS in the third round (known as MICS3, conducted mainly in 2005 and

2006) and were specifically designed to assess the quality of care in a child's home environment as well as access to early childhood care and education outside the home. In total, 60 countries implemented MICS3, the majority of which included most of the questions on early learning and child development. It was the first time that data on this specific topic were collected from such a large cross-section of low- and middle-income countries.

This publication, which presents some of the data gathered through MICS3, provides an overview of factors that either support early childhood development or place it at risk. It also reveals inequities in parental care – and in access to early learning opportunities for children – that are associated with household income.⁸ The new data, combined with scientific evidence about the developing brain, provide a compelling case for more effective, better resourced and more precisely targeted action on early childhood development. Such action must be spearheaded by national governments and authorities and supported by development partners.

What the data say

Parents and other caregivers play a critical role in determining children's chances for survival and development,⁹ and they can empower children to become architects of their own lives.

Childcare at home encompasses basic practices such as feeding, cleaning and clothing a child, while also maintaining vigilance for signs of illness and developmental delays. Caregivers are tasked with providing direction and guidance in daily life as well as establishing a safe, stimulating and nurturing home environment, which is central to a child's social, emotional and cognitive development.¹⁰

Data collected through MICS3 provide valuable information on selected childcare practices and aspects of the home environment

that either contribute to the healthy development of children under age 5 or place them at risk. This publication looks at multiple variables at play in these areas, based on the following selected indicators:

- Availability of children's books in the home
- Support for learning (that is, caregiver engagement in activities that promote early learning and school readiness)
- Use of disciplinary practices, both positive and violent
- Absence of one or both biological parents
- Being left at home alone or with inadequate care
- Access to early childhood care and education services.

Availability of books in the home

Numerous research studies indicate that children who grow up in households where books are available are likely to receive, on average, three more years of schooling than children from homes with no books. This finding holds regardless of a caregiver’s level of education, occupation or class, and it applies to rich and poor countries alike.¹¹

In the countries surveyed, the percentage of households with three or more children’s books varies widely – from almost all (97 per cent) in Ukraine to almost none (3 per cent) in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (see Table 1 on pages 14–15 for data on prevalence across all indicators by country).

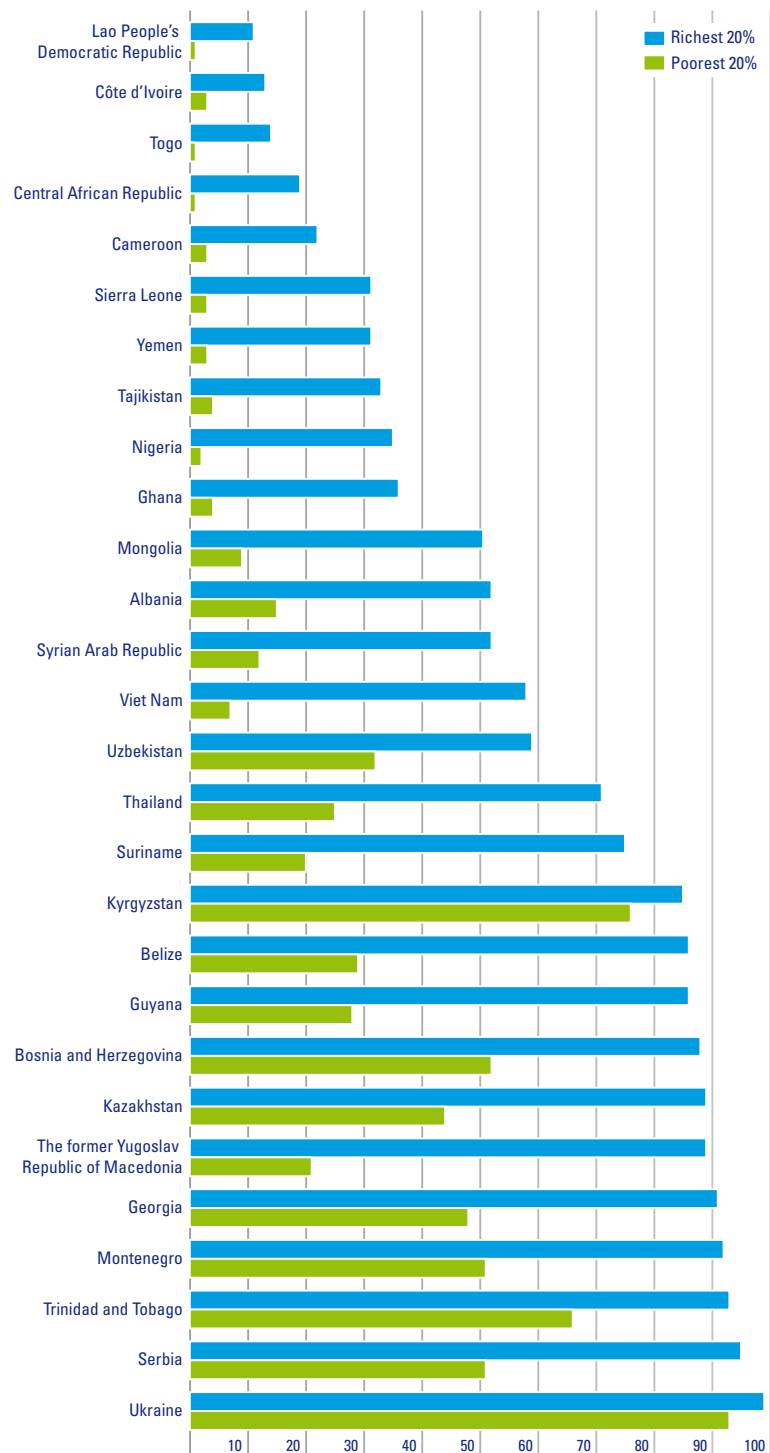
Household wealth (Figure 1) is strongly associated with the availability of children’s books at home in all of the countries surveyed. Poorer households tend to have fewer children’s books.

Support for learning

Children’s development is facilitated by the active involvement of parents and other caregivers in learning activities. Two major aspects of positive caregiving are cognitive and socio-emotional support.¹² By reading,

Figure 1. Children in the richest households are more likely than children in the poorest households to have books in the home

Percentage of children under 5 living in households with three or more children’s books, by household wealth quintile



Note: This analysis included 28 countries, all of which showed a statistically significant difference at the 1 per cent level ($p \leq .01$) between the richest and poorest households.

Source: MICS3.

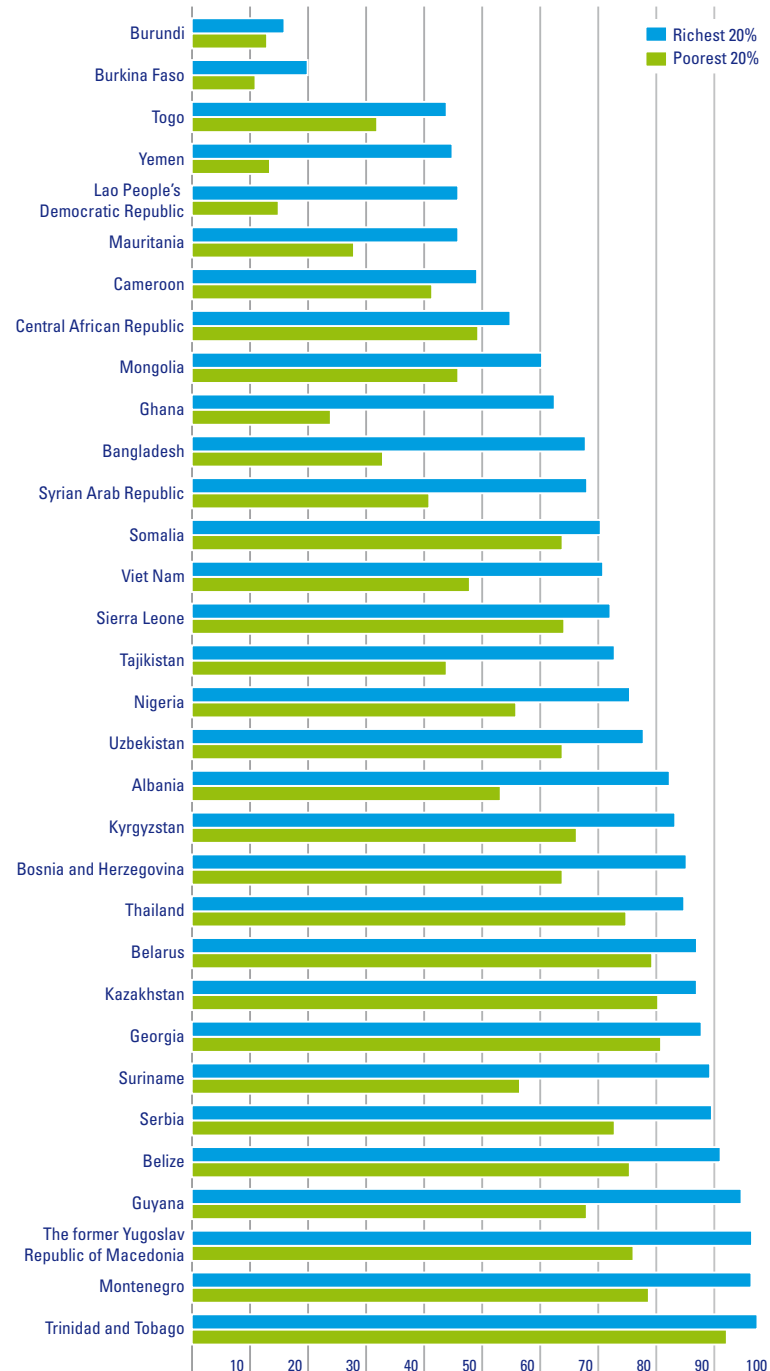
telling stories, naming, counting and drawing with their children, parents stimulate children’s curiosity and understanding of their environment, thereby fostering cognitive development. Socio-emotional caregiving – like playing with children, singing them songs or taking them out of the home – can help children feel valued and accepted, thereby supporting the development of their emotions, promoting healthy reactions and providing a model for acceptable social relationships.

As a proxy indicator for these two domains of positive caregiving, MICS3 measured adult engagement with young children in the following activities: reading or looking at picture books; telling stories; singing songs; taking children outside the home; playing; and naming, counting and/or drawing. Support from a mother, father or other adult household member in these early learning activities according to household wealth is shown in Figure 2. In all the countries surveyed, with the exception of Côte d’Ivoire and the Gambia, a statistically significant difference was found between wealth quintiles: Children in the richest 20 per cent of households received more support for learning than children in the poorest 20 per cent of households.

Further analysis shows that, in the majority of countries surveyed, mothers are the household members

Figure 2. Children from the poorest households are less likely than children from the richest households to be engaged in early learning

Percentage of children under 5 engaged by an adult household member in four or more activities to promote learning and school readiness in the past three days, by household wealth quintile



Note: This analysis included 34 countries, two of which (Côte d’Ivoire and the Gambia) did not show a statistically significant difference between the richest and poorest households and were therefore excluded from the graph. Burundi and the Central African Republic showed a statistically significant difference at the 5 per cent level ($p \leq .05$); all other countries showed a statistically significant difference at the 1 per cent level ($p \leq .01$).

Source: MICS3.

most likely to engage young children in early learning activities (Figure 3). While emerging evidence points to the importance of a father's engagement in the socio-emotional development of his children,¹³ fathers are, on average, two to three times less likely than mothers to be involved in early learning activities. In four African countries (Burundi, the Central African Republic, the Gambia and Guinea-Bissau), other adult household members, such as siblings or grandparents, tend to be more engaged than a child's parents in developmental activities for children.

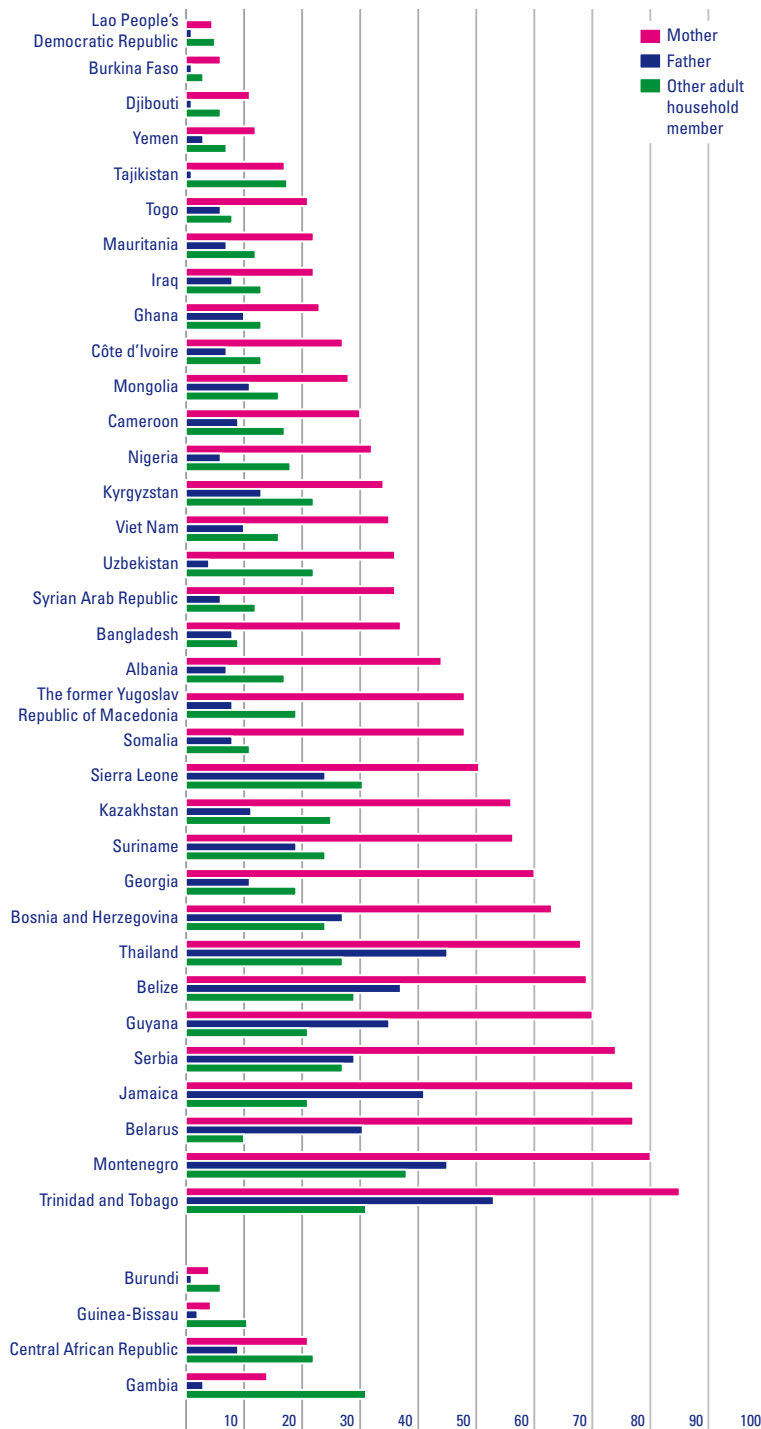
Disciplining the child

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children should be protected from all forms of violence while in the care of parents or other caregivers. But caregivers themselves are often the perpetrators of such violence in their attempts to discipline young children. Studies have shown that exposing children to violent forms of discipline has harmful consequences that children may carry into adulthood; these consequences vary according to the nature, extent and severity of exposure.¹⁴

Positive parenting, which sets limits for a young child and corrects misbehaviour while simultaneously promoting desired behaviours, is an acquired skill. It is also the best

Figure 3. Mothers are the adult household members most likely to engage in early learning activities for children

Percentage of children under 5 whose mother, father or other adult household member engaged them in four or more activities to promote learning and school readiness in the past three days



Note: This analysis included 38 countries. When the direction of the association was not consistent with the expected pattern, the chart groups the countries accordingly.

Source: MICS3.

response to behavioural challenges. In MICS3, questions concerning various forms of discipline and punishment were divided into three broad, though not mutually exclusive, categories:

- **Non-violent disciplinary practices**, which include explaining to a child why her or his behaviour is wrong and redirecting that behaviour.
- **Psychological aggression**, such as shouting at the child or calling the child ‘dumb’, ‘lazy’ or other offensive names.
- **Physical or corporal punishment**, such as shaking, slapping or hitting the child.

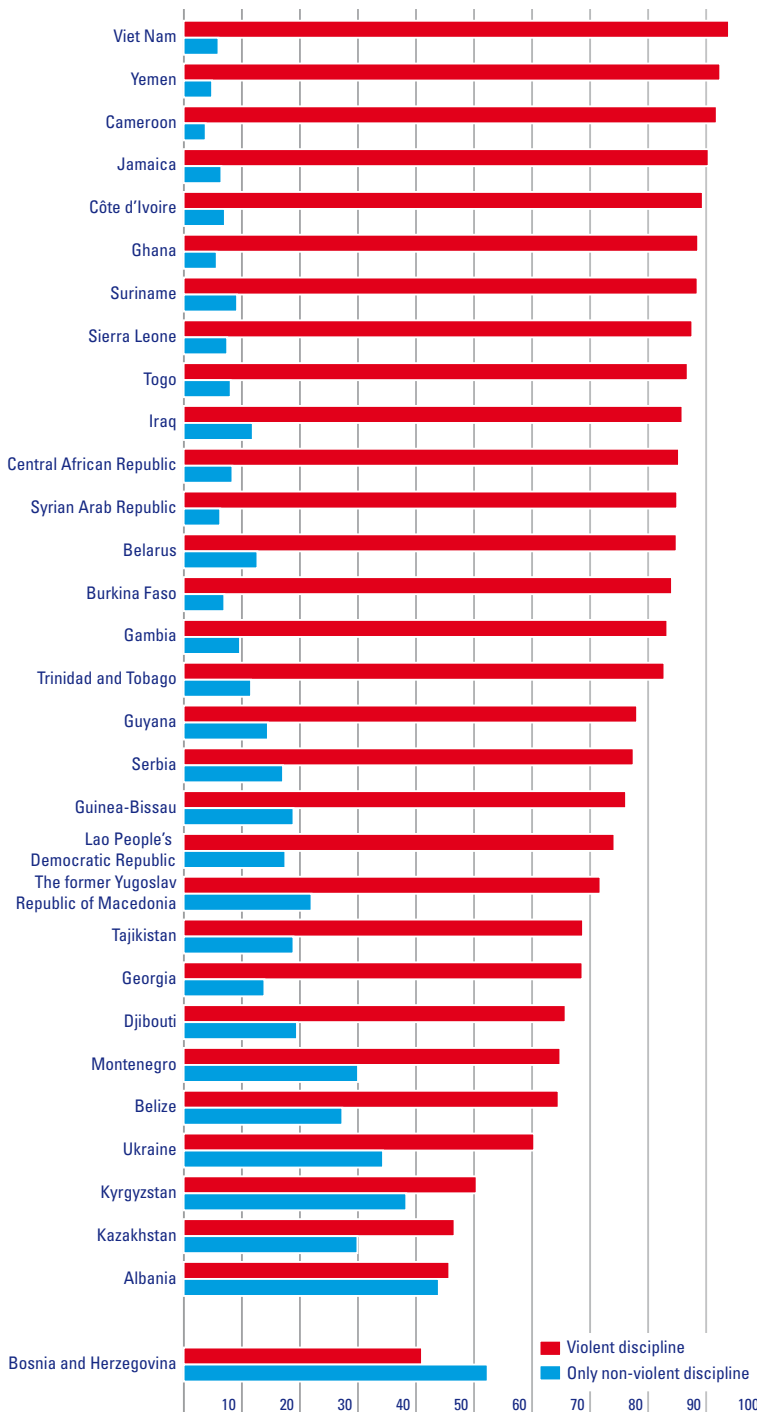
According to MICS3 evidence, violent forms of discipline, including physical punishment and psychological aggression, are extremely common. The percentage of children 2–4 years old who experience such forms of violence ranges from 41 per cent in Bosnia and Herzegovina to 94 per cent in Viet Nam (Figure 4).

Children living without biological parents

Child development is largely influenced by the family structure in which a child is raised. Children living without their mothers or fathers, or without both biological parents, are at special risk of being denied the care they need for their physical and psychosocial well-being.

Figure 4. Violent forms of discipline are widespread in most of the countries surveyed

Percentage of children 2–4 years old who experienced any violent discipline (physical punishment and/or psychological aggression) and percentage of children 2–4 years old who experienced only non-violent discipline in the past month



Note: This analysis included 31 countries. Data for Kazakhstan refer to children 3–4 years old. When the direction of the association was not consistent with the expected pattern, the chart groups the countries accordingly.

Source: MICS3.

Data gathered in 40 countries indicate that children are at high risk of growing up without a biological parent (Figure 5). Such children are most likely to live with their biological mothers but without their biological fathers. This is the situation for half of children under age 5 in Jamaica, and about 1 in 3 children in Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania, Suriname and Thailand.

The percentage of young children living without their biological mothers but with their biological fathers is lower, but it is still significant in some of the countries surveyed. Such is the case for 1 in 5 children in Thailand and about 1 in 10 children in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone.

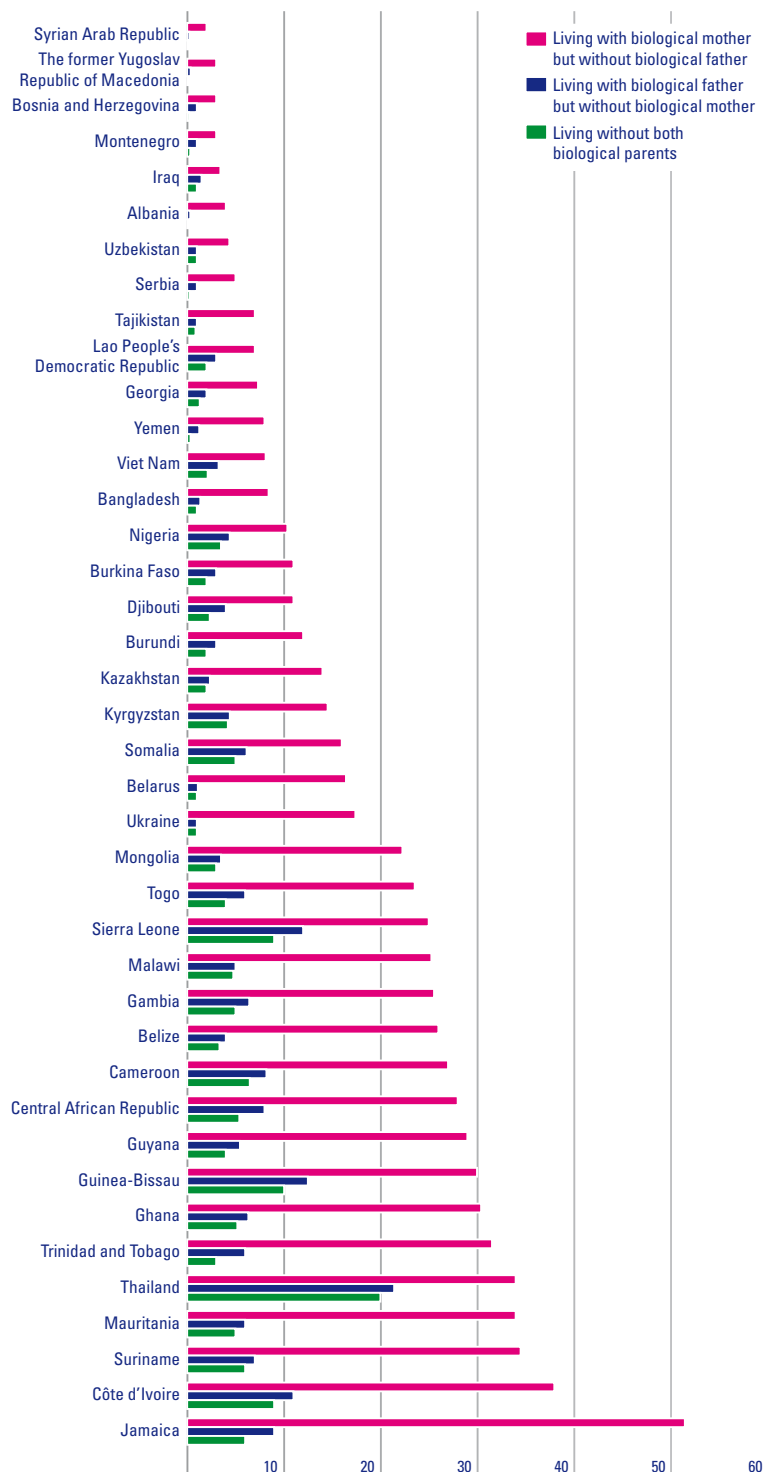
The data also indicate that 1 in 5 children in Thailand live without both biological parents, as do 1 in 10 children in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea-Bissau. At the opposite extreme, at least 95 per cent of children in countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Montenegro, Sierra Leone, Syrian Arab Republic and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia live with both biological parents.

Children left at home alone or with inadequate care

Proper parental care and support help protect children from physical danger and emotional abuse. Leaving a young child alone or in the care of another

Figure 5. Children are at high risk of growing up without a biological parent, usually their father

Percentage of children under 5 living with their biological mother but without their biological father, living with their biological father but without their biological mother, and living without both biological parents



Note: This analysis included 40 countries.

Source: MICS3.

child is a dereliction of caregiving responsibilities and can have harmful consequences. It exposes the child to increased risk of not only injury, but also abuse and neglect.

Responses from MICS3 show that many young children are left alone or with inadequate care. In most countries, children from the poorest households are most vulnerable (Figure 6). They are less likely to have access to early childhood care and education programmes, to have children’s books at home or to have household support for early learning.

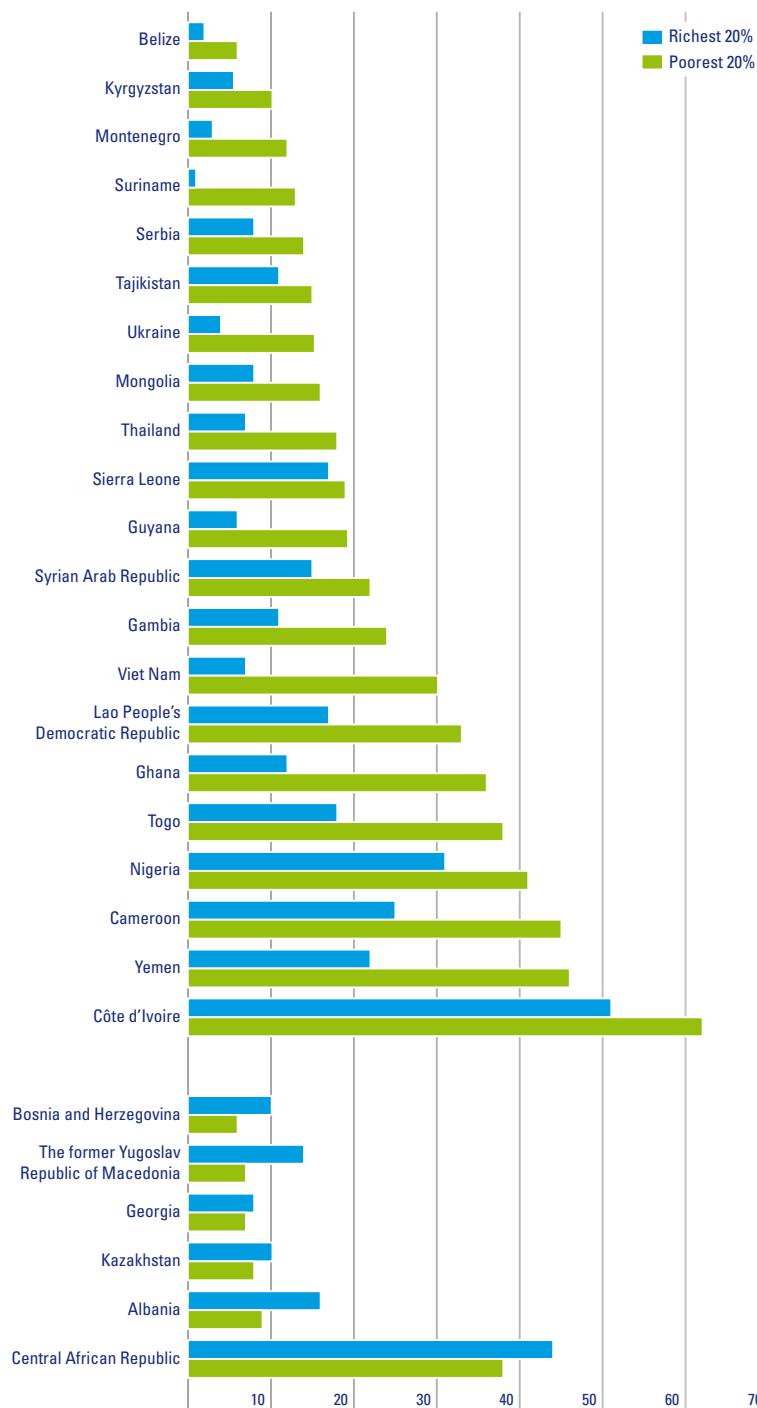
Accessing early childhood care and education

While the home environment is critical to children’s survival and development, care and education programmes are also important if children are to flourish. Quality care both at home and outside the home can provide children with the basic cognitive and language skills they need for school, while also fostering social competency and emotional development. In fact, early childhood care and education make up the foundation of a quality basic education.¹⁵

A variety of early learning programmes are found worldwide, including those offered through community-based centres, day care facilities, kindergartens and

Figure 6. The poorest children are at greatest risk of being left alone or with inadequate care

Percentage of children under 5 left alone or in the care of another child under 10 years old in the past week, by household wealth quintile



Note: This analysis included 28 countries, one of which (Uzbekistan) did not show a statistically significant difference between the richest and poorest households and was therefore excluded from the graph. Albania, Belize, and Bosnia and Herzegovina showed a statistically significant difference at the 5 per cent level ($p \leq .05$); all other countries showed a statistically significant difference at the 1 per cent level ($p \leq .01$). When the direction of the association was not consistent with the expected pattern, the chart groups the countries accordingly.

Source: MICS3.

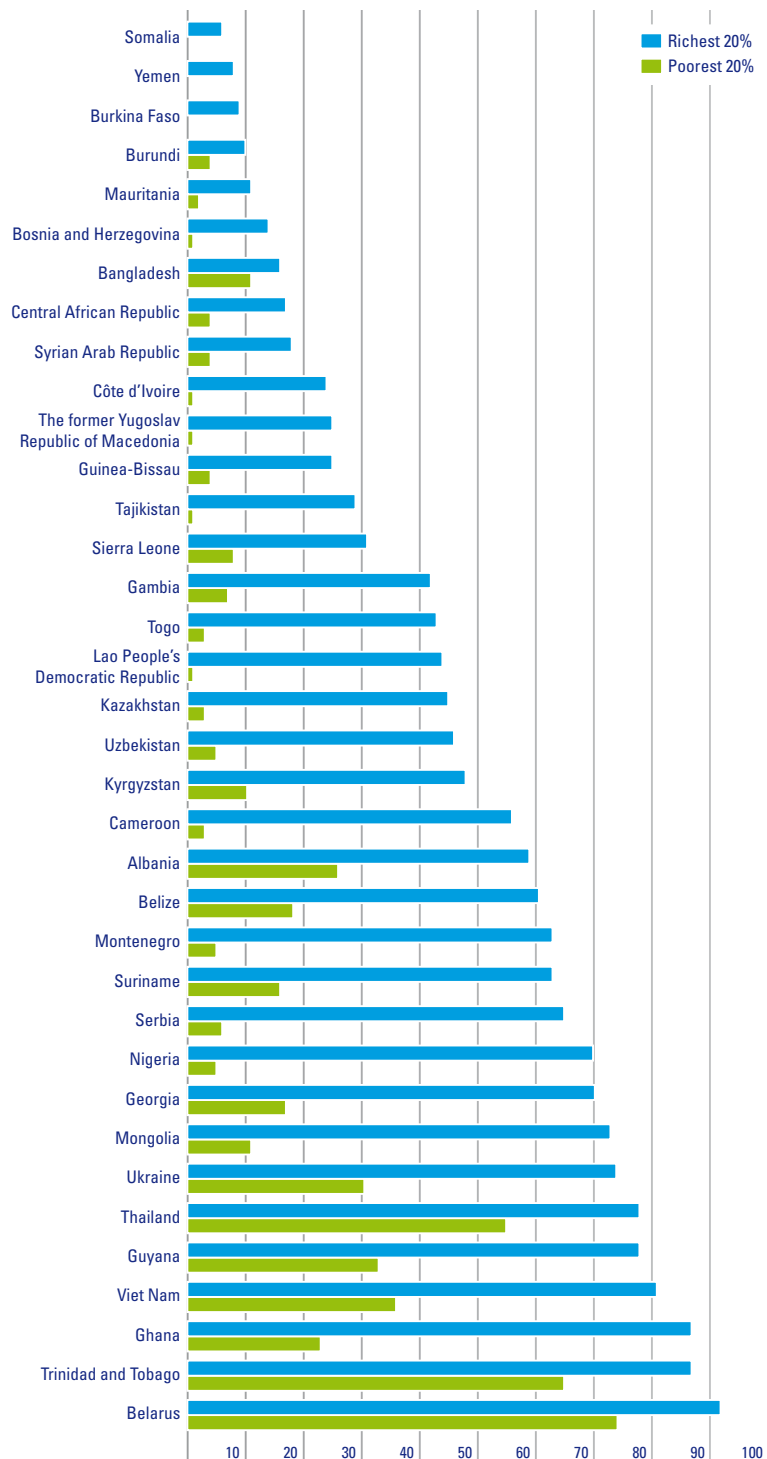
preschools. These programmes may be organized by the state, private institutions or a variety of community-based organizations, including religious groups. Early childhood care and education of good quality can benefit not only young children, but also mothers and other caregivers, whose time is freed up for educational or vocational activities, and society at large.

Yet despite the proven benefits of early childhood care and education, the attendance of children 3–4 years old in any form of organized early learning is low. Evidence from MICS3 shows that attendance in such programmes is 10 per cent or less in a third of countries with available data (Table 1).

It is well known that investing in early childhood care and education can be a powerful way to reduce gaps in cognitive and socio-emotional skills that often put children with low social and economic status at a disadvantage. Moreover, recent studies show that the returns on such investments are highest among poorer children, for whom early childhood programmes may serve as a stepping stone out of poverty and exclusion.¹⁶ But as with other indicators of early childhood development, data from MICS3 show that here, again, access to such programmes is often denied to the poorest children (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Children in the poorest households are less likely than children in the richest households to attend early childhood education programmes

Percentage of children 3–4 years old who attend some form of early childhood education programme, by household wealth quintile



Note: This analysis included 36 countries, all of which showed a statistically significant difference at the 1 per cent level ($p \leq .01$) between the richest and poorest households.

Source: MICS3.

From evidence to action

Evidence gathered through MICS3 suggests that, overall, young children in the countries surveyed live in households that are not conducive to optimal early childhood development. Many of these children have:

- **Few or no children's books in the home.** More than half of children lack the stimulation provided by books in the home in about two thirds of countries.
- **Moderate support for early learning by caregivers.** More than half of children are denied adequate support for early learning in about a third of countries.
- **Limited access to early childhood care and education programmes.** Attendance in such programmes is 10 per cent or less in a third of countries.

The risks to early development are high:

- **Violent discipline is widespread.** More than half of children 2–4 years old are subjected to violent forms of discipline in nearly all of the countries surveyed.
- **Young children are too often left alone or in the care of another child.** At least one in six young children receive inadequate care in more than a third of countries.
- **Many children grow up without at least one biological parent.** At least one in four children live without their biological fathers in about a third of countries surveyed.

Evidence from MICS3 also shows that the threats to early development are greatest among

children living in the poorest households. Such children are less likely to receive support for early learning at home and up to 10 times less likely to attend early childhood education programmes.

All of these factors can have a detrimental effect on child development.¹⁷ Moreover, risk factors related to poverty tend to occur together – and in general, the more risk factors present, the greater the development deficit.¹⁸ These risk factors lead to inequities in early child development that undermine educational attainment and adult productivity, thereby perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

But there are ways to break that cycle: Effective, well-implemented interventions in early childhood development increase the likelihood that a child will be successful academically, well-adjusted both socially and emotionally, and productive economically – and the greatest benefits of such interventions accrue to the most disadvantaged children. Giving children the best start in life, furthermore, boosts the odds that they will become responsible, contributing members of society.¹⁹

In the words of UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake, “While the challenges ahead are steep, the imperative for universal early childhood development is clear: Every child has the right to develop to her or his fullest potential and to contribute fully to society. Our responsibility to pursue this goal is just as clear.”²⁰

Notes

- 1 United Nations General Assembly, Status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: Report of the Secretary-General, United Nations, New York, A/65/206, 2 August 2010.
- 2 Although the United Nations' definition of early childhood refers to the period up to 8 years of age, most official statistics, including those derived from household surveys such as the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, collect data for children under the age of 5.
- 3 Shonkoff, Jack P., et al., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., 2000.
- 4 Heckman, James J., 'Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children', *Science*, vol. 312, no. 5782, 30 June 2006, pp. 1900–1902.
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- 7 Grantham-McGregor, Sally, et al., 'Developmental Potential in the First 5 Years for Children in Developing Countries', *Lancet*, vol. 369, no. 9555, 6 January 2007, pp. 60–70.
- 8 Each household surveyed was assigned a wealth score based on assets owned by that household. The households were then ranked according to these wealth scores and divided into five parts (quintiles), from poorest to richest. The resulting wealth index is assumed to capture underlying long-term wealth.
- 9 Belsky, Jay, et al., 'Socioeconomic Risk, Parenting During the Preschool Years and Child Health Age 6 Years', *European Journal of Public Health*, vol. 17, no. 5, 14 December 2006, pp. 511–512.
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- 13 Cabrera, Natasha J., Jacqueline D. Shannon and Catherine Tamis-LeMonda, 'Fathers' Influence on Their Children's Cognitive and Emotional Development: From toddlers to pre-K', *Applied Development Science*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2007, pp. 208–213.
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- 15 Irwin, Lori G., Arjumand Siddiqi and Clyde Hertzman, 'Early Childhood Development: A powerful equalizer – Final report for the World Health Organization's Commission on the Social Determinants of Health', Human Early Learning Partnership, Vancouver, June 2007.
- 16 Heckman, James J., 'Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children', *Science*, pp. 1900–1902.
- 17 Bradley, Robert H., and Robert F. Corwyn, 'Socioeconomic Status and Child Development', *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 53, February 2002, pp. 371–399.
- 18 Grantham-McGregor, Sally, et al., 'Developmental Potential in the First 5 Years for Children in Developing Countries' *Lancet*, p. 62.
- 19 Woodhead, Martin, et al., 'Equity and Quality?: Challenges for early childhood and primary education in Ethiopia, India and Peru', Working Papers in Early Childhood Development 55, Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Hague, November 2009.
- 20 Lake, Anthony, 'Early Childhood Development – Global action is overdue', *Lancet*, vol. 378, no. 9799, 8 October 2011, pp. 1277–1278.

TABLE 1. Statistical table of early childhood development indicators

	Availability of children's books	Adult engagement	Paternal engagement	Children's living arrangements
	Percentage of children under 5 living in households with at least three children's books	Percentage of children under 5 engaged by an adult household member in four or more early learning activities in the past three days	Percentage of children under 5 engaged by their father in one or more early learning activities in the past three days	Percentage of children under 5 living without both biological parents
Albania	32	68	46	0
Bangladesh	–	47	50	1
Belarus	–	84	71	1
Belize	57	85	52	3
Bosnia and Herzegovina	70	76	74	0
Burkina Faso	–	12	23	2
Burundi	–	14	8	2
Cameroon	8	43	36	6
Central African Republic	6	53	38	5
Côte d'Ivoire	5	42	37	9
Djibouti	15	27	16	2
Gambia	–	47	21	5
Georgia	72	84	56	1
Ghana	13	39	47	5
Guinea-Bissau	–	–	–	10
Guyana	54	82	51	4
Iraq	–	44	54	1
Jamaica	57	86	41	6
Kazakhstan	66	81	47	2
Kyrgyzstan	76	71	52	4
Lao People's Democratic Republic	3	25	20	2
Malawi	–	–	–	5
Mauritania	–	36	27	5
Mongolia	26	55	44	3
Montenegro	77	89	78	0
Nigeria	14	65	35	3
Serbia	80	85	70	0
Sierra Leone	11	65	65	9
Somalia	–	65	39	5
Suriname	45	70	33	6
Syrian Arab Republic	30	55	56	0
Tajikistan	17	60	21	1
Thailand	43	79	58	20
The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	49	85	61	0
Togo	5	36	41	4
Trinidad and Tobago	81	94	67	3
Ukraine	97	–	–	1
Uzbekistan	42	71	47	1
Viet Nam	25	57	54	2
Yemen	10	25	32	0

	Child discipline		Inadequate care	Early childhood care and education
	Non-violent	Violent		
	Percentage of children 2–4 years old who experienced only non-violent discipline	Percentage of children 2–4 years old who experienced any violent discipline	Percentage of children under 5 left alone or in the care of another child	Percentage of children 3–4 years old attending early childhood care and education
Albania	44	46	13	40
Bangladesh	–	–	–	15
Belarus	13	85	–	86
Belize	27	64	4	31
Bosnia and Herzegovina	52	41	7	6
Burkina Faso	7	84	–	2
Burundi	–	–	–	5
Cameroon	4	92	36	22
Central African Republic	8	85	43	9
Côte d'Ivoire	7	89	59	5
Djibouti	19	66	12	14
Gambia	10	83	17	20
Georgia	14	69	8	43
Ghana	6	88	25	52
Guinea-Bissau	19	76	–	10
Guyana	15	78	11	49
Iraq	12	86	–	2
Jamaica	6	90	3	86
Kazakhstan	30	47	10	16
Kyrgyzstan	38	50	10	19
Lao People's Democratic Republic	17	74	26	7
Malawi	–	–	–	–
Mauritania	–	–	–	5
Mongolia	–	–	13	37
Montenegro	30	65	6	29
Nigeria	–	–	38	32
Serbia	17	77	9	33
Sierra Leone	7	88	21	13
Somalia	–	–	–	2
Suriname	9	88	7	37
Syrian Arab Republic	6	85	17	8
Tajikistan	19	69	13	10
Thailand	–	–	13	61
The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	22	72	9	11
Togo	8	87	30	16
Trinidad and Tobago	12	83	1	75
Ukraine	34	60	10	63
Uzbekistan	–	–	5	20
Viet Nam	6	94	19	57
Yemen	5	92	34	3

Notes on Table 1

Definitions of the indicators

Availability of children's books: Percentage of children under 5 living in households with three or more children's books.

Adult engagement: Percentage of children under 5 living in households in which an adult has engaged in four or more of the following activities to promote learning and school readiness in the past three days: a) reading books to the child; b) telling stories to the child; c) singing songs to the child; d) taking the child outside the home; e) playing with the child; and f) spending time with the child naming, counting or drawing things.

Paternal engagement: Percentage of children under 5 whose father has engaged in one or more of the following activities to promote learning and school readiness in the past three days: a) reading books to the child; b) telling stories to the child; c) singing songs to the child; d) taking the child outside the home; e) playing with the child; and f) spending time with the child naming, counting or drawing things.

Children's living arrangements: Percentage of children under 5 living without both biological parents.

Child discipline: a) Non-violent: Percentage of children 2–4 years old who experienced the following methods of non-violent discipline in the past month: Parents explained why something was wrong, took away privileges or gave the child something else to do. b) Violent: Percentage of children 2–4 years old who experienced any violent discipline (psychological aggression or physical punishment) in the past month.

Inadequate care: Percentage of children under 5 left alone or in the care of another child under 10 years old in the past week.

Early childhood care and education: Percentage of children 3–4 years old who attend some form of early childhood care and education programme.

Data source

Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) carried out from 2005 through 2007.

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**“While the challenges ahead
are steep, the imperative for
universal early childhood
development is clear: Every child
has the right to develop to her
or his fullest potential and to
contribute fully to society.
Our responsibility to pursue this
goal is just as clear.”**

Anthony Lake, UNICEF Executive Director

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