

The future of children is always today

El futuro de los niños es siempre hoy

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“The future of children is always today. Tomorrow will be too late.” The great poet Gabriela Mistral said this phrase almost a century ago, yet we still owe a great debt to childhood, despite the Convention on the Rights of the Child, signed by all countries on November 20, 1989¹. Many issues have since been highlighted, among them the right of every boy and girl to achieve their optimal potential for physical, cognitive, psychological, social, behavioral, and affective development, regardless of their ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, or their parents’ level of education.

There is compelling evidence of the critical importance of the first thousand days of life in the integral development of the human being – a pivotal period for development and one of intense neuronal activity, during which the most complex neural circuits are formed compared to the rest of life. Whatever is done or left undone during this period will have far-reaching consequences at different stages of life²⁻⁴.

The ecological model of child development by Bronfenbrenner⁵ considers that development as a whole depends on the dynamic interaction between the boy or girl and their environment, represented from the macro to the micro level by the state, the community, and the family. Each of these holds norms, values, and responsibilities (public policies, institutional frameworks, organizational models, community participation, love, care, and the fulfillment of children’s immediate needs).

Today, when everything tends to be evaluated from an economic perspective, Nobel laureate in Economics from the University of Chicago, James Heckman, demonstrated in 2005 that the return rate on investment in early childhood is very high – up to eight times the amount invested⁶. This return rate decreases during the school years and higher education, eventually flattening in adulthood. While there is a return on investment at every stage of life, nothing compares to early childhood. There is extensive evidence from neuroscience and social sciences regarding the determining and risk factors in development, such as poverty, lack of stimulation, emotional attachment, violence, and abuse. Prolonged and toxic stress caused by these risk factors leads to increased production of adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol, which have lifelong consequences, including deficits in cognitive and psychosocial skills that translate into higher school dropout rates, delinquency, substance abuse, deterioration of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and empathy, as well as a greater prevalence of mental health issues and early onset of non-communicable chronic diseases²⁻⁴.

If we know what must be done and the tremendous advantages of accompanying and strengthening development during these first thousand days of life, why don’t we do it?

Could it be that we have only fought for survival? Could it be that children have no voice and are rendered invisible? Could it be that those of us with the

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knowledge and the related institutions have not been able to advocate enough or spread the knowledge to reach the necessary political levels?

The United Nations Children's Fund, the Pan American Health Organization, and other organizations have been publishing studies, successful experiences, and developing intervention models for decades. Despite this, we are still far from reducing the rates of developmental delay⁷⁻⁹.

Today, more than 250,000,000 children under 5 years of age (43%) worldwide experience deficient biopsychosocial development, with the vast majority of cases concentrated in countries with the greatest socioeconomic and educational vulnerabilities, as well as those with the highest levels of inequity⁸⁻¹⁰.

Public policies for child protection must be intersectoral, as many sectors and actors are involved (health, education, and social security, among others). This requires the capability to work in both multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary ways, blending biological and social sciences, an enormous challenge for developing countries^{2,11}.

To create good policies, plans, and programs, it is required to have accurate information and appropriate instruments and indicators. Only in this way can we determine whether our efforts are correctly aligned with our objectives^{12,13}.

Mexico has been a pioneer in this field, and it is noteworthy when major initiatives in the area of development emerge from a pediatric hospital. Such is the case of the Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics Service at the Hospital Infantil de México Federico Gómez, led by Antonio Rizzoli and his team, who, in addition to sharing experiences between Chile and Mexico, are training Developmental Pediatricians who will undoubtedly have the leadership necessary to advance our region toward a childhood where the right to development is respected.

Building instruments to measure child development is a complex task because it requires evaluating multiple dimensions. Validating an instrument for use at the national level is an enormous effort. This is why the contribution of the Child Development Evaluation Test¹⁴, an instrument developed, validated, and implemented as part of public policy in Mexico, and the lessons, challenges, and opportunities derived from it represent an invaluable contribution to the region.

Many instruments have emerged over time; some are in use in certain countries, but others are either too complex or expensive to apply or have not yet been

validated across different populations. It remains up to each country to decide which developmental assessment tool to use, highlighting the relevance of the umbrella review of various screening tests developed in Latin America.

Therefore, the content of this special supplement of the *Boletín Médico del Hospital Infantil de México* is of utmost importance, as it provides highly valuable information at an international level, specially for Latin American countries. The experiences presented here can be replicated and adapted in different contexts, but the most important aspect is how this wealth of knowledge and scientific experience is put into practice in countries and applied to childhood through national policies with a sense of urgency. The first thousand days pass quickly, and the future of children must always be today.

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