



## ADVOCACY BRIEF

# BREASTFEEDING AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

## GLOBAL BREASTFEEDING COLLECTIVE

Breastfeeding gives all children the healthiest start in life. It stimulates brain development and protects women's health. Breastmilk acts as a baby's first vaccine and breastfeeding leads to lower health care costs, healthier families and a smarter workforce. When mothers breastfeed, everyone benefits.

Yet, worldwide, less than 40 per cent of children under the age of 6 months are fed only breastmilk.

UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) are leading a Global Breastfeeding Collective to increase political commitment for breastfeeding—one of the smartest investments a country can make.

We seek to join forces with partners also working to realize the Sustainable Development Goals' vision of a better world. Our aim is to integrate agendas, messages and advocacy to maximize our collective impact.

Together, we will go further.

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**“We are emphasizing breastfeeding more and more in our support to countries, not just as a health investment but as a true powerful economic investment in their futures. The gains from early childhood nutrition are forever. In sheer, raw bottom-line economic terms, this may be the single most effective investment a country can make in any sector for any reason!”**

**Keith Hansen,  
Vice President,  
World Bank Washington D.C.**

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GLOBAL BREASTFEEDING  
**COLLECTIVE**



# BREASTFEEDING POWERS EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

## KEY MESSAGES

The first years of life have a profound effect on a child's future. These years are a critical early window of opportunity to provide the nutrition, protection, bonding and stimulation that children need to reach their full potential.

Adequate nutrition, safe environments and responsive adult caregiving are the best ways to support healthy brain development. Inadequate early nutrition undermines brain development in ways that can make it difficult for a child to recover later.

Breastfeeding is one of the first early childhood development interventions and helps prepare children for a prosperous future in a cost-effective way for families and societies. Breastfeeding supports healthy growth and protects against life-threatening and chronic illnesses. Breastmilk includes long-chain fatty acids and other nutrients needed for healthy brain development.

Across all income levels, breastfeeding is associated with higher performance in intelligence tests among children and adolescents (3 IQ points on average), which can translate to improved academic performance, increased long-term earnings and a smarter workforce.

Breastfeeding also supports healthy brain development by providing frequent close interaction and attachment between mother and infant. These kinds of nurturing interactions have a two-generation effect because positive behaviours are modelled for the next generation.

Never in the history of science have we understood so much about the importance of breastfeeding in nurturing resilient families, economies and nations. Now we must put this evidence into action and strengthen collaboration between the early childhood development and nutrition communities by promoting a shared agenda.

## KEY FACTS

When countries, rich or poor, support breastfeeding through meaningful investments and programmes, it has an impact on their bottom lines and the health and well-being of women and children.

Globally, the costs of lower cognitive ability associated with not breastfeeding amount to more than US\$300 billion each year, a figure comparable to the entire global pharmaceutical market or 0.53 per cent of global gross national income (GNI).

An estimated 250 million children under age 5 are at risk of not reaching their developmental potential due to stunting and other adversities. Poor nutrition in the first 1000 days, from conception to two years, is a direct risk factor for stunting. In gestation and infancy, the brain consumes between 50 and 75 per cent of all the energy absorbed by the body from food. Breastmilk's unique blend of fats, proteins, sugars and other nutrients nourishes brain development. In addition, the act of breastfeeding provides positive stimulation and bonding.



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Improving breastfeeding practices could save the lives of over 800,000 children each year. Breastfeeding also benefits women by reducing the risk of post-partum haemorrhage and breast and ovarian cancers, and it helps birth spacing by temporarily delaying the return to fertility. Breastfeeding also stimulates oxytocin, a hormone that assists bonding between mother and baby and a stress reliever for the mother.

Work outside the home can interfere with breastfeeding and with parental interaction and stimulation in the critical early phase of life. Yet only 34 per cent of countries have maternity protection regulations in line with International Labour Organization Convention 183, which calls for at least 14 weeks of paid maternity leave and cash benefits. Only 47 per cent have some regulations for paternity leave.

Protecting breastfeeding is an urgent priority because aggressive marketing from the breastmilk substitute industry undermines breastfeeding. Indeed, sales of breastmilk substitutes are projected to increase from US\$45 billion in 2014 to US\$71 billion in 2019.

## CALL TO ACTION

Countries have demonstrated that breastfeeding rates can be dramatically improved within a very short period of time. Actions, policies, and programmes that support mothers at health facilities, home and work have been shown to significantly increase breastfeeding, one of the first early childhood development interventions.

Early Childhood Development and Nutrition advocates are joining forces to advance this agenda. Working together, we must:

- **Define common ground between the early childhood development and nutrition communities and promote an integrated advocacy agenda to build political will.**
- **Disseminate accurate information on the value of breastfeeding as a powerful intervention benefitting early childhood development, brain development and healthy families.**
- **Foster positive social attitudes towards breastfeeding, by raising the public profile for the issue and building a breastfeeding culture for the 21st century.**
- **Promote the active involvement of men and community members in support of breastfeeding.**
- **Advocate for paid maternity leave in line with International Labour Organization Convention 183 and advocate for paternity leave.**
- **Advocate for regulating the breastmilk substitute industry by implementing, monitoring and enforcing the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and World Health Assembly Resolutions.**



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## RESOURCES CITED:

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO JOIN THE COLLECTIVE:

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Global Breastfeeding Collective Partners: 1000 Days | Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine | Action Against Hunger | Alive and Thrive | Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation | Carolina Global Breastfeeding Institute | Centers for Disease Control and Prevention | Concern Worldwide | Helen Keller International | International Baby Food Action Network | International Lactation Consultant Association | Nutrition International | New Partnership for Africa's Development | PATH | Save the Children | UNICEF | United States Agency for International Development | WHO | World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action | World Bank | World Vision International

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