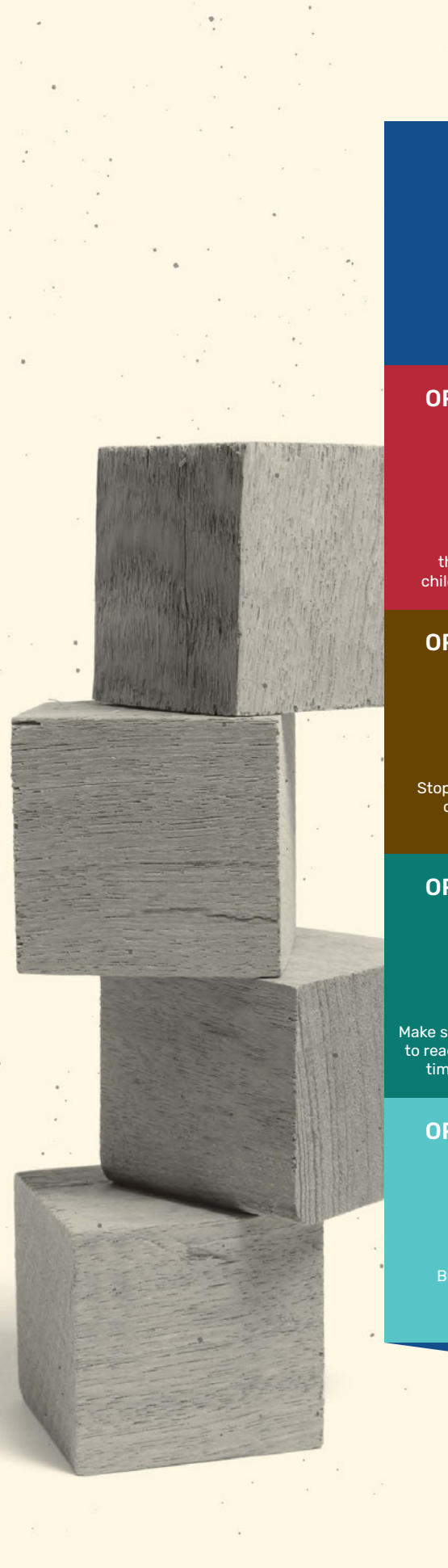




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HANDS-ON

Experience Learning

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OPPORTUNITY

4

Give every child
the benefit of early
childhood development

OPPORTUNITY

5

Stop nutritional stunting
of young children

OPPORTUNITY

6

Make sure every child is ready
to read and do maths by the
time they go to school

OPPORTUNITY

7

Build simple, loving
connections for
every child

SHAPING THE FUTURE TODAY

South Africa's future depends on its children's brainpower — and a child's brain grows fastest in the first few years of life. To help children reach their full potential in those early years, they need nutritious food, early language development through age-appropriate books and responsive caregiving. Yet too many receive few or any of these crucial building blocks. It's a problem that needs to be addressed from multiple angles, as suggested by the recommendations of the latest Thrive by Five Index.

This learning brief is the first in an issue dedicated to unpacking how early childhood development can be strengthened in South Africa. It looks at what the 2024 Thrive by Five Index tells us about young children's early development and how DGMT's pivotal projects have put the recommendations from the Index into action — from thinking about how to best spend budgets to rolling out on-the-ground interventions that can help reduce chronic malnutrition manifesting as stunting, help get children ready to read and do maths, and support parents to give their children the best start through responsive caregiving.

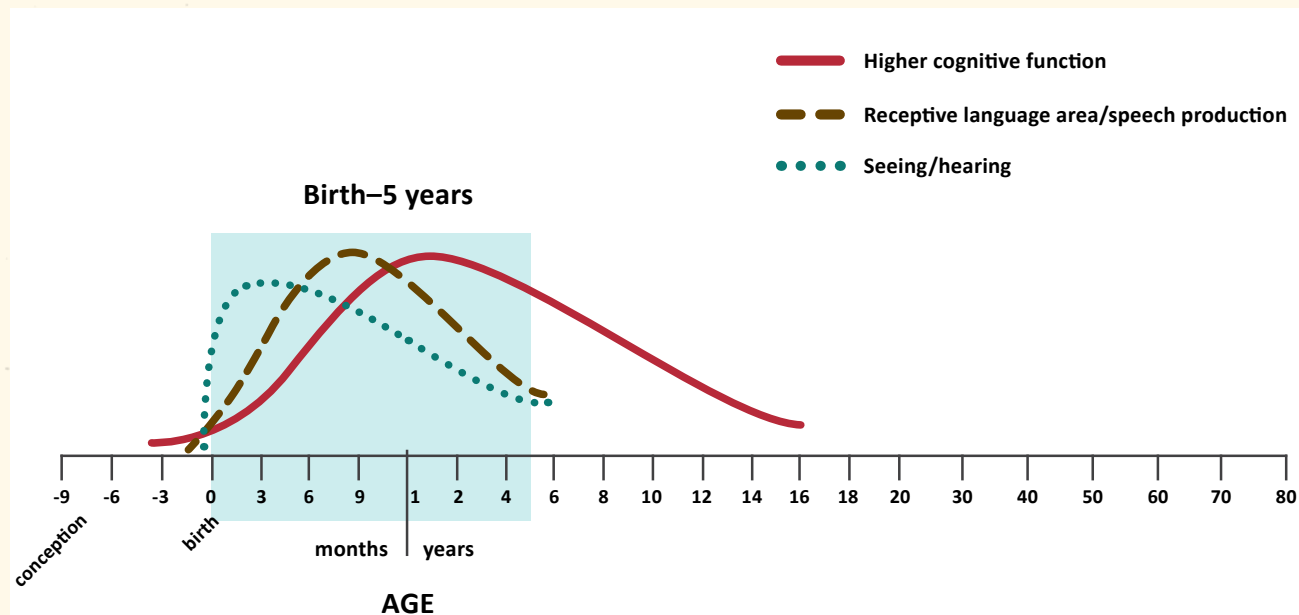
WHY GETTING OFF TO A GOOD START MATTERS

South Africa's potential relies on its children's brainpower. But brains are built over time, child development experts say. Early childhood development (ECD) should therefore be understood as a process during which a child's brain builds a complex network of connections between the more than 100 billion cells a baby is born with.¹ The circuits formed by these connections drive how we think, learn and behave. And because experiences in early life shape how this network forms and works, the first years of a child's life create the foundation for what follows.

Childhood development is rooted in the progressive way in which the brain's architecture takes shape:²

- Areas responsible for seeing and hearing are the first to start making extensive connections in a newborn's brain; the process is quickest during the first five or so months after birth.
- Neural connections then expand in areas governing speech production and language comprehension — processes that require both visual and auditory input — peaking at around one year of age.
- In the meantime, the prefrontal cortex — the brain area that underpins complex mental processes like problem-solving, decision-making, planning and creative and critical thinking — has already started ramping up in building connections, with the development rate at its highest around the age of three or four.³

SYNAPSE FORMATION IN THE DEVELOPING BRAIN



Source: National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2024⁴

¹ Ackerman, S. 1992. *Discovering the brain*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. Chapter: "The development and shaping of the brain." Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK234146/>

² National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development. 2001. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Chapter 8. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK225557/>

³ Development continues long past these periods; the time windows described here only pertain to the periods in which neural connections form at the highest rate.

⁴ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. 2024. *The timing and quality of early experiences combine to shape brain architecture* (Working Paper No. 5). Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. Available at: https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Timing_Quality_Early_Experiences-1.pdf

Assessing children's developmental progress by age four is therefore a valuable checkpoint to see if they're ready to start school soon⁵ — and in the broader sense to get an idea of what a country's potential for social and economic development looks like. Early learning, especially in structured programmes in the years before a child goes to school, boosts a society's wellbeing. This is not only because it gives people better chances of building sustainable livelihoods, but also because it allows them to access healthcare, build resilience, become more engaged citizens and make better choices about their lives.⁶ Supporting children to learn well is therefore a powerful lever for building a sustainable future for a nation.

"The highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible, from birth through age five, in disadvantaged families."⁷

—James Heckman, American economist and scholar



THE STATE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

The 2024 Thrive by Five Index,⁸ a three-yearly national survey that measures how four-year-old children are developing and what influences their progress across early learning, physical growth and social-emotional functioning, paints a concerning picture of the state of ECD in South Africa:⁹

- Only 42% of children of this age enrolled in early learning programmes (ELPs) were developmentally on track — and of the close to 60% that were not on track, half were far behind the expected milestones. For children outside of ELPs, only about a fifth (18%) were on track, and more than half were far behind.¹⁰
- Nearly half of the children in the survey were not emotionally ready for school.
- Almost four in 10 children lagged behind when it came to engaging in social relations with peers and adults, such as when they had to participate in group activities, resolve conflicts or ask for help.
- About a third (32%) of the sample showed signs of stunting, although it was moderate to severe in only a fifth of this subgroup (7% of the total sample). Stunting means a child is too short for their age because of chronic malnutrition; the condition can be worsened by repeated infections, and contributes to suboptimal brain development.
- Close to 50% of the girls in the study were developmentally on track compared with about 40% of boys.
- Children in low-fee ECD centres (charging less than R50/month) were half as likely to be on track as those in high-fee centres (charging more than R1 690/month).

5 In South Africa, children may start Grade R in the year they turn five or six. Grade R forms part of the compulsory Foundation Phase in the public schooling system. See: *Basic Education Laws Amendment Act* (Act 32 of 2024). Government Gazette, 16 September 2024. Available at: https://www.parliament.gov.za/storage/app/media/Acts/2024/Act_32_of_2024_Basic_Education_Laws_Amendment_Act.pdf

6 World Bank. 2018. *World Development Report 2018: Learning to realize education's promise*. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-1096-1

7 Heckman Equation. n.d. *Invest in early childhood development: Reduce deficits, strengthen the economy*. Available at: <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/invest-in-early-childhood-development-reduce-deficits-strengthen-the-economy/>

8 Thrive by Five. n.d. *Thrive by Five Index*. Available at: <https://thrivebyfive.co.za/>

9 Giese, S., et al. 2025. *Thrive by Five Index 2024: National findings*. Pretoria and Cape Town: DBE and DataDrive2030.

10 A subsample of 272 children not enrolled in an ELP was included in the 2024 survey to gain insights into a highly vulnerable population of young children. This sample was purposively selected from low-income areas in three provinces. However, owing to the small sample size, findings are not provincially or nationally representative.

THE THRIVE BY FIVE INDEX

The 2024 Thrive by Five Index surveyed 5 001 four-year-olds attending one of 1 388 ELPs across South Africa's nine provinces. Standardised tools were used to assess developmental milestones across five subdomains of early learning, as well as physical growth and social and emotional functioning. A child's abilities in language, emergent mathematics, executive functioning, fine motor coordination and visual-motor integration are the building blocks for reading, writing, problem-solving and classroom participation. Assessing children's performance in these areas at the age of four is therefore a good way to gauge whether they're ready for formal school-based learning, which starts in the Foundation Phase.¹¹

A subsample of 272 children not enrolled in an ELP was also included, selected from low-income areas. These findings are not nationally representative but do offer important insights regarding the developmental progress of children in a highly vulnerable population.

CHANGING THE COURSE

Although the survey's findings appear to paint a bleak picture, they also offer hope — because knowing where the problems lie means appropriate solutions can be explored. According to the study's recommendations, prioritising the following six approaches can change the story for South Africa's children and help the country to build a more equitable early learning system:¹²

- 1 Finance the ECD sector for access and quality.
- 2 Strengthen the ECD workforce and classroom practices.
- 3 Integrate early learning and child health to tackle stunting.

¹¹ Thrive by Five. n.d. *Thrive by Five Index methodology*. Available at: <https://thrivebyfive.co.za/methodology/>

¹² Thrive by Five Index. 2024. *Recommendations brief: Evidence to action*. Pretoria and Cape Town: DBE and DataDrive.

- 4 Support positive parenting by all caregivers — including fathers.
- 5 Strengthen Foundation Phase teaching.
- 6 Advance data and research.

One of the goals of DGMT's approach to building a thriving society in South Africa is focused on helping all children get on track by Grade 4.¹³

GOAL 2: ALL CHILDREN ON TRACK BY GRADE 4

The four opportunities included in this strategic goal are as follows:

OPPORTUNITY 4:

Give every child the benefit of early childhood development.

OPPORTUNITY 5:

Stop nutritional stunting of young children.

OPPORTUNITY 6:

Make sure every child is *ready* to read and do maths by the time they go to school.

OPPORTUNITY 7:

Build simple, loving connections for every child.

¹³ DGMT. n.d. *Goal 2: Keep all children on track by Grade 4*. Available at: <https://dgmt.co.za/our-approach/goal-2-keep-all-children-on-track-by-grade-4/>

The four opportunities identified under this goal intersect with the recommendations that have come out of the 2024 Thrive by Five Index. The following section of this learning brief focuses on four ways in which DGMT and its pivotal projects are putting the Thrive by Five recommendations into action: investing in early childhood development; preventing stunting; promoting early literacy and language development through the distribution of books; and supporting caregivers to give their children the best start.

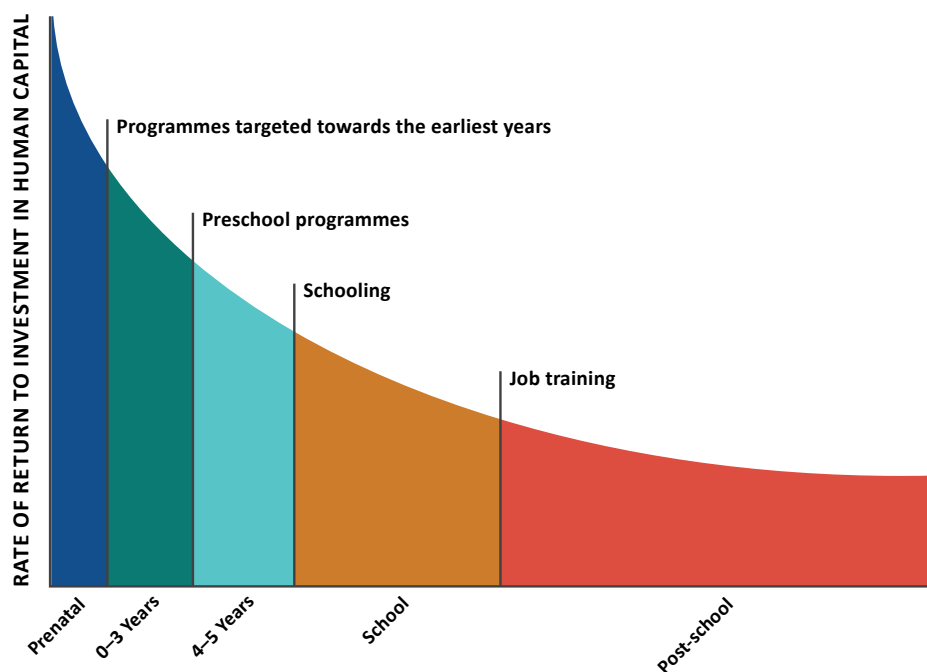
1 MAKING THE BEST OF BUDGETS TO BUILD BUSY BRAINS

Funding early childhood development makes sense — for everyone.¹⁴ Based on extensive analysis of data from the United States, Nobel laureate James Heckman showed that the earlier funding is directed to supporting ECD, the better.¹⁵

That’s because the return on investment — in other words, the gain derived from spending an extra unit of money on something — is highest when expenditure is prioritised in the first five years of life, but tapers off in the following years and almost flatlines by the time a child leaves school. It’s clear that waiting too long before investing in a child’s development dilutes the “bang” that can be gained from each “buck”.

Improving funding for early childhood development as recommended by the 2024 Index is part of Opportunity 4 of DGMT’s strategy. Having more money available will help not only to get more children enrolled in ELPs in South Africa — and especially those from the poorest households who can least afford to pay for care — but also to make sure that programme practitioners work in decent conditions, are paid fairly and have ongoing access to training opportunities.

HECKMAN CURVE



Source: James Heckman, 2008¹⁶

¹⁴ Dulvy, E.N., et al. 2022. *South Africa: Public expenditure and institutional review for early childhood development*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

¹⁵ Heckman, J.J. 2008. Schools, skills and synapses. *Economic Inquiry* 46(3), p. 289. Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2812935/>

¹⁶ Ibid.



In 2021, the government spent about R9.5 billion on early learning, representing less than 1% of its total public expenditure that year.¹⁷ Of this amount, only about 40% — R3.8 billion — was allocated to preschool programmes; about R2.8 billion of that was channelled through ECD subsidies. At that time, a subsidy of R17 was available to support a child in an ELP per day, an amount that had not changed since 2019 and did not change until 2024. But because of inflation, that R17 translated to only R13,59 of buying power in real terms by 2023.¹⁸

In 2025, a R10 billion boost from Treasury over three years pushed up the amount to R24 per child per day¹⁹ and has the potential to expand early learning programmes to 1.2 million children by 2027, bringing South Africa closer to the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) goal of subsidising 2.3 million children by 2030. While significant, the increase from R17 to R24 served only to recover the subsidy's value lost to inflation over the years. Further increases are needed to bring it closer to what quality ECD provision actually costs, estimated to be as high as R91 per child per day.²⁰

South Africa's national policy on ECD says that cost should not be a barrier to access for early learning. In an ideal situation, this would imply that ELPs should be fully publicly funded, says Daniel McLaren, public finance economist at Ilifa Labantwana.²¹ "But we haven't gone that far yet. Where we're at now is simply trying to increase funding to the sector so that ELPs can rely less and less on having to charge fees."

Results from the ECD Census in 2021 show that roughly seven out of 10 ELPs in the country depend on fees as their primary source of income.²² Three-quarters of the centres that took part in the survey were in wealth quintiles 1–3, where monthly fees could be, on average, between R218 and R313.²³ Only a third of the almost 42 500 programmes surveyed received a subsidy, and data showed that those without subsidies may have had to charge almost three times as much as centres that were able to access government help.

There are two components needed to get to a point where public funding for early learning relieves the financial pressure on families, says McLaren. One is working towards increasing the value of the subsidy so that it's closer to what it actually costs to support a child in an ELP that offers quality learning. The other is to increase access to the subsidy for more children, which means getting more programmes registered in the system so that they can be eligible for funding.

To this end, Ilifa Labantwana has been working with the government to model the cost of quality provision and the funding amount necessary to achieve universal access to ELPs for all children by 2030. Ilifa is also working with the DBE, which administers the ECD subsidy, and a range of social partners to develop guidelines and step-by-step tools that can help decision-makers ensure that the subsidy reaches all children who need it, especially those attending ELPs in the most informal and low-resource environments. Currently, a number of systemic obstacles linked to regulation and administration, such as meeting the requirements for getting to Silver status on the DBE's registration system (on page 24), prevent the subsidy reaching children in these settings.

The collaboration is an example of the power of strong relationships between the public sector and non-government players, says McLaren. "Something like the Thrive by Five Index, and also other research in the sector, gives us a much stronger platform for engaging with the government. The closeness of this relationship, together with evidence that sparks ideas for innovative change, is where our strength lies." It's a social compact as proposed in the 2030 Strategy for ECD Programmes.²⁴

17 Dulvy, E.N., et al. 2022. *South Africa public expenditure and institutional review for early childhood development*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

18 Brooks, L.E., et al. 2022. Assessing the policy options for the public provisioning of early childhood development programmes. *South African Journal on Human Rights* 38(3–4), pp. 240–260.

19 Parliament of the Republic of South Africa. 2024. *Finance Minister announces budget allocations for employment of doctors and teachers and expansion of the ECD programme*. Available at: <https://www.parliament.gov.za/news/finance-minister-announces-budget-allocations-employment-doctors-teachers-and-expansion-ecd-programme>

20 Kika-Mistry, J. 2024. *Spending and budget trends in the early childhood care and education sector*. Note 14: Teacher Demographic Dividend Project. Research on Socio-Economic Policy (RESEP), Stellenbosch University.

21 Ilifa Labantwana. n.d. Ilifa Labantwana. Available at: <https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/>

22 Department of Basic Education. 2022. *ECD Census 2021: Report*. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education. Available at: <https://datadrive2030.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/ecdc-2021-report.pdf>

23 In 2021, the child support grant was R460. This means some families may have had to spend about half of the grant on early learning.

24 Department of Basic Education. n.d. *ECD workshop unpacks 2030 strategy for ECD programmes*. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.za/ArchivedDocuments/ArchivedArticles/ECD-Workshop-unpacks-2030-Strategy-ECD-Programmes-0524.aspx>

About a third of children in the latest Thrive by Five Index showed some signs of stunting, meaning they're too short for their age. This happens because of chronic malnutrition (either not having enough food or not getting the right balance of nutrients), especially in the first 1 000 days of life.²⁵ Moderate to severe stunting was seen in only about a fifth of this group, representing just 7% of the total sample.

There's some good news in this finding, as the number of worryingly stunted children is lower than what was suggested in earlier national surveys.²⁶ This demonstrates the protective effects of ELPs, of which most provide at least one of the day's meals (usually lunch).²⁷ This point is reinforced by the finding that about 20% of children not enrolled in ELPs show signs of moderate to severe stunting. Only 18% of these children were developmentally on track, and more than half were far behind the expected milestones. Although this subsample was small and not nationally representative, it offers insight into the developmental consequences of living in poverty and vulnerability.

Stunting — even when mild — impairs children's ability to learn, grow and do well at school. This developmental setback has long-term health and economic consequences, such as earning low wages as adults, lost productivity and a high risk of chronic diseases later in life.²⁸ On the flip side, research shows that rolling out 10 simple nutrition interventions at scale (including supplementing pregnant women's diets with vitamins and minerals such as zinc, vitamin A, folic acid and calcium), promoting breastfeeding, teaching pregnant women about good nutrition for themselves and their babies and nipping malnutrition in the bud early, can yield \$18 in productivity returns later for every \$1 invested.²⁹ If the quality of learning improves and labour market participation becomes more equal, the returns can be up to \$30 for every \$1 invested in early childhood nutrition.³⁰

Tackling stunting is more than a health issue; it's a whole-of-society issue, says Edzani Mphaphuli, executive director of Grow Great, an organisation focused on combatting stunting. "[It] is a complex and wicked problem, of which the root cause really is poverty, and our aim is to halve stunting in South Africa by 2030."

The Grow Great campaign follows a two-pronged approach, focusing as much on pregnant women as on children. Early interventions can cushion even children at high risk of stunting, explains Mphaphuli, so the Grow Great Flourish programme supports pregnant women with knowledge about both their own and their developing child's health through a peer-to-peer model. "We call it the school of motherhood," she says, "to help mothers become their children's fiercest supporters and protectors."

On the other end is the Grow Great Champions programme, which trains community health workers (CHWs) to check up on pregnant women, track how well their babies are growing after birth, share knowledge on nutrition and wellbeing, and link them to health and social services early on.

NUMBERS THAT COUNT

In the past seven years, Grow Great has:

- monitored **357 037** children to see if they're growing as they should
- trained **4 294** CHWs on tracking children's developmental progress
- supported **65 464** mothers
- licensed **over 400** Grow Great Flourish hosts
- seen **80%** of mothers book for their first antenatal visit before 20 weeks of pregnancy.



²⁵ World Health Organization. n.d. Stunting in a nutshell (Chapter 2). Available at: <https://www.who.int/multi-media/details/stunting-in-a-nutshell-chapter2>

²⁶ Data from the 2016 South African Demographic and Health Survey and 2021–2023 National Food and Nutrition Security Survey.

²⁷ Department of Basic Education. 2022. ECD Census 2021.

²⁸ World Health Organization. n.d. Stunting in a nutshell (Chapter 3). Available at: <https://www.who.int/multi-media/details/stunting-in-a-nutshell-chapter3>

²⁹ Desmond, C., et al. 2021. Realising the potential human development returns to investing in early and maternal nutrition: The importance of identifying and addressing constraints over the life course. *PLoS Glob Public Health* 1(10): e0000021. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0000021>

³⁰ Ibid.

“But the thing that really makes my heart sink is seeing how debilitating poverty can be for pregnant women and the mothers of young children,” says Mphaphuli. Because even when mothers know all the important things they need to do to raise healthy babies, there’s little they can do if they don’t have the money to go for antenatal check-ups, buy healthy food or take pregnancy supplements. Low birth weight is one of the strongest predictors of stunting, she explains, and financial support during pregnancy can help to ensure that babies are born at a healthy weight.

“That’s why we advocate for a Maternal Support Grant to be introduced. From our research during Covid-19, we saw that giving mothers fortnightly vouchers of R300 allowed them to buy food, which improved both their and their children’s nutritional status. On top of that, we saw an improvement in maternal mental health, telling us that financial support changes a lot for a mother who would otherwise already be under pressure during pregnancy.”

Says Mphaphuli: “If there were a treatment for poverty, it would be to invest in a young child’s mother.”



3 BOOKS BUILD BRAINS

The 2024 Index showed that when early learning is viewed at a domain level, children performed best in emergent literacy and language, with just over half of them being on track and only about a fifth falling far behind the expected milestones.

Being able to read and make sense of language is important in all aspects of learning, says Kwanda Ndoda, development practitioner at DGMT.³¹ Moreover, having abundant access to books, especially at home, boosts early learning skills, executive functioning and early numeracy — as demonstrated by results from the Yizani Sifunde project in the Eastern Cape.³² The project, which was a collaboration between Book Dash, Wordworks and Nal’ibali, helped children to have access to 25–50 books in their homes. After a year of the intervention, the proportion of children who were developmentally on track approximately doubled and the proportion who were falling far behind approximately halved.³³ This was seen not only in literacy and language,

but also with regard to fine motor skills and executive functioning,³⁴ two domains in which only 29–40% were found to be on track in the 2024 Thrive by Five Index.

Just 11% of households covered by the 2024 Index had more than five children’s books, and over a quarter had none. Umncedi, a pivotal project at DGMT that provides support and resources to a network of early learning practitioners and principals, can help address this book deficit; it’s well placed to act as a link between book distributors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working to strengthen reading and literacy outcomes. Umncedi’s collaboration with the book distribution network Book Dash involves distributing boxes of books, including some 50 000 wordless picture books, to a network of 400 ECD centres.

³¹ University of Minnesota Center for Early Education and Development (CEED). n.d. *Center for Early Education and Development*. Available at: <https://umncedi.org/>

³² Book Dash. n.d. Research and evidence base. Available at: <https://bookdash.org/research-and-evidence-base/#local-evidence>

³³ Findings are from an external evaluation of the Yizani Sifunde project, and shown in the infographic “Abundant book ownership: A key contributor to improving preschool outcomes”.

³⁴ Ibid.

“Early learning is one-quarter stimulation and three-quarters encouragement,” says Ndoda, who has been an avid reader from a young age and understands the value of reading time with his two-year-old son. “He will bring me his favourite book every day and demand story time. It’s gold.”

To Ndoda the power of shared reading lies in it being not only a way to help children unlock their language ability, but also an activity that helps them to strengthen their developing social and emotional relations with caregivers. It also promotes focus and attention on a single activity. Wordless picture books as included in the Book Dash boxes are especially valuable, as they are language independent, making them suitable to distribute at scale.

Says Ndoda: “It doesn’t matter whether they get delivered to Delft in the Western Cape or a rural area in Limpopo; they have the same power everywhere.”



4 CARING THROUGH SHARING

While ELPs play a critical role in children’s early development, learning begins — and continues — at home. The 2024 Index suggests that many caregivers also overestimate their child’s developmental progress, suggesting a gap in awareness of age-appropriate milestones. Helping families recognise key developmental milestones and understand why they matter, and offering simple, low-cost ways to support children to reach them, can go a long way in strengthening ECD.

“If we want children to thrive, we need to help parents thrive too,” says Aqeelah Tootla, innovation manager at DGMT focusing on Opportunity 7, which is all about establishing an environment of simple, loving connections for children. This doesn’t apply only to children’s primary caregivers, but also to the other adults that children interact with in their community, such as family members, people at church or teachers at school.

“To me, responsive caregiving is really about being able to pause and think what a child needs in a certain context, responding to those needs consistently, and also understanding yourself in order to provide that response. It starts during pregnancy already and continues as a child grows and develops after birth — and this approach underpins all our grant-making,” explains Tootla.

Currently, 27 projects are supported with grants under Opportunity 7. “It really does take a village to raise a child,” she says, and for this reason the team aims to view grant applications in a holistic way and tries to find touch points between projects to facilitate wide-reaching impact, setting organisations up to learn from and tap into one another’s strengths.

One of the implementing partners funded through this opportunity, for example, is the South African Parenting Programme Implementers Network (SAPPIN),³⁵ which brings together NGOs that use evidence-based solutions to develop parenting support programmes. “Our current grant to SAPPIN focuses on their work around establishing a community of practice with regard to the role of fathers in the lives of children, and how this can then be part of the work that organisations do in supporting caregivers to form the connections that will help children thrive,” she explains. This links perfectly with the recommendation from the 2024 Index to recognise the role of fathers in strengthening positive parenting.

Working with a network like SAPPIN is a practical way to expand impact. Says Tootla: “We know that we can’t fund everyone who applies, but by partnering with an established network, a grant can reach further and help to support interventions that can deliver small, consistent changes in behaviour. And that’s what we’re aiming for: solving one thing at a time to make a difference in the long run.”

³⁵ South African Parenting Programme Implementers Network (SAPPIN). n.d. *SAPPIN*. Available at: <https://sappin.org.za/>

LESSONS LEARNT

Giving our children the best chance to thrive and shape a bright, sustainable future is a goal Jack Shonkoff, the founding director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University,³⁶ calls “a very challenging art”.³⁷ Here are some of the lessons DGMT’s teams working in this space have learnt so far.

1 STRONG RELATIONSHIPS HELP TO ACHIEVE THE BEST OUTCOMES

In working towards making the best use of the ECD subsidy and giving more centres access to it, “we didn’t realise just how strong our relationship with the DBE was,” McLaren says. That closeness in relationship is based on evidence and data on how interventions can help drive change, showing a real willingness to support the government in their needs. “We were able to work really closely with the department on innovative ideas and now that things are starting to take shape, we’re quite humbled by how nimble and agile the government is in supporting ECD and how open they are to new ideas.”

2 TO HELP CHILDREN THRIVE, WE HAVE TO START EARLY – AND BUILD ON WHAT WE HAVE

“Investing in a child’s mother is the most important investment that you can ever make for that child’s growth,” says Mphaphuli. This is what both Grow Great Flourish, a peer-support network for new mothers, and Grow Great Champions, an initiative that trains community health workers to help new and expecting mothers know what’s best for their babies, focus on. In addition, financial support during pregnancy, such as what could be available if a Maternal Support Grant were introduced, can help mothers to buy healthy, nutritious food during pregnancy, improve their babies’ growth and nutrition outcomes and relieve financial pressure on households, Grow Great’s research has shown.³⁸ Through these initiatives and collaborative networks, “we can ensure that every malnourished child is linked to care and food to reduce significantly the impact of stunting on early childhood development,” says Mphaphuli.

3 PARTNERSHIPS HELP BRING THE WHOLE PICTURE INTO VIEW

Ndoda says that before collaborating with Book Dash, he understood the idea of a book distribution initiative only in theory. Seeing the printing and distribution process first-hand — and understanding what drives the costs — opened his eyes to what could realistically constrain an initiative of this kind, and what would not.

For example, 20 000 books were printed at R15 each. The cost was relatively low because the books were wordless, and the print run included only two titles. This meant the books could be printed in large volumes, without the set-up having to be changed repeatedly. “Consider a print run to be an assembly line,” explains Ndoda. “The more different models you want to assemble, the more components your assembly line must have and the more costly that process becomes.” In addition, courier costs were found to be cheaper than initial estimates: instead of approximately R1 500 per delivery, it cost around R500 per delivery. This shows that practical knowledge informs better decisions about designing an intervention that can yield real benefit for children.

4 ASK PEOPLE WHAT THEY NEED, RATHER THAN TELLING THEM WHAT YOU NEED

When it comes to deciding which types of projects to fund, it’s easy to fall into a set way of thinking about what interventions are needed, rather than listening to what people on the ground say the needs are, says Tootla. “We need to be intentional in our grant-making and perhaps take a step back to find out what it is that people need and what realistic outcomes are for them,” she says. This means focusing on a grantee’s strengths and supporting them in the areas where they already excel. They know what they’re good at. Being too prescriptive can become a hindrance rather than an enabler of meaningful work.

³⁶ Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. n.d. *Center on the Developing Child*. Available at: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/>

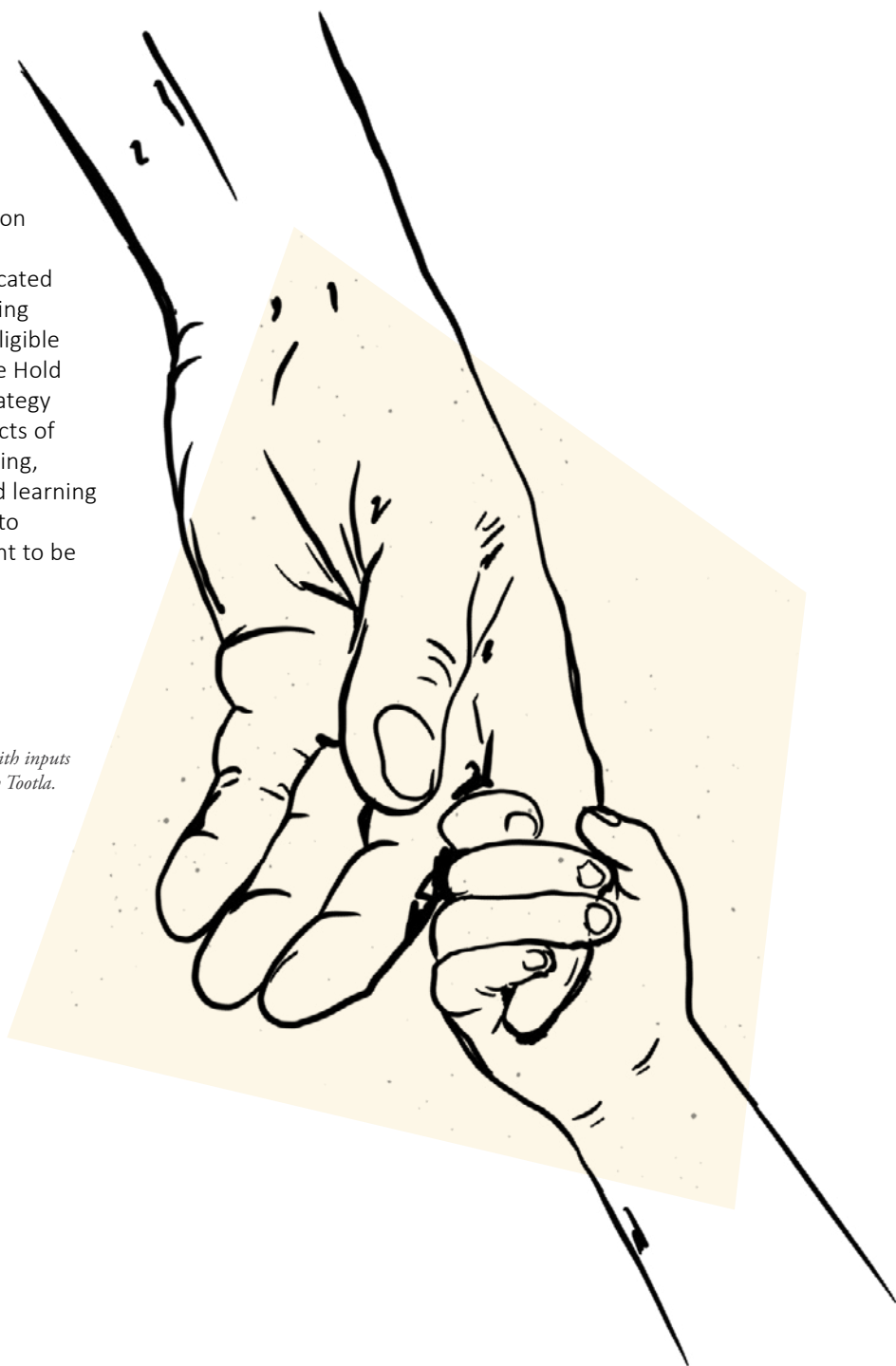
³⁷ Shonkoff, J. 2023. Opening address at the national symposium of the Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0ygFrNGo2E>

³⁸ Grow Great. 2024. CoCare Maternal Support Study (handout). Available at: <https://growgreat.co.za/ow/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/GG-MSG-HANDOUT-final-revised-PRINT.pdf>

WHAT'S NEXT?

Ilifa Labantwana is working with the DBE to develop meaningful strategies to maximise Treasury's allocation to ECD. This includes supporting the Bana Pele Mass Registration Drive and exploring ways to use the allocated funds for structural improvements at facilities, enabling more early learning programmes (ELPs) to become eligible for state support (on page 24). Through its role in the Hold My Hand campaign, which supports the National Strategy to Accelerate Action for Children, other pivotal projects of DGMT are focusing on supporting responsive caregiving, helping to stimulate early language development and learning through promoting reading programmes and access to books, and advocating for the Maternal Support Grant to be implemented.

This brief was written by Linda Pretorius and edited by Rabima Essop, with inputs from Daniel McLaren, Edzani Mphaphuli, Kwanda Ndoda and Aqeelah Tootla.



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