

One, Two, Three, Go! Early Childhood Development—Ages 0-3

Many of the world's poorest children are born on the dirt floor of a hut. They are born to mothers who did not gain enough weight or have the benefit of lifesaving tetanus shots. They are at risk of low birth weight, developmental delays and birth defects. And many die.

Christian Children's Fund believes early childhood development begins even before birth, while the child is still in the womb. Mothers in CCF programs attend prenatal classes and learn safe motherhood practices. They learn to eat healthy diets and take vitamin supplements. They get tetanus shots that protect the mother and child from infection. This prenatal care and training is integral to a child's survival and goes a long way toward preventing developmental problems in the future.

In countries where infant and maternal mortality is especially high, CCF has launched an innovative Grannies program, incorporating the traditional influence of the older generation of women on the reproductive and maternal health decisions of the younger generation. (See story, page 6.)

The first three years of life are an especially critical time in the growth of a child. It is a time of accelerated learning, when the brain grows rapidly and fundamental wiring takes place. CCF offers a great diversity of programs to ensure the proper growth and development of children from birth to age three. Though CCF supports a number of full-time day care centers for the three and under age group, most initiatives are home-based and focus on the complete participation of the family, especially the mother.

CCF's Home-Based Program

A child's well-being in the first years of life depends heavily on the knowledge and skill of its parents, especially on the knowledge and skill of the mother. Home visitors bring parents the enhanced knowledge and skills they need to raise healthy children. (In countries such as Kenya or Uganda, where HIV/AIDS has claimed the lives of many parents, home visitors often work with grandparents and older siblings, who now must assume the responsibilities of parenting orphaned infants and toddlers.) Home visitors are called by different names—Guide Mothers in Honduras,

Ages 0-3

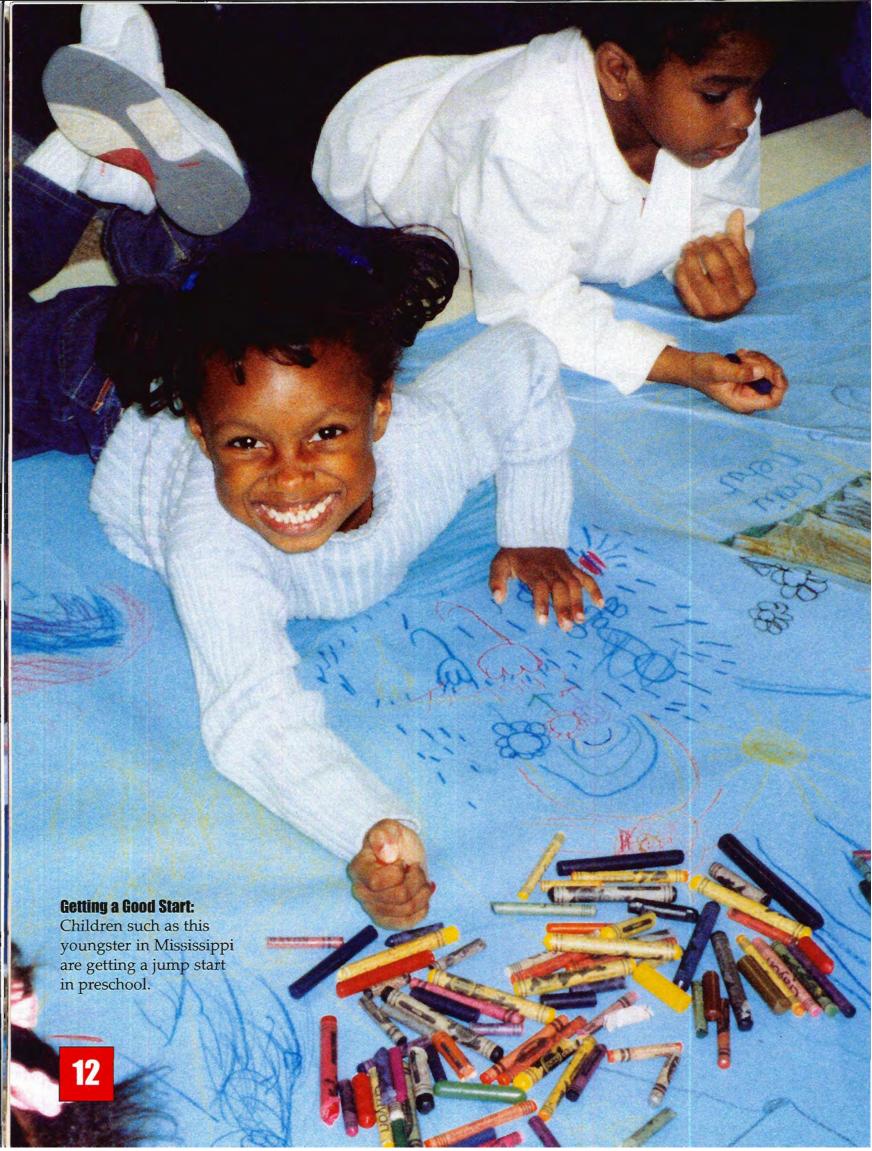


Weighing In: A standard procedure in CCF's ECD program is weighing babies on the Salter Scale to assure that they are the right weight for their height and age. This is part of CCF's ECD effort to prevent malnutrition.

Caders in Indonesia, and Health Volunteer Mothers in Ethiopia. But they all share a strong commitment to children and a commitment to helping parents improve the lives of their children.

The home visitors are community volunteers who undergo extensive and ongoing training by CCF. Guide Mothers, for instance, participate in a two-month training period with a community educator. The community educator, who frequently holds a university degree, receives extensive early child-hood development training by CCF. The educator accompanies the Guide Mothers on their first few home visits, then holds weekly group meetings to address problems and exchange ideas.

CCF assigns the home visitors a small number of families to visit regularly. Some home visitors have challenging routes, like several in Guatemala who travel by horseback to remote mountainous regions. Home visitors focus on children ages zero to three, although they follow the development of older children as well.



Four, Five, Six—Ready, Set, Go! Getting Kids Ready For School: Ages 4-6

Though infants and young toddlers need the comfort and security of family, as they grow older they also need the company of other children. Playing with their peers provides them with opportunities to gain social skills and learning experiences. CCF has preschools throughout the world, which help children become school-ready, preparing them for making the critical leap to primary school.

Preschool activities are designed to address the holistic needs of children ages four to six—supporting their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. Ensuring good health and involving parents are among the key factors CCF addresses.

A Variety of Settings—One Goal

CCF's ECD centers reflect the diversity of the environments and countries where we work. In some ECD centers, such as those in urban areas of Brazil, children have chairs, desks and classrooms inside modern brick buildings. But in some parts of Indonesia, children learn their lessons while sitting on palm mats, in simple, thatched-roof schools built by their parents. Children who go to CCF's preschool in East Timor attend classes in a previously war-torn building that the community has renovated. All so different! Yet they share the same goals and approaches: providing an age-appropriate curriculum as well as important time to play and eat a nutritious lunch in a clean, safe location.

Although most ECD programs are half-day, CCF also runs a number of full-day day-care centers to support the needs of working families in Albania, Ukraine, and the U.S. And CCF provides support to child centers in squatters' camps in Diepsloot, South Africa. There are a number of communities, such as those served by the CCF-U.S./Great Plains office, that do not have physical centers the children can attend. In these locations, CCF reaches the four- to six-year-olds and their families through home visitors and playgroups.

Quality Programming

CCF ensures that its preschool children receive the best education possible through a well-designed curriculum, teacher training manuals, best practices guidelines, and monitoring and evaluation tools. Preschool teachers, many of whom have no more than an eighth-grade education, receive ongoing training in early childhood development from CCF. Depending on local requirements, CCF provides professional certification/accreditation programs for these early childhood development teachers. In Brazil, for instance, child educators undergo an 11-step qualification program, which covers language, math, science, music, first aid and other topics.



Hand in Hand: Children in a CCF Sri Lankan preschool program learn to develop social skills early.

Play-oriented Curriculum

In CCF preschools, children learn through play. They pick up fine motor skills through activities like painting and cutting, and develop their large muscles by running, swinging and having fun on playgrounds. In music classes, they learn songs about their culture, and develop rhythm and language. They learn how to share while playing with their friends, experiment with social roles in playhouses and pretend kitchens, and discover that reading is fun while sitting in colorful Dream Corners.

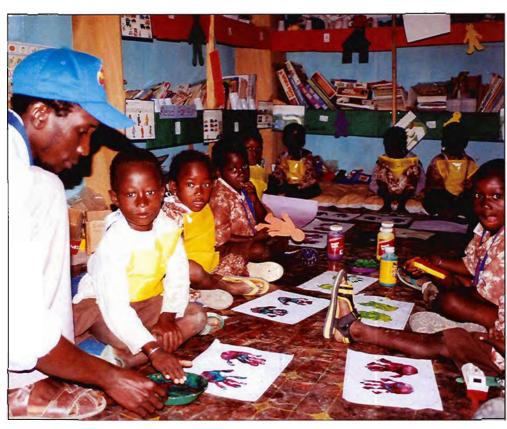
Puzzles and science experiments stimulate problem-solving skills. As they build towers with blocks, they use their imagination and learn about colors and shapes and counting. Field trips introduce children to new worlds and hands-on experiences. Preschool children in the Philippines, for instance, hunt for shells on beaches and visit zoos and botanical gardens.

A Place To Dream, Play...And Learn

In The Gambia...

For five-year-old Sainabou, who lives in The Gambia, visiting a Dream Corner is "the happiest time of the day in school."

Sainabou's Dream Corner is a cozy nook in her classroom where she enjoys looking at picture books, playing with toys with her friend Haddy, and experimenting with arts and crafts. CCF has set up Dream Corners throughout The Gambia, as well as in Brazil, Honduras, the U.S. and ten other countries. With easy-to-reach shelves and bright decorations, the Dream Corners inspire creative thinking.



In addition to Dream Corners, CCF has other ways of getting books into the hands of young children. In Brazil, for instance, community promoters take giant Book Bags to rural preschools, offering a different selection of books every 15 days. In other countries, such as Thailand, mobile libraries bring the pleasure of reading to children.

For many children, these programs provide their first exposure to books. In The Gambia, for instance, few families can afford them, and only 39% of the population can read. But Dream Corners offer children like Sainabou an opportunity to escape into new worlds, and imagine a better future.

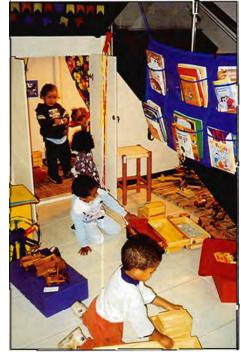
In Brazil...

"Make yourself at home" is the motto of CCF-Brazil's Toy Library program. In the libraries, children can find comfortable spaces to come together and play.

The program started in 1999, and reaches primarily rural children through 54 libraries in the states of Minas Gerais and Ceara. The libraries bring educational toys like blocks and puzzles into the hands of children who have few or no playthings at home. At the toy libraries, children can also play games, listen to stories, try out musical instruments, or create works of art. Such opportunities are rare in poor communities, where children spend most of their free time doing chores.

Early childhood development and parenting classes also meet in the toy libraries. While their children play, parents learn about health topics such as malnutrition. At toy-making workshops, they craft ordinary materials

into such playthings as sock dolls and wooden cars. They learn that simple activities—like throwing a blanket over a table to make a playhouse—can create endless hours of pleasure for their children.



Behind Locked Doors: Special Needs Children

In some areas of the world, special needs children are kept at home, hidden away behind locked doors, because they are mentally or physically limited.

In the Caribbean, CCF staff members go door to door in Dominica and St. Vincent, looking for families with special needs children they can help. These children often suffer physical abuse and neglect. They receive little stimulation or affection at home and are often ignored. In many cases, parents and communities believe disabilities are punishments from God. As a result, special needs children are a source of shame to be hidden away. When CCF staff meet these children, they counsel families and help get the special needs children into appropriate educational programs.

In addition, CCF home visitors invite families to a CCF special needs playground in Dominica, where they can interact with others. Other CCF support includes wheelchairs, food, clothing, medical assistance and special toys for stimulation. Some children receive transportation to the Alpha Center in Dominica, which offers learning and rehabilitative care for children ages three to 18.

CCF field visits help the center identify children with special needs before they reach the age of five. But space is limited, and CCF-Caribbean hopes to build a new community-based rehabilitation center on the island.

ECD Monitoring Scale Helps Special Needs Children

Through its ECD monitoring scale, which marks universal development milestones, CCF identifies at-risk children. Those who are found at risk undergo further testing and are often referred to pediatricians and other sources of help. Depending on the number of children and the available funding, CCF communities may establish or support a Community-Based Rehabilitation program. Other solutions can come in the form of enhanced programming. To address language delays, for instance, CCF might offer supplemental reading, storytelling, singing, and other activities. CCF also offers a number of programs, including art therapy classes in South Africa, to help special needs children develop to their full potential.



Outward Bound: CCF assists children with special needs, helping their families and school-mates understand and accept their special circumstances.