

Time to Focus on the World's Youngest Children

FROM GUEST ON DECEMBER 3, 2014 ·

By Joan Lombardi

From Kampala to Kingston; Delhi to Denver; and São Paulo to Santiago, giving children a strong start in life is critical to not only the growth and development of individuals, but also the growth and development of nations.

As the child mortality rate continues to decline, a new interest in the healthy development of young children has become the next frontier in health care, social protection and education. We need to continue to improve the chances that children survive, as we move forward to help all young children thrive.

We are leaving behind the outdated adage that education begins at the school house door, and instead are embracing the reality that learning begins at birth. Through innovative and integrated development programs and policies, we are bringing together all sectors that affect our children and are caring for the whole child and family.

In countries around the world, public awareness about the lasting impact of investing in early childhood is growing; national plans are emerging, evidence is mounting.

At the Grand Challenges Annual Meeting in October, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced a new set of [Grand Challenges](#), including a focus on both women and girls, and on helping children thrive. President Obama recently announced the [White House Summit on Early Education](#) on December 10th, bringing together leaders and stakeholders from across the United States working to help children get off to a strong start.

Experts from around the world recently gathered in Brazil to discuss how to best reach more young children and families with effective programming and investment. The Institute of Medicine's [Forum on Investing in](#)

[Young Children Globally](#) brought together leaders from education, health, social protection and development to identify the best practices across science, policy and financing. In São Paulo, [experts explored global and national research](#) as well as innovative solutions to promote healthy development.

Broader understanding of the importance of the first years of life in relation to long-term health, opportunity and well-being is finally “coming of age.”

And yet so much remains to be done. As we work to improve access to education and early childhood development, we must also ensure that a child enters school ready to succeed. When we improve our social protection and economic policies to support parents, reduce domestic violence and ensure a child’s safety, we are helping children thrive not only today but in the future. A lack of access to quality health care diminishes a family’s basic ability to survive. By integrating community health workers and behavior change programs, we work with families to understand their health options, improve access to services and support their parenting.

We’ve seen the impact our actions can have across individual sectors. We have the tools and services to care for the whole family; now is the time to integrate our successes into one global agenda to best serve families and help our children thrive. We must begin here:

- Put a holistic approach to health, education and social protection for young children at the center of post-2015 sustainable development goals;
- Expand public investments and national policies to increase the availability and accessibility of integrated services to those in the greatest need;
- Increase multilateral and bilateral investments in young children, including early education and family support; and
- Work with the private sector to increase their time and investments in communities throughout the world.

We recognize the opportunities to work across generations to improve opportunities not just for children, but for their families. The hope of stemming inequality rests with our willingness to provide opportunity right from the earliest years of life. In a world divided, it is time to come together around a common cause that can unite us, one that can ring in a new era of peace and one that can build on the world’s greatest resource—its children.

Joan Lombardi, Ph.D. is an international expert on child development and social policy. Over the past 40 years she has made significant contributions to the development of early childhood and family support policies as an innovative leader and advisor to national and international organizations and foundations and as a public servant. She currently serves as an advisor to the Bernard van Leer Foundation as well as the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, and as a member of the Forum on Investing in Young Children Globally.