

Equality  
for Everyone

# All means all:

**A call for disability-inclusive  
early years financing**

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### Introduction

The Act for Early Years campaign calls for urgent government action to end the global early years crisis and ensure every young child has access to high-quality, nurturing interventions during the most critical period of their development. Through three catalytic goals - universal access to quality primary healthcare, universal access to quality preschool education, and universal support for families - the campaign aims to transform life trajectories for young children worldwide.

To drive forward these goals, the campaign is calling for at least \$1 billion in new funding commitments from governments, international donors, businesses, and philanthropic donors through the first-ever International Financing Summit on Early Years. This watershed moment will bring global leaders together to galvanise political will, align diverse stakeholders, and establish new funding mechanisms explicitly focused on ensuring every child gets the best start in life.

Yet for this vision of universal early years support to be truly realised, it is crucial to address multiple factors that exclude young children from the services they need, including gender, poverty, ethnicity and language, and migrant and refugee status. Among the most intractable of these exclusion factors is disability. As children with disabilities often face intersecting marginalisation, this policy briefing strengthens the campaign's mission by placing disability inclusion at its heart, recognising that without deliberate inclusion strategies, the Act For Early Years goals cannot deliver for all children.

## Defining disability inclusion

Disability inclusion means ensuring that children with disabilities can access and meaningfully participate in all early years services, alongside their peers without disabilities. This encompasses both universal design approaches that make services accessible to all children from the outset, and targeted interventions that address specific barriers faced by children with disabilities.<sup>1</sup>

**This twin-track approach is central to effective disability inclusion, involving:**

- 1. Mainstreaming:** Integrating disability considerations into all universal early years policies and services
- 2. Targeted interventions:** Providing specific support and services designed to meet the specific needs of children with disabilities

Central to this approach is the principle of “Nothing About Us, Without Us.” Children with disabilities and their families must be meaningfully involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating the services that affect their lives. This means listening to their experiences, respecting their expertise about their own needs, and ensuring their voices shape policy decisions from the earliest stages. Too often, services are designed by professionals without consulting the very people they are meant to serve, leading to approaches that miss the mark or create new barriers.



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<sup>1</sup> This briefing utilises Article 1 of The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) definition: Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.



## Key messages

The Act For Early Years campaign goals of universal primary health, universal preschool, and universal support for families require deliberate inclusion strategies and dedicated resources targeted at the under-fives to be achieved. This is particularly true for the most marginalised and at-risk group of young children, including those with disabilities, who often face multiple, intersecting forms of disadvantage at the very start of life. The window of opportunity, particularly in the first five years of life when brain development is most rapid, is simply too important to miss for these children and their families.

- 1. Every child deserves the same opportunities to thrive:** Children with disabilities face barriers across all early years services, from healthcare that doesn't screen for developmental needs, to preschools where 1 in 4 children with disabilities can't access places, to family support that doesn't recognise additional costs. When we remove these barriers and design services that welcome every child, we create stronger, more inclusive communities where all children and families thrive together.
- 2. Investing early creates lasting benefits for children, families and society:** Early support and inclusive services during the critical first five years, when all children's development is most rapid, leads to better outcomes throughout life. Every \$1 invested returns \$17 through increased participation in education and employment, reduced support costs, and stronger, more productive communities.
- 3. True universality requires intentional inclusion and dedicated funding:** Universal access to healthcare, preschool, and family support means removing barriers and ensuring services work for all children, including those with disabilities. Following UNICEF's commitment, donors and governments should allocate at least 10% of early years budgets specifically to inclusion - making this a funding priority, not an afterthought.



## Seizing the moment for change

The first five years of a child's life (including the first 1,000 days characterised by unparalleled brain development and neuroplasticity) make this period optimal for mitigating barriers to full participation in activities and services that support children's development. For children with disabilities, early identification and intervention during this critical window can substantially improve outcomes and reduce the need for more intensive and expensive support later. These early years are vital for building foundations through inclusive services and continued health and family support.<sup>2</sup>

In a global landscape marked by rapidly shifting strategic priorities and tightening fiscal constraints, the case for investing in disability-inclusive early years services is more critical than ever. Recent significant reductions in development assistance from several major donor countries, and the subsequent increased demand for additional support from philanthropies, the private sector, and governments threaten to further exacerbate the already limited funding for young children. As resources become scarcer, there is a real risk children with disabilities will be even further neglected.

This moment of challenge nonetheless presents an opportunity to fundamentally rethink how we value young children and allocate limited resources. By demonstrating that disability-inclusive approaches strengthen all early years services and deliver better financial value, we can make a compelling case that inclusion is not an optional add-on but an essential allocation of resources. This is a fundamental right, enshrined in both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, that applies to all children.

Inclusive approaches for young children with disabilities are also essential to upholding the 'leave no one behind' principle that underpins the entire 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. By prioritising the most marginalised children from the earliest years, we create pathways for countries to achieve multiple Sustainable Development Goals simultaneously and ensure that global development progress is truly equitable. By taking decisive action now to protect and prioritise disability-inclusive early years services, we can secure the future of this generation of children whilst avoiding much greater social and economic costs in the decades to come.

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<sup>2</sup> Olusanya, Bolajoko O., Claudine Storbeck, Vivian G. Cheung, and Mijna Hadders-Algra on behalf of the Global Research on Developmental Disabilities Collaborators (GRDDC). 2023. "Disabilities in Early Childhood: A Global Health Perspective" *Children* 10, no. 1: 155. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children10010155>

## Understanding the scale of exclusion

For the world's youngest children, including those with disabilities, the early years represent both vulnerability and opportunity. Despite significant global progress in reducing child mortality over recent decades, the world has failed to make comparable advances in supporting the youngest children with disabilities. In fact, one effect of the success in reducing mortality is an increase in the number of children with disabilities. This growing gap for under-fives represents both a profound injustice and a missed opportunity during the most critical developmental window of their lives.

These first five years, when brain development is most rapid and interventions most effective, are precisely when support is most lacking. The geographic burden is highly uneven, with South Asia (particularly India) and sub-Saharan Africa facing the greatest challenges. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, the number of children under five with disabilities increased by over 71% between 1990 and 2016<sup>3</sup>, reflecting growing recognition of disability, substantial demographic changes in the region, and continuing gaps in preventative care and early intervention services.

The range of barriers facing these youngest children is diverse, reflecting how society fails to accommodate children with different types of disabilities. For example, 25.2 million children under five years old globally experience vision loss but face barriers due to lack of accessible learning materials, inadequate teacher training in inclusive approaches, and environments not designed with their needs in mind. Meanwhile, 15.5 million children are affected by hearing loss but encounter communication barriers because of insufficient support for alternative communication methods, lack of assistive devices, and educational settings that rely solely on auditory instruction.<sup>4</sup>

Girls with disabilities in many low-income countries are at an even greater disadvantage, as they face compounded barriers to healthcare, education, and nutrition.<sup>5</sup> In rural and remote communities in low-resource settings, where

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3 Developmental disabilities among children younger than 5 years in 195 countries and territories, 1990–2016: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2016 Olusanya, Bolajoko O. et al. *The Lancet Global Health*, Volume 6, Issue 10, e1100 - e1121

4 Developmental disabilities among children younger than 5 years in 195 countries and territories, 1990–2016: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2016 Olusanya, Bolajoko O. et al. *The Lancet Global Health*, Volume 6, Issue 10, e1100 - e1121

5 Global report on children with developmental disabilities: from the margins to the mainstream. Executive summary. Geneva: World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2023.

healthcare and early intervention services are scarce, families often lack access to even basic screening for developmental delays and disabilities. These gaps are further amplified by intersecting factors including family poverty and ethnic and linguistic minority status. When combined with inaccessible environments and negative attitudes, such challenges can hold back a child's development if they can't access the right support and early help during these vital years.

For example, children with disabilities are 25% less likely to attend preschool than their peers without disabilities, creating a compounding disadvantage at the very start of their educational journey.<sup>6</sup> Children with disabilities are 49% more likely never to attend school at all, with exclusion beginning in these earliest years and continuing throughout life. Children with disabilities under five years old also face 34% higher rates of stunting and 25% higher rates of wasting, highlighting how disability intersects with nutrition and health outcomes during this critical developmental period.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond these stark statistics lies a deeper issue. The world's youngest children with disabilities continue to face structural exclusion from systems designed without their rights and needs in mind. This systematic marginalisation creates cascading consequences throughout their childhood, affecting not just immediate outcomes but their entire life trajectory, along with their families and communities. Without addressing these foundational barriers, we perpetuate intergenerational cycles of exclusion.



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6 UNICEF and UNESCO. 2024. Global Report on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE): The Right to a Strong Foundation. Paris: UNESCO.

7 United Nations Children's Fund, Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy (DIPAS) 2022–2030, UNICEF, New York, December 2022.



## **Why global action has failed to emerge**

Despite multiple international commitments, progress on supporting young children with disabilities has stagnated, creating a growing implementation gap between policy promises and practical action. Though children have the right to be heard on all matters affecting them, their voices and needs are routinely overlooked when designing policies and investment priorities. Three critical barriers have undermined global efforts, including fragmented leadership, inadequate data systems, and deprioritised investment.

### **Fragmented leadership at all levels**

At national and subnational levels, responsibility for children with disabilities remains fragmented across health, education, and social sectors. Even when disabilities are identified, families often encounter broken referral pathways, difficult-to-access specialist services, and lack of ongoing community-based support. This coordination problem reflects a broader global trend where key international institutions, including WHO, UNICEF, and UNESCO, have launched valuable initiatives, but these efforts often lack coordination and clear accountability mechanisms. When the Nurturing Care Framework was launched in 2018, it was not sufficiently designed with children with disabilities in mind, creating a disconnect with the inclusive vision of SDG 4.2.<sup>8</sup>

### **Inadequate data and monitoring systems**

Most countries do not routinely monitor children's development as part of standard healthcare, missing crucial opportunities for early identification. Current monitoring tools, including the Global Scale for Early Childhood Development Index 2030, are not well-designed for including children with disabilities or tracking their progress, creating significant blind spots in accountability systems.<sup>9</sup>

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8 Almasri, Nihad A., Tracey Smythe, Mijna Hadders-Algra, and Bolajoko O. Olusanya. 2022. "Prioritising Rehabilitation in Early Childhood for Inclusive Education: A Call to Action." *Disability and Rehabilitation* 45 (19): 3155–59

9 Olusanya, Bolajoko O., Claudine Storbeck, Vivian G. Cheung, and Mijna Hadders-Algra on behalf of the Global Research on Developmental Disabilities Collaborators (GRDDC). 2023. "Disabilities in Early Childhood: A Global Health Perspective" *Children* 10, no. 1: 155

## Declining investment despite compelling evidence

Global investment from official development assistance for children with disabilities under five years old declined by 11.4% between 2007 and 2016, whilst families bear almost the entire burden of care.<sup>10</sup> This funding gap is particularly concerning given that annual costs of childhood disability range from US\$450 to \$69,500 per child—costs that could be significantly reduced through early intervention.<sup>11</sup> Whilst UNICEF has committed to allocating 10% of its budget to disability inclusion by 2030<sup>12</sup>, similar commitments from other major donors and governments have not materialised. This systematic underinvestment undermines children’s fundamental rights to health, education, and development as enshrined in both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, signalling how society values, or fails to value, its youngest children.



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10 Olusanya, Bolajoko O. et al. “Accelerating progress on early childhood development for children under 5 years with disabilities by 2030.” *The Lancet Global Health*, Volume 10, Issue 3, e438 - e444

11 Olusanya, Bolajoko O. et al. “Accelerating progress on early childhood development for children under 5 years with disabilities by 2030.” *The Lancet Global Health*, Volume 10, Issue 3, e438 - e444

12 United Nations Children’s Fund, *Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy (DIPAS) 2022–2030*, UNICEF, New York, December 2022



## Financing disability inclusion

To truly transform early years services for children with disabilities, we must ensure that disability inclusion is centrally positioned within the Act For Early Years campaign's investment objectives. This requires fundamental shifts in how we invest in, monitor, and account for disability-inclusive services:

- 1. All donors and governments should adopt UNICEF's 10% benchmark:** Building on UNICEF's commitment to allocate 10% of its budget to disability inclusion by 2030, all early years funders must adopt this as a minimum standard. This represents a critical shift from previous approaches where disability was an afterthought.
- 2. Every dollar must contribute to accessible services:** The campaign's targets at least \$1bn in new commitments from governments, donors, and philanthropies. New investment should be guided by the twin-track approach to disability and inclusion.
- 3. Early intervention delivers compelling returns:** Investment yields significant returns through reduced healthcare and education costs over a lifetime, whilst enabling greater workforce participation for parents and, eventually, for children with disabilities themselves as they grow into adulthood.
- 4. Accountability requires robust data systems:** We must develop disability-disaggregated indicators for all early years investments and establish clear benchmarks for inclusion across healthcare, education, and family support services.
- 5. National policies must explicitly prioritise inclusion:** Early childhood development policies must name disability inclusion as a priority area with corresponding budget allocations. Similarly, disability policies must prioritise young children within their frameworks.
- 6. The International Financing Summit offers a pivotal opportunity:** By dedicating sessions to disability-inclusive financing and ensuring meaningful participation of disability rights organisations, the Summit can establish new global standards for under-5years investment.

## What all young children need

The Act For Early Years campaign calls for three catalytic goals that can transform outcomes for all young children. For these goals to be truly universal, they must be designed with the specific needs and rights of children with disabilities in mind from the outset.

- 1. Universal Access to Quality Primary Healthcare:** Primary healthcare must provide essential services from pregnancy through early childhood, including quality antenatal care, comprehensive immunisation, regular health monitoring, and nutrition support. For true universality, this means universal developmental screening from birth, early intervention services integrated within maternal and child health frameworks, and clear referral pathways between health, education and social services. Healthcare workers need training to identify and respond to developmental delays, whilst assistive devices and rehabilitation become part of basic healthcare packages.
- 2. Universal Access to Quality, Inclusive Preschool Education:** Two years of quality preschool education must use play-based, child-centred approaches in safe, stimulating environments with qualified educators trained in inclusive pedagogy. Universal design principles should guide school construction and learning materials from the start. This includes evidence-informed specialised support in mainstream settings, individualised teaching approaches, and smooth transitions from early intervention to inclusive preschool and primary school settings.
- 3. Universal Support for Families:** All families need affordable childcare, adequate child benefits, supportive parental leave policies, and parent education programmes. For families of children with disabilities, this means enhanced child benefits covering disability-related costs, flexible childcare accommodating diverse needs, peer support networks, meaningful engagement in all decisions affecting their children, respite care services, and access to low-cost assistive technologies.





## **Including every child**

The Act for Early Years campaign's vision of universality can only be achieved by placing disability inclusion at its heart. As we secure \$1 billion in new funding and stage the first International Financing Summit on Early Years, disability inclusion must be a foundational principle, not an afterthought.

By adopting UNICEF's 10% benchmark for disability inclusion, strengthening accountability through disability-disaggregated data, and ensuring the Summit establishes new global standards for inclusive investment, we can transform early years systems to work better for everyone. The evidence is clear. When we remove barriers and design services that welcome every child from the start, we create stronger, more productive communities where all families can thrive.

Only by explicitly addressing the needs of children with disabilities, guided by their voices and experiences, can we ensure universal truly means universal. This means reaching every child, regardless of ability, and giving them the foundation they need to develop their full potential. The window of opportunity in the first five years is simply too important to miss for any child. By making this commitment now, we can transform the lives of millions of children globally whilst building early years systems that benefit everyone.

## **Contributing to this briefing**

This briefing is part of an ongoing consultation process to enhance disability inclusion within the Act for Early Years campaign. We welcome additional contributions, feedback, and insights from disability rights organisations, early years networks, researchers, and practitioners working with children with disabilities.

## Key recommendations

- 1. Donors and governments commit to the 10% minimum benchmark for disability inclusion in all early years investments, following UNICEF's leadership:** UNICEF has set a global standard by committing 10% of its budget to disability inclusion by 2030. All donors and governments must adopt this benchmark to shift from treating disability as an afterthought to making it a funding priority.
- 2. Summit host countries and participating governments ensure the International Financing Summit includes dedicated disability-inclusive financing sessions with meaningful participation of disability rights organisations:** The Summit represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to establish new global standards. Without dedicated sessions and genuine participation of disability rights organisations, we risk perpetuating the exclusion of children with disabilities from this critical moment.
- 3. National leaders eliminate the 25% preschool attendance gap for children with disabilities through targeted policies and investments:** Children with disabilities are currently 25% less likely to attend preschool than their peers, creating compounding disadvantage from the start of their educational journey. Targeted action is needed to remove barriers and ensure equal access.
- 4. National and sub-national governments establish clear referral pathways among health, education and social protection systems:** Families currently encounter fragmented services and broken referral systems when seeking support. Coordinated pathways across sectors are essential for the twin-track approach to work effectively and ensure no child falls through the cracks.
- 5. Finance ministries and donor agencies expand financing for disability-inclusive early years services with dedicated budget lines:** Without explicit budget allocations, disability inclusion remains underfunded and marginalised. Dedicated budget lines signal political commitment and ensure resources reach the most excluded children during the critical early years window.

## Report authors

**Vibhu Sharma,**  
Disability and Inclusion Coordinator

**Michael Simpson,**  
Senior Research and Policy Manager







The Act For Early Years campaign is led by a High-Level Advisory Group of early childhood experts, networks and organisations around the world. The campaign's secretariat is managed by Theirworld, a UK-registered charity.

**Company Number:** 4422413

**Charity Number:** 1092312

**Email:** [campaigns@theirworld.org](mailto:campaigns@theirworld.org)

[www.actforearlyyears.org](http://www.actforearlyyears.org)