



# WINDOWS INTO EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT



Save the Children

Cross Country IDELA findings fueling progress  
on ECD access, quality and equity

## **Acknowledgements**

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Front cover photo: Aline, four, holds up a book that Save the Children has published to promote literacy in Rwanda at the Kiboga Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centre in Bureru, Rwanda. Credit: Colin Crowley/Save the Children

Back cover photo: Girl playing outside Save the Children's Early Childhood Care and Development centre in Bhutan. Credit: Susan Warner/Save the Children

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# Foreword

***“We have hard evidence that ECD matters – it can change a single child’s life and lift up whole economies.”***

HELLE THORNING-SCHMIDT  
CEO of Save the Children International

The long-term development of nations is compromised by the weak learning foundations for young children. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognize early childhood development as a global priority. Investing in the early learning foundations of young children is one of the smartest investments a country can make to address poor education outcomes and inequality, and to break the cycle of poverty. Unless governments prioritize starting early, we won’t get close to achieving inclusive and quality education for all by 2030. Investment in the early years is an investment in the human capital of whole nations.

## THE 2,000 MOST IMPORTANT DAYS

World leaders made a bold and important promise in 2015: to ensure inclusive and quality education for all by 2030. No-one will be left behind. Although the world has made great progress in education the last two decades, the challenge ahead of us is tremendous: 61 million primary school age children are out of school, and 130 million girls and boys complete four years in school without acquiring even basic literacy and numeracy skills. If we continue with business as usual, we will fall at least 50 years behind in ensuring that every child learns, and inequalities between those who learn and those who do not, will increase. We need to shift gears.

It is no coincidence who is left behind when others prosper. Children are excluded from learning because of who they are, what they have or where they live. Because they are born into poor households, are part of an ethnic minority group, are forced into a migrant situation, or simply because they are born as a girl.

Our imperative and greatest challenge is to give priority to the children who are most deprived, to fulfill their right to learn.

The 2,000 first days of our lives are the most important for children’s development. Ninety percent of a child’s brain is already developed by their fifth birthday. Nutrition, care and stimuli in a child’s early years affect many aspects of life, including cognitive development, well-being and social-emotional learning. Early learning and well-being greatly impact a child’s opportunities later in life. We cannot afford to underestimate how important those 2,000 days are.

Still, only half of the world’s children have access to early learning opportunities. And those who do, are often amongst the most advantaged children. Exclusion from early learning and development for disadvantaged children further deepens inequalities in learning, which fosters deeper inequalities in life opportunities.

That is why Save the Children gives priority to giving girls and boys an early start in learning and development – be it center-based such as kindergartens, learning centers or preschool, or home-based efforts to create caring, safe and stimulating home environments.

This report shares lessons learned from our programs. We have investigated how early childhood development programs can improve learning and development for some of the world’s most disadvantaged children. Through activities such as supporting both literate and illiterate parents to teach their children through games and songs and to create safe and stimulating home environments, Save the Children presents low-cost yet effective methods for early learning and development.

Investing in early learning opportunities is one of the smartest investments we can make to address inequality and poor learning outcomes. We simply cannot ignore this evidence. Save the Children therefore calls on governments and development partners to scale up efforts to ensure every girl’s and boy’s right to learn, by making quality early childhood development, care and learning available to all children.

TOVE R. WANG  
CEO of Save the Children Norway  
Head of Save the Children’s Education Global Theme

# Introduction

Many children across the world face adversity, but those who begin their lives without appropriate care and early stimulation are at the highest risk of not reaching their full potential. In fact poverty, stunting, and lack of cognitive stimulation mean that nearly half of 3- and 4-year-old children are unable to achieve their potential with respect to cognitive, social-emotional, or physical development.<sup>1</sup> The growing availability of data on early childhood development (ECD) has produced unprecedented knowledge about the status of children in lower middle income countries (LMICs): what is urgently needed are solutions to the challenges we now see more clearly.

## POTENTIAL IN THE EARLY YEARS

The first five years of a child's life is a time of great promise and rapid change, when the architecture of the developing brain is most open to the influence of relationships and experiences. However, young children cannot learn on their own; relationships with caring, responsive adults and early positive experiences build strong brain connections.<sup>2</sup> Research has shown that the provision of warm, responsive, and stimulating caregiving can effectively promote children's early cognitive, motor, and social-emotional development, even in the presence of risk factors such as poverty and malnutrition.<sup>3</sup> The sheer quantity of parental talk is highly associated with vocabulary size in the early years of a child's life,<sup>4</sup> and a child's vocabulary size at age three predicts his or her reading at age nine, even after controlling for other factors.<sup>5</sup> In short, children's exposure to care, stimulation, and play in these early years determines their lifelong trajectory: years in school, learning success, adult earnings, health, parenting of their own children, and even likelihood of being incarcerated or engaging in violence.

## IN SEARCH OF SCALABLE SOLUTIONS FOR EVERY LAST CHILD

Academic consensus touts the importance of supporting children's early learning foundations. Yet, much less is known about how to meet the challenges of delivering programs that promote learning and play for young children in easy and impactful ways that meet the needs and abilities of both service providers

and caregivers. Without evidence from effective, scalable programs the political will and resources to expand ECD programs will remain limited. This is true in highly developed countries like the United States, but ECD advocates in LMICs struggle even more to define approaches that work in low resource contexts and to advocate for bringing programs to a scale that would reach their most disadvantaged children, those who need this support the most.

This report will use recent IDELA (see box for description) evidence to investigate child development status, factors influencing child development, and ECD approaches that work for children in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs). To complement and expand upon the well-known global statistics, we will share lessons learned from existing ECD programs to investigate strategies and approaches that are improving learning and development for the world's neediest children. We will present evidence related to who is enrolled in ECD programs, what they are learning, and who is at the highest risk of being left behind to address issues of the access, quality, and equity of ECD programs in LMICs.

## IDELA

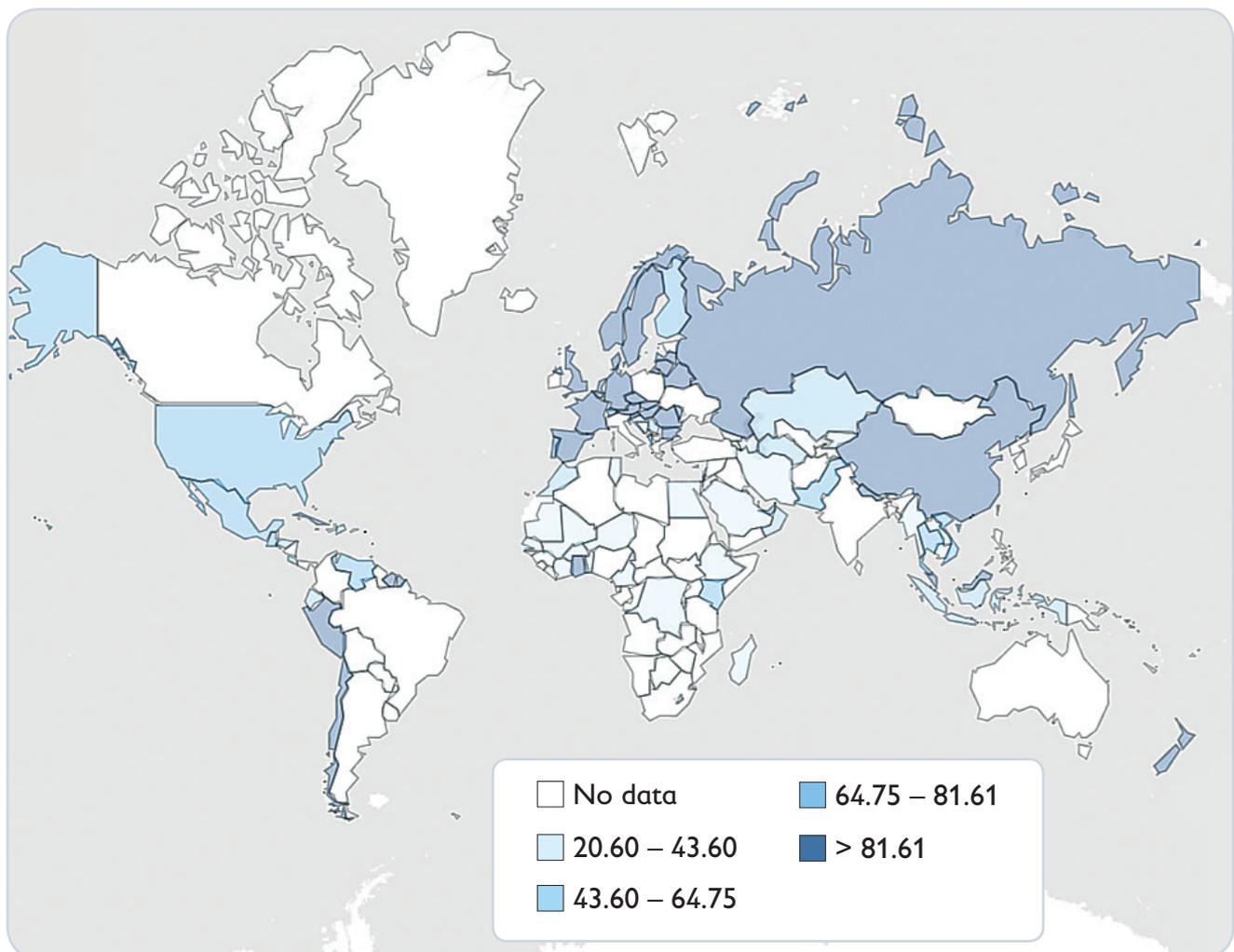
Evidence presented in this paper on children's learning and development uses the International Development and Early Learning Assessment, or IDELA. This metric is a holistic, rigorous, open source, direct child assessment that is easily adapted and used in different national and cultural contexts. Save the Children began developing IDELA in 2011 and the tool was released for public use in 2014.<sup>6,7</sup> Since then, IDELA has been used for evaluations by Save the Children and over two dozen partner organizations in 35 countries. IDELA is also the focus of ongoing psychometric analyses with New York University's Global TIES (Transforming Intervention Effectiveness and Scale) for Children.

# The most vulnerable children are not in preschool

Global indicators suggest that as of 2014, 18 percent of children in low-income and 50 percent of children in lower middle-income countries have access to pre-primary education.<sup>8,9</sup> However, these national participation rates mask vast underlying inequities.

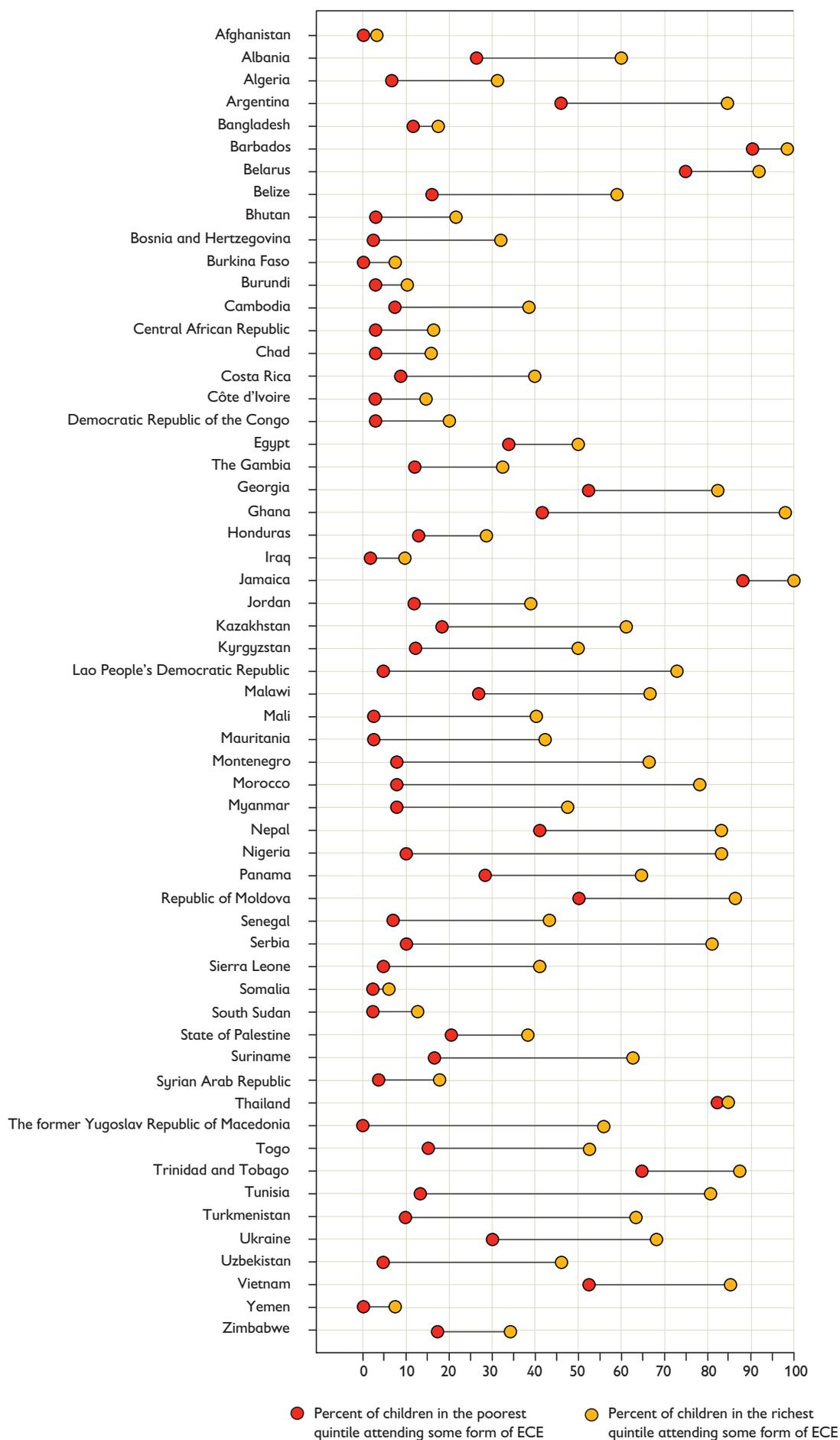
The absence of ECD enrollment data from many low income countries conceals a much lower rate of access for children in the poorest countries (Figure 1). Also, within countries that do report information on ECD enrollment, access is often substantially lower in rural than in urban areas and most limited for the poorest children (Figure 2).<sup>10</sup>

**FIGURE 1** GROSS ENROLMENT RATIO, PRE-PRIMARY, BOTH SEXES (%), 2013



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2013). Gross enrolment ratio, pre-primary, both sexes. [http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRE.ENRR?view=map&year\\_high\\_desc=true](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRE.ENRR?view=map&year_high_desc=true)

**FIGURE 2 CHILDREN IN RICH HOUSEHOLDS ARE MORE LIKELY TO ATTEND EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS**



Source: UNICEF global databases, 2014, based on MICS, DHS and other nationally representative surveys, 2005-2012.

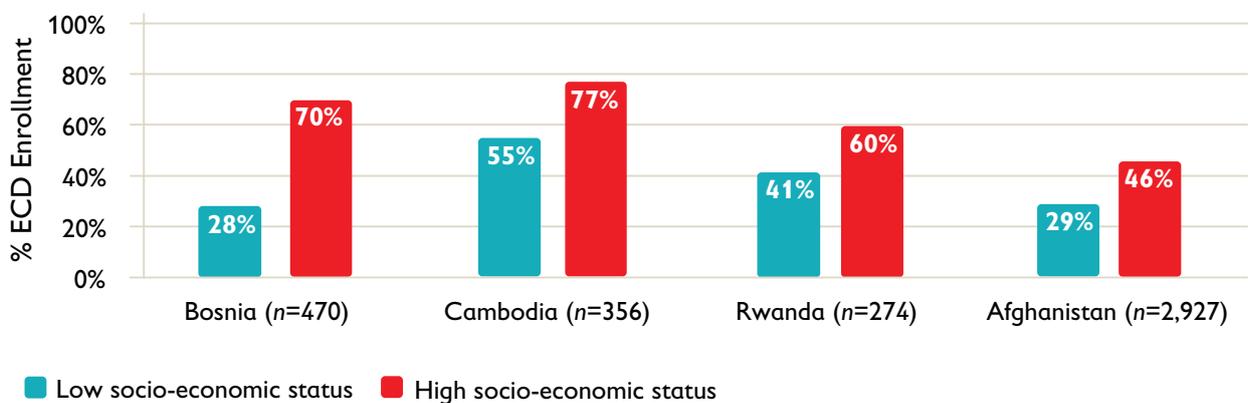


PHOTO: STEPHANIE ROBERTS/SAVE THE CHILDREN

Data from Save the Children program areas substantiates the global statistics, highlighting the fact that the world's most disadvantaged children are also often those without access to ECD programs and therefore in greatest need of support to develop strong early learning foundations. For example, a Save the Children study of over 2,500 children and families from four provinces in Afghanistan found

that children were more likely to be enrolled in ECD centers if they were living in wealthier homes or had literate mothers.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Save the Children studies in program sites in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia also found that children from wealthier families were more likely to be enrolled in ECD centers than their poorer peers (Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3** CHILDREN FROM WEALTHIER FAMILIES IN PROGRAM SITES ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE ENROLLED IN ECD PROGRAMS



Note: Family wealth is defined as a sum of commonly owned assets, which are different in each context.

Taken together, both global monitoring data and results from Save the Children’s ECD work around the world highlight the inequity in access to ECD programs. In contexts ranging from low- to upper middle-income countries, the children who are least likely to be accessing ECD programs are the poorest and most marginalized. Therefore, while enthusiasm for and investment in ECD centers is growing, we must go beyond these brick and mortar structures in order to reach disadvantaged children with much needed care and stimulation support.

### ALTERNATIVES TO CENTER-BASED ECD

Save the Children supports children without access to center- or school-based ECD through alternative models like radio programs, a nomadic family model,<sup>12</sup> parenting programs, and summer school readiness camps. While many governments around the globe

are making strides towards improving access to preschool classes, it will take many years for these aspirations to be realized. In the meantime, children in the most marginalized communities are falling further and further behind their more advantaged peers.

### PROMISING IMPACT OF ELM AT HOME

Two studies of Emergent Literacy and Math (ELM) at Home programs (see box for detail) from eastern Africa highlight the successes possible through home-based ECD support.

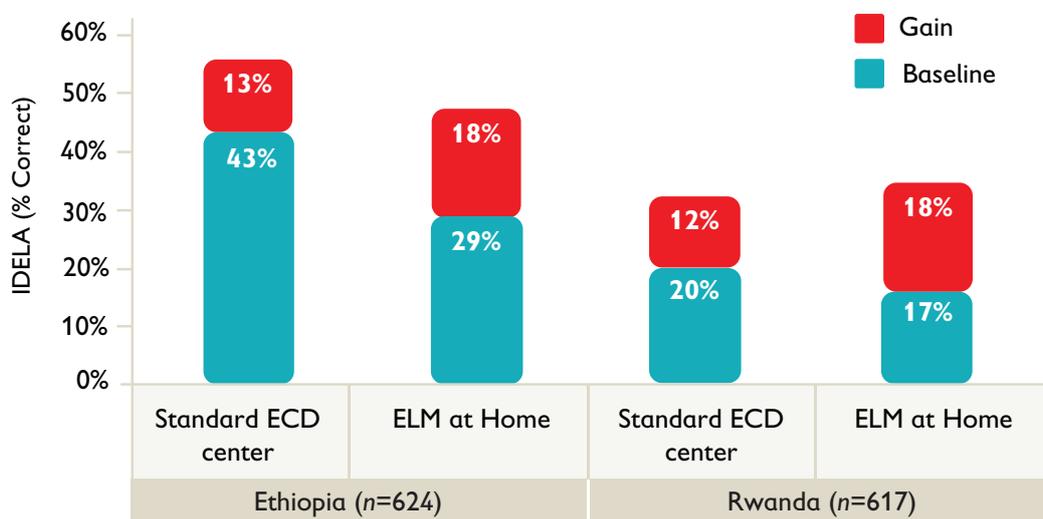
In both Ethiopia and Rwanda, Save the Children has implemented ELM at Home to teach and empower parents to engage in play-based literacy and math activities at home. Figure 4 shows the powerful results: children in both country sites made greater progress than peers in standard center-based ECD.<sup>13,14</sup>

## ELM at Home

Play-based ELM at Home provides early learning opportunities where there are no preschools or ECD centers. In 8 sessions, mothers and fathers learn hands-on activities to build emergent literacy, math, and social-emotional skills with their children. Activities are built on the latest evidence about fostering early learning, but the key to the success of the program is that the activities are designed to fit into the daily routine. ELM at Home uses picture cards so that activities can be easily used by both literate and illiterate

parents. For example, parents and children make patterns using rhythms with different parts of the body, they compare and sort vegetables during meal times, and they discuss the names of animals and plants around their home. ELM at Home supports quality interactions with children to build strong early learning foundations in Bhutan, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Mali, and Rwanda and encourages cross-country sharing and learning via a Facebook group.

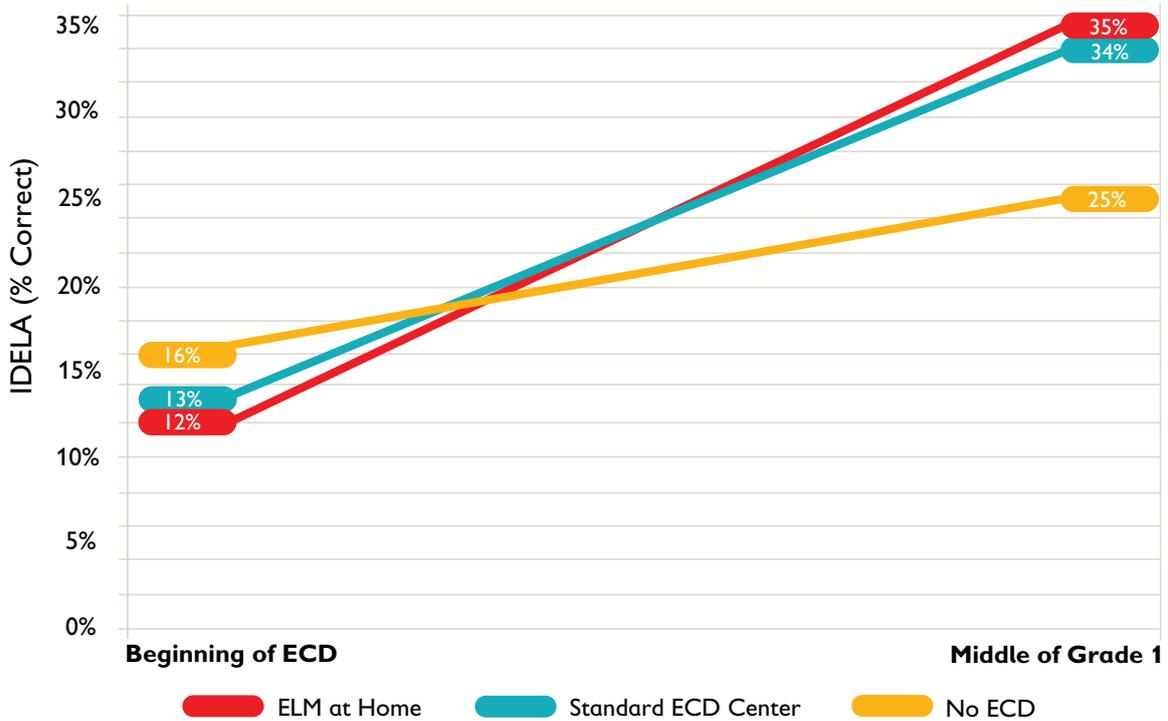
**FIGURE 4** WITH HIGH QUALITY STIMULATION AT HOME, CHILDREN MAKE COMPARABLE GAINS TO THOSE ENROLLED IN ECD CENTERS



Additional stimulation during such a critical period of brain development could be the difference between success and failure in primary school and beyond.<sup>15</sup> A group of children in Rwanda were followed into grade one and study results found that those who received the parenting program sustained the largest

gains in learning and development compared to their peers who did not receive ECD support. Further, this research showed that children who received the parenting programs had similar skills to children who had been enrolled in standard ECD centers (Figure 5).

**FIGURE 5** CHILDREN RECEIVING HOME-BASED ECD SUPPORT IN RWANDA GAIN AND MAINTAIN AS MUCH LEARNING AS THOSE IN ECD CENTERS



Note: This study included 313 children across the three study groups who were assessed prior to ECD intervention and also during grade 1.

The cases of Ethiopia and Rwanda are not unique. Governments in many LMICs are adopting policies aimed at providing more access to ECD centers and this trend is predicted to continue over the next 15 years. However, it will take many more than 15 years

to mobilize the resources necessary for the full scope of these policies to be realized, and in the meantime, millions of children could miss the opportunity to benefit from high quality early learning experiences unless alternative models of ECD are embraced.



PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

# Quality interactions boost early development

In the ECD field, quality is often spoken about in terms of the resources and interactions provided in center-based settings, such as preschools and child care centers. While the quality of these settings is very important, the quality of a home environment is what children experience from birth and what they come home to after a morning spent at an ECD center, if they are lucky enough to attend one. This means that these environments are of tremendous importance for early development and learning.

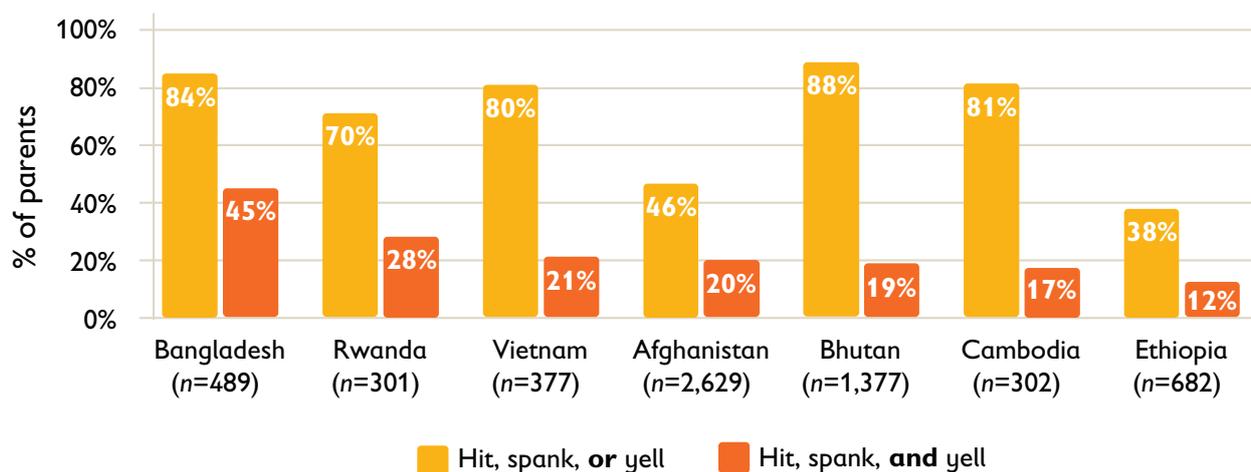
## QUALITY INTERACTIONS AT HOME

First and foremost, home environments need to be safe for children, with parents providing nurturing care.

250 million children living in LMICs are at risk of not developing to their full potential and home environments are the most important environments for fostering a nurturing and caring context for young children.<sup>16,17</sup> The need for nurturing care has been shown in numerous studies and is replicated in Save the Children's IDELA research.

Surveys from communities around the world find that parents regularly report hitting, spanking, and yelling at their children. Figure 6 displays the prevalence with which parents from seven recent studies report using negative discipline with their children.

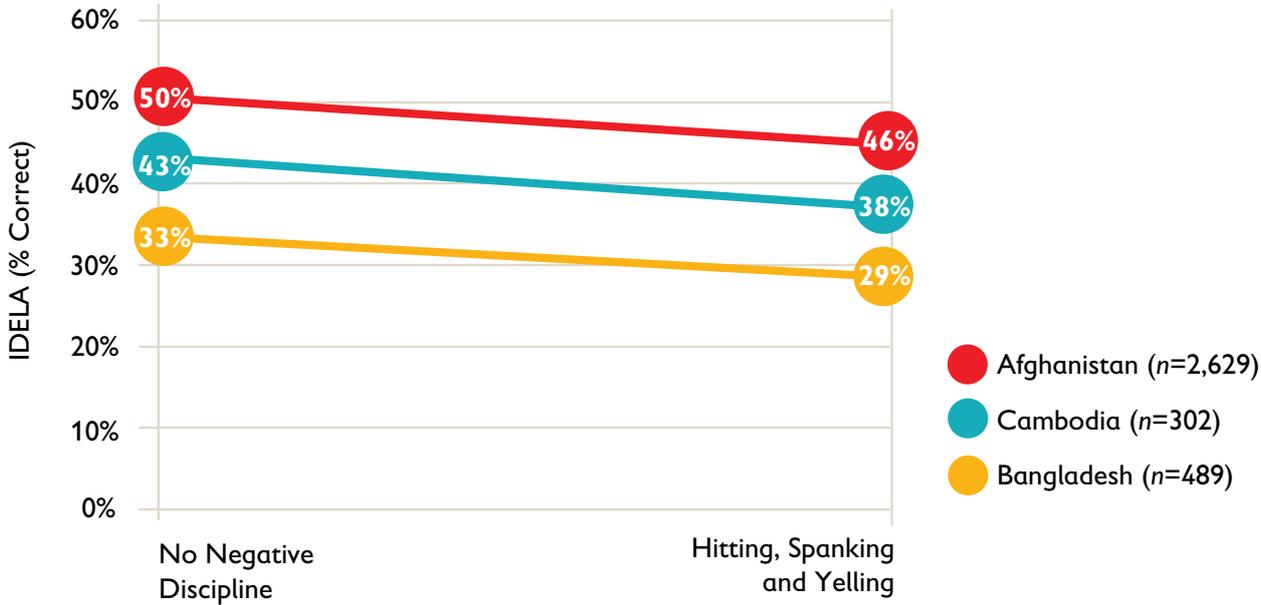
**FIGURE 6** PARENT REPORTED PREVALENCE OF USING NEGATIVE DISCIPLINE TECHNIQUES WITH CHILDREN IN THE PAST WEEK



Research has shown that negative experiences in early childhood can change the structure of the brain and weaken the foundations for learning, health, social skills, and productivity. Figure 7 displays the negative relationship these behaviors had with children's

learning and development in three sites, even after controlling for other factors like parent education, socio-economic status, and the presence of positive home learning activities.

**FIGURE 7** NEGATIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HARSH DISCIPLINE AND CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT



Note: Figure controls for child age, child sex, father's education, total home possessions, and total home learning activities.



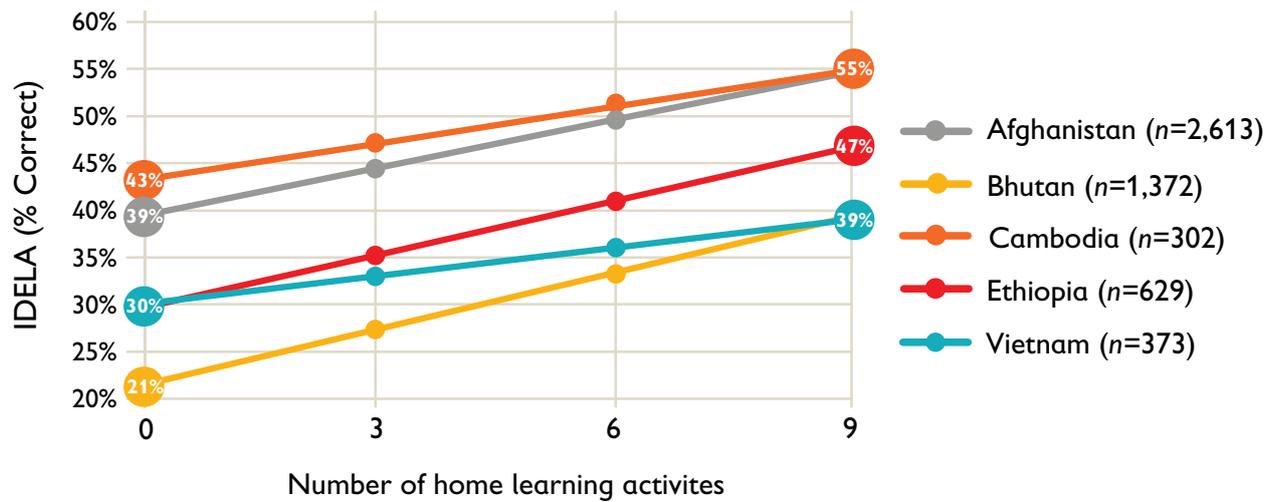
PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

The importance of supportive home learning environments for early learning has been documented across numerous Save the Children program areas. The stronger the presence of learning and play activities at home – such as reading, telling stories, singing, playing, drawing, teaching letters, numbers, or

other new things – the more advanced the children’s learning and development (Figure 8).

In fact, Save the Children promotes quality interactions at home from birth to promote early stimulation and learning.

**FIGURE 8** EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT AMONG 5-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN IS SUPPORTED BY PLAY/LEARNING ACTIVITIES AT HOME



## Early Stimulation and Nutrition in the First 1,000 Days to Promote Learning

In Bangladesh, Save the Children developed an early stimulation model to promote positive caregiving and early learning for children in the first 1000 days. On top of health and nutrition services, Save the Children introduced capacity-building for frontline workers and supervisors, materials to reinforce and nudge play and talk with children at home, and group and home visit sessions to enable hands-on practice. These interventions changed the things mothers and fathers did in their home environment and also fostered actions to better

support caregivers, usually mothers. Results of a randomized control trial found that girls and boys whose parents received early stimulation training on top of other health and nutrition interventions made significant gains in language and cognitive development compared to children receiving only health and nutrition.<sup>18</sup> In partnership with the World Bank and AIR, Save the Children’s model has been scaled up through the National Nutrition Service with sustainable gains at scale.

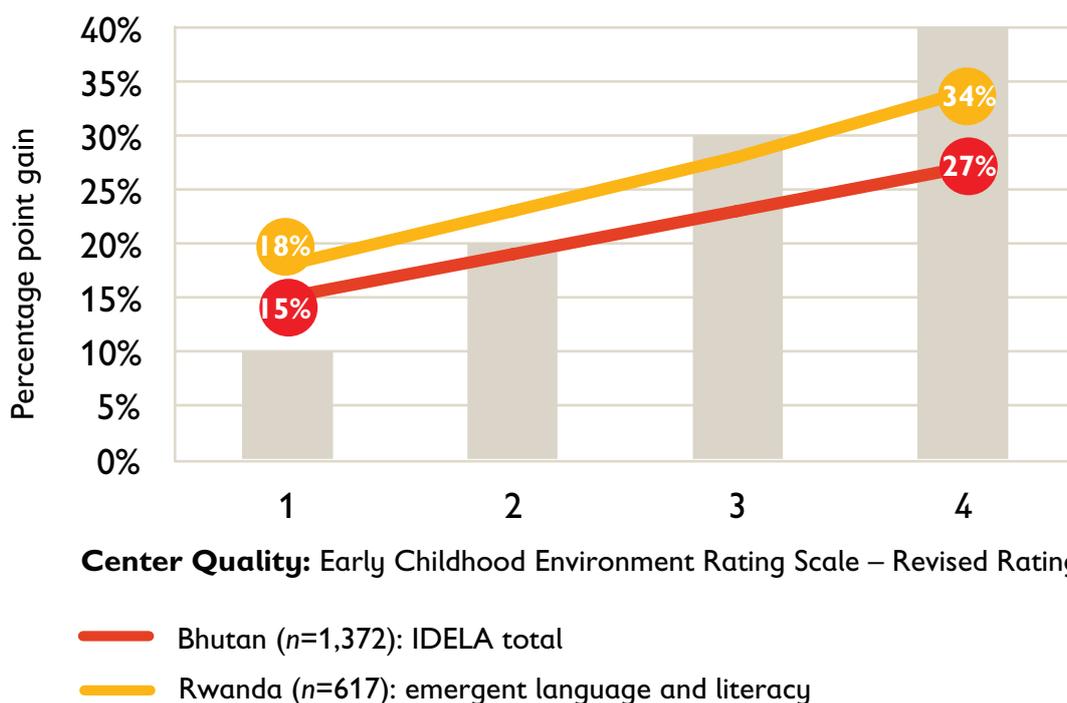
## QUALITY INTERACTIONS IN ECD CENTERS

Evidence that quality in preschool centers promotes learning and development drives Save the Children and partners to actively intervene to enhance quality and thus early learning and development. In three different settings across the globe, IDELA data alongside measures of center-based quality show that the higher the quality, the greater the learning.

In Bhutan for school readiness and in Rwanda for

literacy, greater quality is supporting significantly greater learning (Figure 9).<sup>19,20</sup> Similarly, evidence from Bangladesh shows that ECD center quality increased significantly during a nine-month implementation period compared to non-intervention sites, and that at the end of this period, children’s early learning and development in intervention centers was more than double that of their peers in other centers.<sup>21</sup> The importance of quality in centers holds across contexts – whether stable or in crisis (see box for detail).

**FIGURE 9** INCREASE IN LEARNING RELATES TO THE QUALITY OF THE PRESCHOOL SETTING



## ECD in Earthquake-affected Nepal

In Nepal, Save the Children is supporting children living in earthquake-affected communities through interactive early learning programs that emphasize both early literacy and math skills, as well as social-emotional learning. ECD facilitators are trained on how to create interactive learning aids for their

classrooms from local materials like leaves, flowers, and seeds. Providing children with a safe, nurturing, and stimulating place to visit every day provides stability and emotional support as well as early learning opportunities.

We must aim to increase children’s learning through play, cooperation, and exploration with supportive attention from adults inside their homes and at ECD centers. This simply means that adults engage with children frequently – talking to them, playing with them, exploring the world around them – in an environment free from violence and abuse. Experiencing quality early stimulation not only promotes children’s development in early childhood but holds equal promise for tomorrow’s schoolchildren

to enter school more prepared to interact, explore, and learn. We must also continue to measure progress and reflect on whether the solutions we are testing work for other partners and impact all domains of development. This will support our thinking about how to improve them and how we take the solutions to scale.

Equally significant are considerations of equity – are we meeting the needs of every last child?

# The equalizing potential of ECD

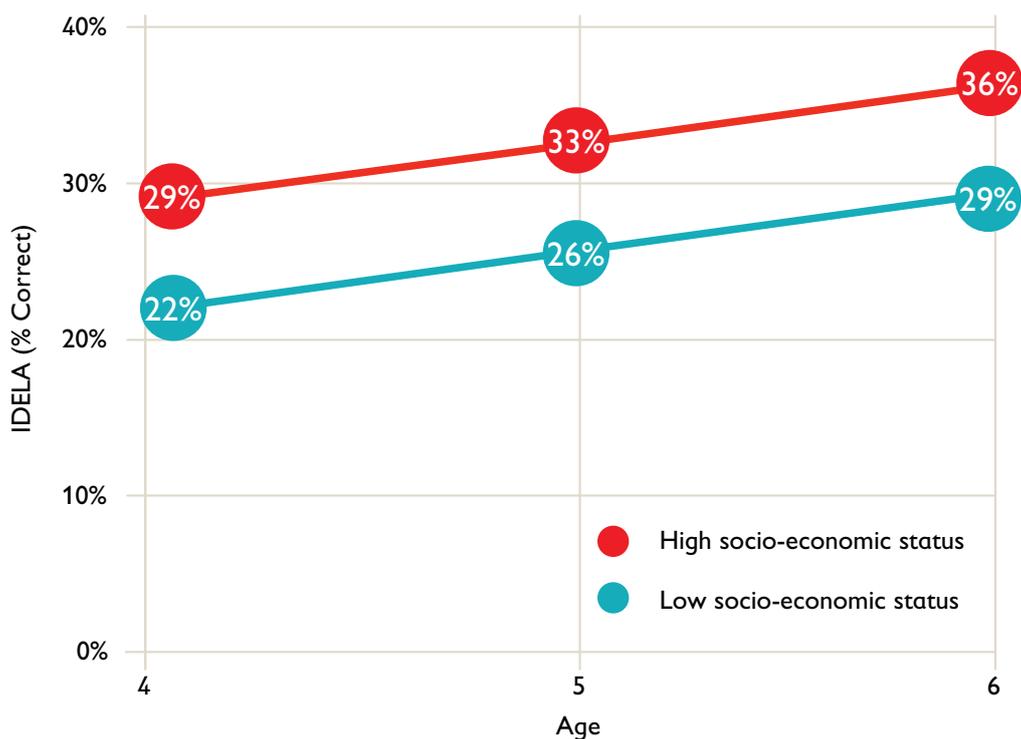


Save the Children's commitment to serving every last child means that we aim to reach the most marginalized communities in the world. Millions of children are left behind because of *what* they have, *who* they are, or *where* they live. The evidence is unequivocal: children's early childhood experiences are critical to lifelong success.<sup>22</sup> Poverty, geography, ethnicity and language, and refugee status can all negatively impact children's healthy development. Disadvantage in the earliest years can lead to persistent and hard-to-overcome deficits later.<sup>23</sup> Effective early childhood interventions are a proven means to avoid and reverse these deficits.<sup>24</sup> Using data to identify and target the most underserved children is a critical first step towards equitable outcomes. Save the Children uses the IDELA and caregiver questionnaires both to begin examining inequities in the communities we serve and as a means to measure our progress in bridging them. This section summarizes evidence that quantifies developmental gaps resulting from poverty, geography, ethnicity and language, and refugee status.

## POVERTY

It is no news that children from families with fewer resources face widespread disadvantages. Poverty during childhood has severe and negative consequences for early learning and development.<sup>25</sup> In the Afar Region of Ethiopia, a 2016 IDELA study found that children from low socio-economic status families are years behind their more affluent peers (Figure 10). A six-year-old child from a low socio-economic status family was predicted to have the same developmental level as a four-year-old child from a high socio-economic status family. The magnitudes of these gaps illustrate the necessity and urgency of finding ways to support the development of economically disadvantaged children.

**FIGURE 10** PREDICTED TOTAL IDELA SCORE BY POVERTY, AFAR REGION, ETHIOPIA



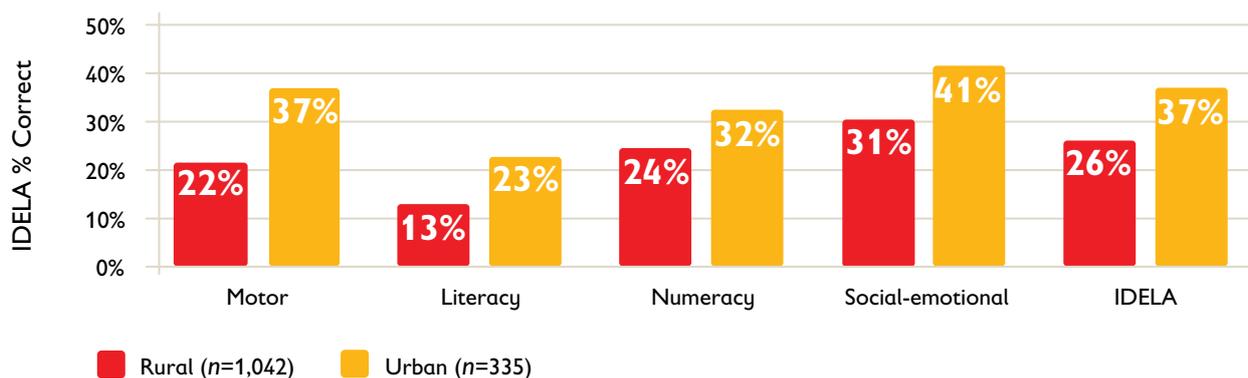
Note: Sample includes 120 children living in the Afar Region of Ethiopia. Figure controls for child sex, negative discipline, and total home learning resources and activities.

## URBAN AND RURAL POPULATIONS

Poverty exists everywhere. However, families in rural areas often face unique challenges because their remoteness often means less access to public services that aid early childhood development, including nutrition and ECD. Simply due to their hard-to-reach status, rural populations are often overlooked and benefit less from the development of the country as a whole.

The findings from a national IDELA study in Bhutan (Figure 11) demonstrate this point. Rural children lagged nearly 50% behind their urban peers on nearly every aspect of the IDELA assessment.

**FIGURE 11** BHUTAN IDELA RESULTS AMONG CHILDREN IN RURAL AND URBAN AREAS



## ETHNICITY AND LANGUAGE

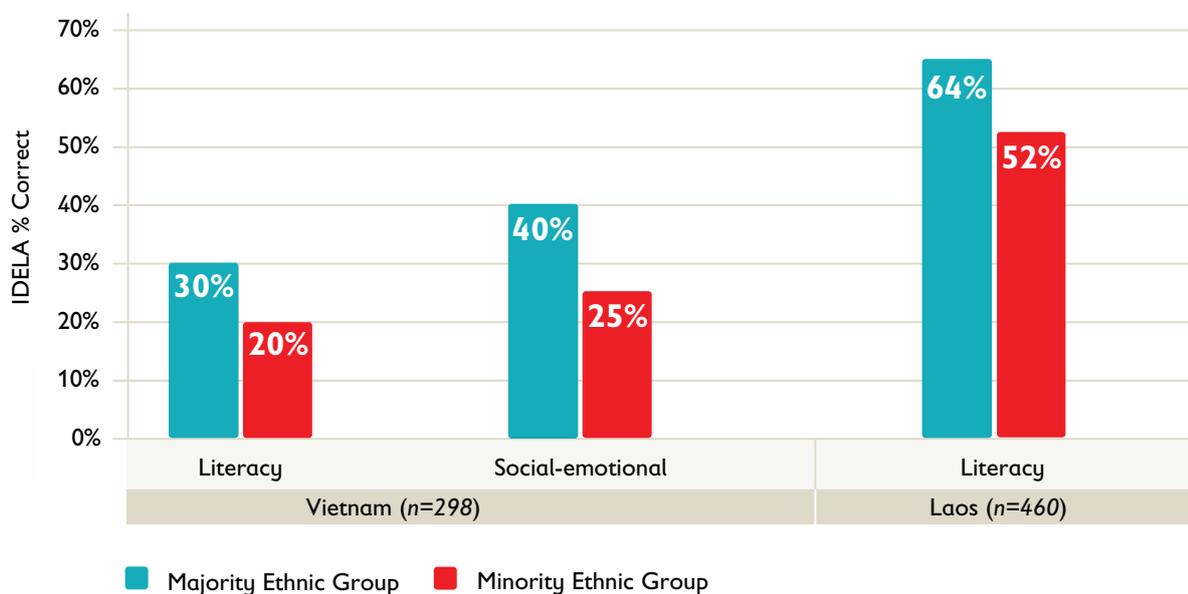
Children from families who speak the majority language of a country or are part of its majority ethnicity enjoy a great privilege. They grow up in a learning environment that is, quite literally, designed for them. The same is not true for many minorities worldwide. In addition to official and unofficial discrimination, children of minority ethnic groups also often face the challenge of learning in an unfamiliar language.

These inequities were highlighted in recent studies using IDELA in program sites in Vietnam and Laos

(Figure 12). In Vietnam, children of the majority Kinh group scored significantly higher in nearly every area, with the largest gaps in emergent literacy and social-emotional development.

In Laos, speakers of the dominant Lao language also scored higher than minority language speakers, especially within the emergent literacy domain. Supporting the needs of minorities, both linguistically and culturally, is an important priority for Save the Children programming.

**FIGURE 12** IDELA RESULTS BY MAJORITY/MINORITY STATUS IN VIETNAM AND LAOS



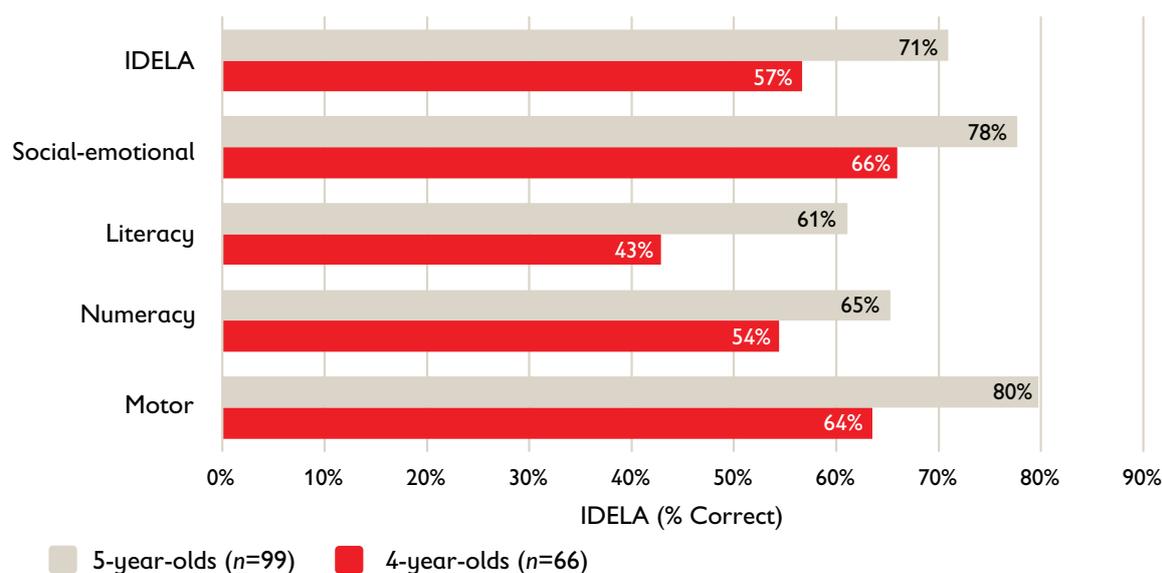
## REFUGEES

Refugee children require special attention and care. The psychological stress of conflict and constant movement and a lack of formal educational opportunities lead to drastic consequences for early childhood development. IDELA data from the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan will help the world better understand how best to support the early learning of these vulnerable children (Figure 13).

Save the Children programs in Jordan show that both home and center-based program options can play a role in such settings (see box for detail).

In the future, evaluations of Save the Children programs alongside other partners' studies of refugee children's learning and development across a variety of interventions would enable greater and more effective responses to refugee children's developmental needs.

**FIGURE 13** AVERAGE LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT OF 4- AND 5-YEAR-OLDS IN ZA’ATARI CAMP (JORDAN)



## ECD Support in Za’atari Refugee Camp

In Jordan, Save the Children leads early childhood interventions to address the specific vulnerabilities of young children. We provide opportunities to play and learn, and for children to build the skills to support their social-emotional development. Here HEART, healing and education through the arts, brings the proven power of artistic expression to children in need, helping them cope with traumatic events and learn the critical skills they need to reach their true potential. As space is a major constraint in the camp, children typically can only go to an ECD center for less than half a year. To continue critical support at home, we also work with mothers to make ‘preschool in a bag’ with activities and materials that can be used when there is no access to preschool. Mothers also learn complementary skills to build strong beginnings for their children and buffer the impact and stress of being a refugee.

## ADDRESSING INEQUITIES: MET BY ALL

In reference to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Incheon Declaration made at the World Education Forum in 2015 stipulates that “no education target should be considered met unless met by all.” Striving to improve the wellbeing of children overall is a noble goal, but is insufficient in itself.

Programming that helps wealthier, majority language/ethnicity, or urban children more so than poorer, minority, or rural children can actually exacerbate existing inequities. Identifying gaps is the first step to resolving them. We must then focus on improving outcomes for the most marginalized children to foster a more equitable society for all.

Solutions to inequitable situations, whether they be parental education sessions, remedial programs, or mother-tongue education initiatives, require testing and measurement to ensure they work at achieving this goal. Save the Children seeks to achieve results like that of its ELM program in Ethiopia, which helped narrow the gap between children of low and high socio-economic status.<sup>26</sup> Potential solutions require careful evaluation and analysis to identify who the programs are benefiting most and recognize if some are being left behind. Most importantly, solutions require flexible and responsive programming. Finding and addressing inequity is a challenging charge. In a world of rapid change and development, ensuring that all children benefit from increasing prosperity must be a global priority and an issue which receives constant attention.

# FOUR LESSONS FROM IDELA: Evidence to Action

The global education community has challenging goals to pursue over the next 15 years in order to achieve the aspiration of all young children being on the right track in their development by 2030. Save the Children has learned a great deal from evidence building within early childhood programs around the world, and is now learning more than ever through expanded partnerships with others following a similar charge. Learning evidence has influenced the way that we work and has opened a wider dialogue with governments, donors, and communities. The learning from our programs to date provides four strong indications of how to move forward the ECD agenda, especially for the most deprived children:

## 1. To reach the most vulnerable children, we need to go beyond preschools.

The SDGs call for all children to have at least one year in preschool. Considering that only half the children in the world have access to preschools, programming for the other half must offer early learning opportunities where there is no preschool. To reach the SDGs and ensure that all girls and boys, especially the most deprived, are developmentally on-track requires continued investment in interventions beyond preschool walls. Investments in preprimary education are growing but not fast enough for the most deprived children. As countries work towards universal preschool coverage, transitional strategies are needed to support children who need an early learning boost where there is no preschool.

## 2. Caring and stimulating environments – at homes and in centers – improve child development.

High quality caregiving must be supported in homes and in centers to build strong foundations for young girls and boys. Children's learning and development outcomes are highly correlated with their home environment. Violence against children, including hitting, spanking, and yelling at children has a negative relationship to children's development, while interactions like playing and singing with children and positive discipline have a positive relationship with early learning and development.

Children need to be protected and free from violence. As mothers and fathers report using harsh discipline on their young children, parenting programs need to focus on approaches for positive parenting to end violence against children. Social protection programs need to address the specific needs of young children, including building their early learning foundations.

The findings from Save the Children's programs underscore that parents' daily interactions with their children are a critical factor impacting a child's development. Programs must continue to engage parents in a very hands-on way to make play and learning part of the daily routine in the lives of young children and their families.

For ECD programs in centers or preschools, poor quality leads to poor outcomes. Center-based programs for young children need to have a primary focus on the quality of activities and interactions with young children. Lessons from more than two decades of primary school expansion have shown us that increasing coverage without attention to quality puts children at risk of poor educational outcomes. Even for center-based programs, outcomes are higher when combined with parenting programs.

### 3. Serious focus and investment is needed to close the early gaps for the most vulnerable young children.

IDELA enables us to better understand children's vulnerability and how it impacts early learning and development. This allows us to identify interventions that serve as protective factors in the lives of children. Inequities and gaps start early and run deep. By six years old, boys and girls from poor families can be developmentally two years behind richer peers. Rural, linguistic minority and refugee children are falling behind those who have a more stable environment and need urgent support. These gaps can be addressed with targeted early interventions. The effects of adversity on child development are cumulative, so the interventions need to address the various risk factors and support early learning as well as social protection. Early childhood interventions need to be equalizing and target the most deprived. All global targets must be met by all.

### 4. Start Early!

This is Save the Children's first principle of literacy. The earlier children receive learning support at home or in centers, the less likely they are to be at risk for poor developmental outcomes. A growing body of neuroscience evidence points to how rapidly the brain grows and develops in the first 1000 days. While this report has focused on our findings from IDELA for children aged three to six, we are also investing and learning from programs that support early learning and stimulation with babies and toddlers. As global measures for learning about children's development in the first three years improve and become more accessible in LMICs, we will continue to grow the evidence base for programs that start really early. Through our preschool work in many countries, we have learned that interventions for older children can open doors and foster dialogue about early learning and development for children under the age of three.

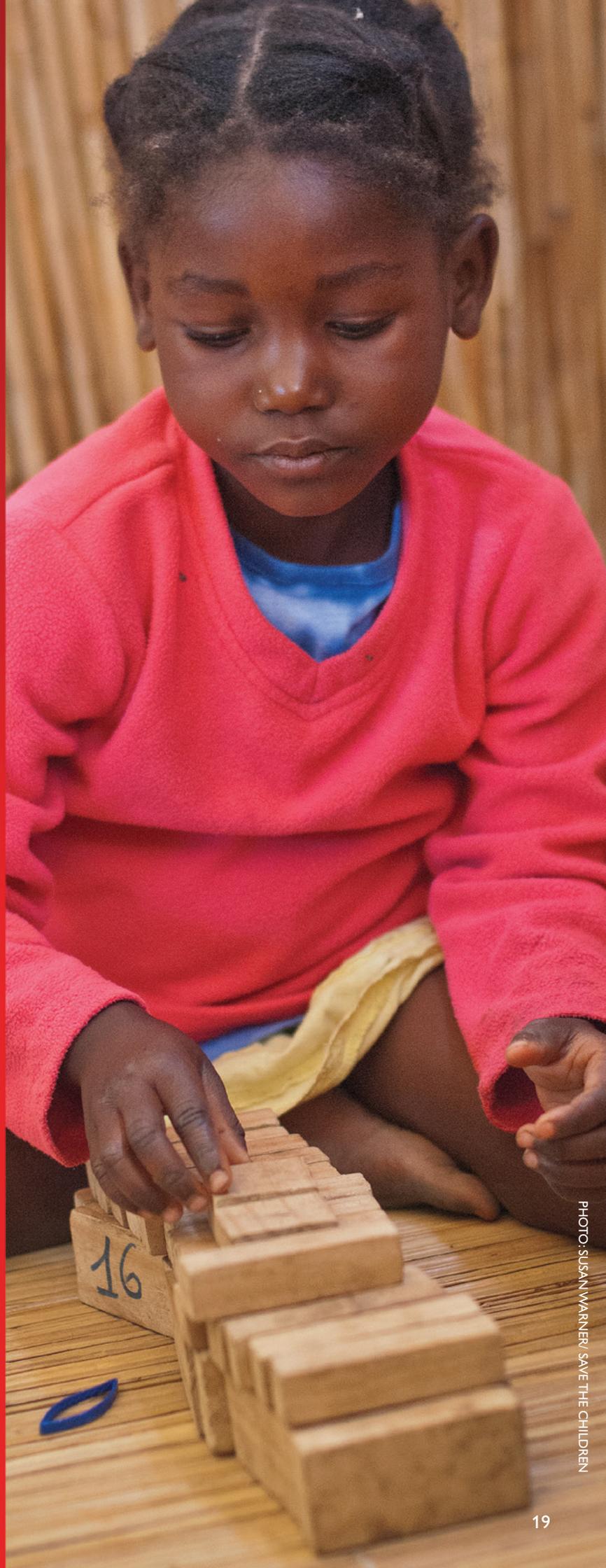


PHOTO: KRISTER JAY BORJAS/SAVE THE CHILDREN

# CALL TO ACTION

To ensure that all children will be developmentally on track and that once in school they learn, we must start early. Unless governments, donors, non-governmental organizations, and development agencies make investments in children's early learning foundations right now, it will be impossible to achieve SDG 4, and many of the other SDGs, by 2030. Early childhood serves as the foundation for human capital development and as a strategy to break the inter-generational cycles of poverty and inequity. Urgent action is needed to:

- **Invest** in the early years, especially for the most deprived. Currently governments and donors underinvest in ECD by not leveraging learning about the impact of investments in early stimulation, welfare, and protection on child development and by focusing on provision for those who already can afford or who prioritize ECD. Investments must provide early learning opportunities for the most vulnerable girls and boys while they build towards the goal of all children having access to at least one year of formal pre-primary education. Regardless of context, we cannot afford to invest only in pre-primary structures while the most vulnerable are excluded. Further, urgent investment is needed to support the youngest refugee children and mitigate the effect of adversity on their development.



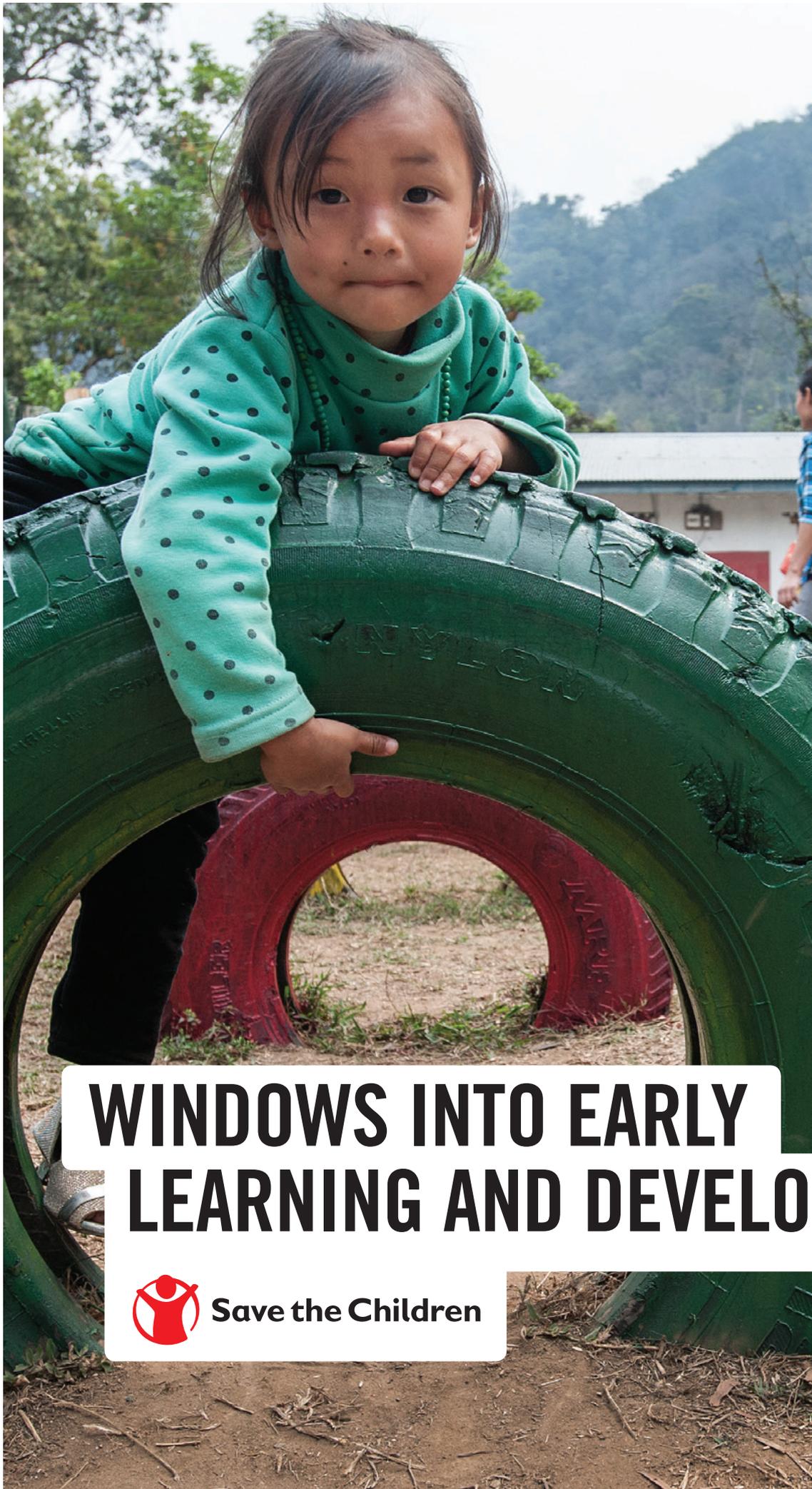
- **Monitor** and build stronger evidence for young children. We need to learn from the lessons of primary education that children attending schools doesn't necessarily mean that they are learning. We must ensure that investments for young children are effectively helping them build early learning foundations. Strong monitoring, along with a strategic research agenda, are essential to ensuring that programs work and that they work for the most vulnerable. Stronger evidence can enable us to be a stronger voice for children. As countries invest in building systems and programs for young children, they must ensure that mechanisms are in place to monitor child development outcomes in order to know if they are actually making progress and whether they are reaching the most deprived children.
- **Scale-up** approaches that work and document their cost effectiveness and impact on equity. High quality preschool programs and learning opportunities that go beyond preschools improve outcomes for children. Save the Children's innovative programs have demonstrated models to support parents and communities in improving children's development. Given what we know about the lifelong impact of adversity and violence on young children, approaches must also address the risks children face and work with mothers, fathers, and families to end violence in homes and communities. Investing in early learning and care builds the foundations to improve later education outcomes and close equity gaps, but more evidence of such models at scale, their cost effectiveness, and their ability to close equity gaps is needed.

*Save the Children is committed to evidence-based programming and growing the knowledge base about what is needed for young children to build strong early learning foundations. We appreciate the support of donors and partners for this important work for young children, as well as for enabling the building of cross-country learning. Through rigorous evidence, we can also hold ourselves accountable to children and produce the kinds of innovative and impactful programs that make a difference in their lives.*

*As the use of IDELA grows with new partners, so does the opportunity to learn from one another. Save the Children continue facilitating the dialogue across IDELA partners to foster real change for children. As we move forward to put our information together in a common narrative, we can also foster common solutions that respond to the urgent need to invest meaningfully in the early years.*

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- 26 Please see Endnote 13.



# WINDOWS INTO EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT



Save the Children