



# Early Childhood Development

A snapshot of our evidence from 2025



Through our global strategy **All Girls Standing Strong**, Plan International works in over 80 countries and focuses programming in six priority thematic areas, as well as responding to humanitarian emergencies. We stand with girls to tear down barriers, save lives and build a world where equality for girls leads to progress for all.

At the end of 2025, we reviewed the evidence available from projects and countries working in each thematic area – covering evaluations and results, key internal research and annual reporting metrics. We also scanned some of the external evidence, to situate our work in the global context. This short snapshot summarises some of the insights from this year in early childhood development and what we can learn from it.

Children play with building blocks at an Early Childhood Development centre in a refugee settlement in Uganda.

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For Plan International, our work in early childhood development focuses on ensuring that all young children grow up well cared for and equally valued.

Core programming areas include:

- Supporting **parenting and caregiving** to ensure that children grow up in nurturing environments that promote gender equality.
- Ensuring women and children have access to **maternal, newborn and child health and nutrition** services.
- Working with communities to ensure they have **adequate sanitation and hygiene facilities and practice healthy behaviours**.
- Supporting **early learning for children to help them develop and thrive** before they start school.

Learn more about our work [here](#).

# Key insights:

## Our programming and the global context

### 01 Progress in reducing child mortality is slowing.

Decades of investment and collaboration by government, communities and partners saw positive gains; however, progress is slowing, with millions of preventable deaths as a result of unequal access to healthcare, nutrition and protection, especially in the most fragile and underserved settings.

### 02 Despite growing recognition of the importance of the early years for children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, global participation in at least one year of organised learning before primary school has stagnated.

Play-based early learning can have a transformative impact, especially when paired with strong positive parental involvement. However, progress towards global goals of ensuring that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education remains significantly off track, and men's participation in nurturing care of their children remains low in many settings.

### 03 In this context, the importance of Plan International's work in early childhood development is clear.

This year we operated at scale in our programming, reaching over 57 million children and adults, including over 14 million girls with a better start in life. Gender-responsive parenting initiatives significantly strengthened positive parenting practices, nutrition initiatives played a vital role in supporting healthy growth and wellbeing for children, and access to water and sanitation improved significantly across projects.

### 04 Integrated programming remains of paramount importance.

Multiple factors are deeply interlinked with children's ability to learn, thrive and develop. This year, programming across nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene, maternal health and positive parenting consistently delivered stronger outcomes than standalone interventions, through addressing interconnected determinants of child and maternal wellbeing.

# 2025 figures at a glance



Our global reach footprint in early childhood development<sup>1</sup>

**57.7 million** children and adults reached with early childhood development programmes.

**14.4 million** girls received a better start in life.

## Examples of our results across projects<sup>2,3</sup>

Supporting parents and caregivers to nurture their children

**162,481** parents and caregivers

in 34 countries were part of positive parenting programmes to ensure that children grow up in nurturing environments that also promote gender equality.



Access to health, water and sanitation services for children and communities

**2.3 million+** mosquito nets and other items

were distributed, to help families and communities protect themselves against malaria.



**324,623** parents, caregivers and community members

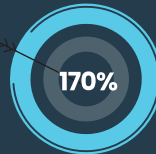
were trained in nutrition and infant and child feeding practices that ensure that children can grow and thrive.

**100,000+** people were tested and treated for malaria, including **22,510** pregnant women.



**88%** of parents and caregivers

had meaningfully engaged with their young children in activities critical to promoting learning and socio-emotional development, in the last 3 days before we spoke to them. All projects except one met or went beyond their goal for meaningful engagement, with an **average achievement of 170%** of the targeted change.<sup>4</sup>



**895,000+** children,

including **308,071** girls, had access to vital health services so they can survive and thrive, through projects in 12 countries.



**71%** of parents and caregivers

we spoke to told us that fathers or male caregivers shared or had sole responsibility for at least two nurturing care tasks in the month before we spoke with them. Projects met or exceeded their goal for men's involvement in parenting, with an **average achievement of 112%** of the targeted change.<sup>5</sup>



## Access to health, water and sanitation services for children and communities (continued)

**209,000+** pregnant and breastfeeding women

in 15 countries received support to ensure they had a healthy pregnancy, and their children received the best start in life.

**99%** of sponsored children, including 99% of girls, have been vaccinated against measles.<sup>6</sup>



Across projects in 18 countries,

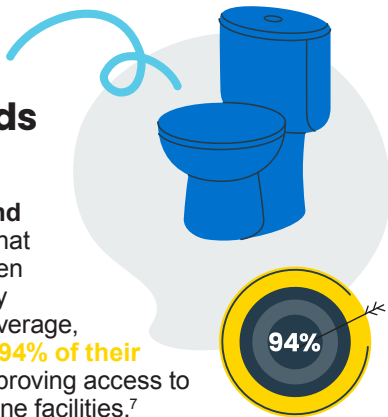
**420,000+** people,

including 157,184 women and girls, gained access to safe water and improved sanitation via infrastructure improvements and distributions.



**84%** of households

observed this year were using at least basic sanitation and hygiene facilities that are critical for children to grow up in healthy environments. On average, projects achieved 94% of their stated goals for improving access to sanitation and hygiene facilities.<sup>7</sup>



1. Based on annual reach reporting by country offices, July 2024 to June 2025.
2. Results are aggregated based on data reported by projects this year, including both those operating in development contexts and those responding to crises. They represent a sub-set of overall reach figures since they are specific to particular project activities and depend on individual project reporting cadence. Best efforts have been made to adjust for double counting during the aggregation through careful review and adjustment where projects have reported more than once during the year. For specific data related to humanitarian programming, please refer to the Humanitarian Snapshot for 2025.

## Preventing and responding to malnutrition

**611,000+** people, including 556,288 thousand children (249,000 girls), were screened for malnutrition, through projects in 10 countries.

**360,000+** people, including 356,169 children (over 153,000 girls) – most of whom were under five years old – were treated for moderate or severe acute malnutrition, across 11 countries.



## Advocacy in early childhood development<sup>8</sup>

**33** influencing successes

included early childhood development as a theme, including »

**17** changes or developments

in laws, policies, regulations, or guidelines.



**7** examples of progress

in the adoption, replication or scaling up of programme models by duty bearers or partners.



3. Project performance against targets was calculated and reported for global outcome indicators that are part of the dataset available this year. Where multiple data points had been reported by a project, an average was first calculated per project. The average performance across projects was then calculated as a mean.
4. Monitoring data from 2075 participants in seven projects.
5. Monitoring data from 1988 people across nine projects.
6. Based on annual survey with sponsored children and families, July 2024 to June 2025.
7. Monitoring data from 9017 households in six projects.
8. Based on annual reporting against our [Global Advocacy Strategy](#), July 2024 to June 2025.

# What are some of the key issues?

## Selected findings from research



Children learn their alphabet at an Early Childhood Development centre in Mozambique.

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### From an early childhood perspective, nutrition, health and caregiving are deeply interlinked with children's ability to learn, thrive and develop.

The world has made significant strides in reducing child mortality thanks to decades of investment and collaboration by governments, communities, and partners, resulting in a 52 per cent decrease in child mortality since 2000. However, progress is slowing, and millions of children are still dying from preventable causes.<sup>9</sup> These deaths are not inevitable; they result from unequal access to healthcare, nutrition, and protection, particularly in the most fragile and underserved settings. The nurturing care framework confirms that children who receive nurturing care are more likely to survive, thrive and grow into adults who contribute positively to their communities and economies.<sup>10</sup> Yet, millions of children under five – especially in low- and middle-income countries – are still deprived of this foundational support and the care economy remains undervalued and underfunded.

**Progress towards Sustainable Development Goal target 4.2, which aims to ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education, remains significantly off track.** Despite growing recognition of the importance of the early years for cognitive, social, and emotional development, global participation in at least one year of organised learning before primary school has stagnated.

This situation is particularly concerning in low-income countries, where almost 60 per cent of children still lack access to any form of structured early care and learning opportunities.<sup>11</sup> These gaps create long-term disadvantages, reinforcing cycles of poverty and inequality from the very start of a child's life.

Research conducted by Plan International on early childhood development this year revealed several cross-cutting findings across reports, related to **play-based early learning, gender norms, maternal, newborn and child health and nutrition and integrated cross-sectoral programming.**

Our research, including the [Changing Lives 2024](#), [Adapting, Piloting and Testing the Adapted Summer Pre-Primary \(SPP\) Program](#), and [LEARN PLUS](#) reports, highlights the transformative impact of **play-based early learning**, especially when paired with **strong positive parental involvement**. These approaches foster child engagement, socio-emotional development, and readiness to attend school, even in remote or resource-poor contexts. Community-based models and flexible education opportunities and adapted curricula have expanded access for children aged 3–6 years old, while parental involvement has strengthened home learning and parent–teacher relationships. However, many classrooms still face shortages of basic materials and toys.

9. United Nations Inter-Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (UN IGME). 2025. [Levels & Trends Report 2024, Estimates developed by the United Nations Inter-Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation](#)

10. World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, World Bank Group. 2018. [Nurturing care for early childhood development: a framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential](#). Geneva: World Health Organization.

11. UNESCO and UNICEF. 2024. [The right to a strong foundation, Global Report on Early Childhood Care and Education](#)

**Gender norms** continue to shape children's roles from an early age. Comprehensively explored in the [Real Choices, Real Lives – Out of Time](#) report, girls (particularly adolescent mothers) were shown to shoulder disproportionate care responsibilities, limiting their education and personal development. In Bolivia, a study on masculinities highlighted that parenting interventions that engage fathers show promise in shifting attitudes, but male participation remains low in many settings.

**In El Salvador, women spend nearly 5 hours daily on care compared to men's 1 hour 40 minutes, while in the Dominican Republic the gap is 4 hours 25 minutes versus 1 hour 20 minutes.\***

\*Data cited in [Real Choices, Real Lives: Out of Time](#)

Integrated **maternal, newborn and child health and nutrition** initiatives have improved access to antenatal care, vaccinations, and nutrition support. Yet, service quality gaps, supply shortages and stigma continue to limit equitable access. Research also highlighted the specific challenges faced by groups such as refugee caregivers of children with disabilities. One respondent from the [Building Bridges](#) report in Poland, noted their concerns: *"If the Ssynka closes, who knows what will happen to parents and their children. They have limited financial and psychological resources."* (Educator, Female, Lublin).

“ They give first aid lessons, they teach lessons on how to preserve one's health, and they teach us how to better feed the family, so little by little people start knowing and improving gradually.”

Male, 70 years old, Ecuador, respondent from [Changing Lives 2024](#)



A young mother and her husband with their son in Timor-Leste.

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**Cross-sectoral programming** – combining education, health, nutrition, and protection – has also shown strong results in improving children's wellbeing. These approaches are particularly effective in addressing gendered care burdens, bias and climate impacts that disproportionately impact women. Community participation and involving men in caregiving roles are essential for sustaining these models. In Bolivia, innovative strategies such as engaging media, artists, and sports teams are helping challenge norms around fatherhood.

In **emergency contexts**, the climate crisis and displacement exacerbate inequalities. Girls often take on additional care responsibilities when livelihoods are disrupted, reducing time for schooling and rest. Refugee children with disabilities face compounded trauma and barriers to support, with caregivers reporting severe pressures on their time and wellbeing. Integrated models again demonstrate the value of combining education, protection, and psychosocial support in humanitarian settings.

**Digital innovations** are expanding access to services. For example, in the Pacific, digitised civil registration systems have facilitated faster and more cost-effective data sharing across borders, which is especially critical during health initiatives and population movements. In Poland, online platforms provide tailored support for displaced families, including children with disabilities. Hybrid parenting models in Bolivia combine education, entertainment and community reflection to promote positive caregiving.

Finally, research highlighted the importance of **influencing efforts** to embedding early childhood development and practices that promote gender equality in policy and programming. Advocacy for government support and financing is essential. For example, in Cambodia, local authority support has been critical for scaling adapted early learning models.

12. Programme that provides early childhood education and care to children under the age of six from Ukraine and Poland

# What have we learned?

## Selected findings from evaluations



**We reviewed 32 evaluations of Plan International’s early childhood development programming this year, covering 24 countries in all five of our regions.**

**Plan’s parenting initiatives, including the Parenting Under Pressure (PUP) programme, significantly strengthened positive parenting and gender-responsive practices, with several projects reporting over 90 per cent of parents actively engaging with their children at the end of the activities.** Strong examples include:

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In **Tanzania** children and parents who participated in Plan’s 12-week school readiness programme called *LearnPlus* were more likely to engage in a variety of caring tasks like singing, reading and playing together compared to the control group who did not receive the intervention.

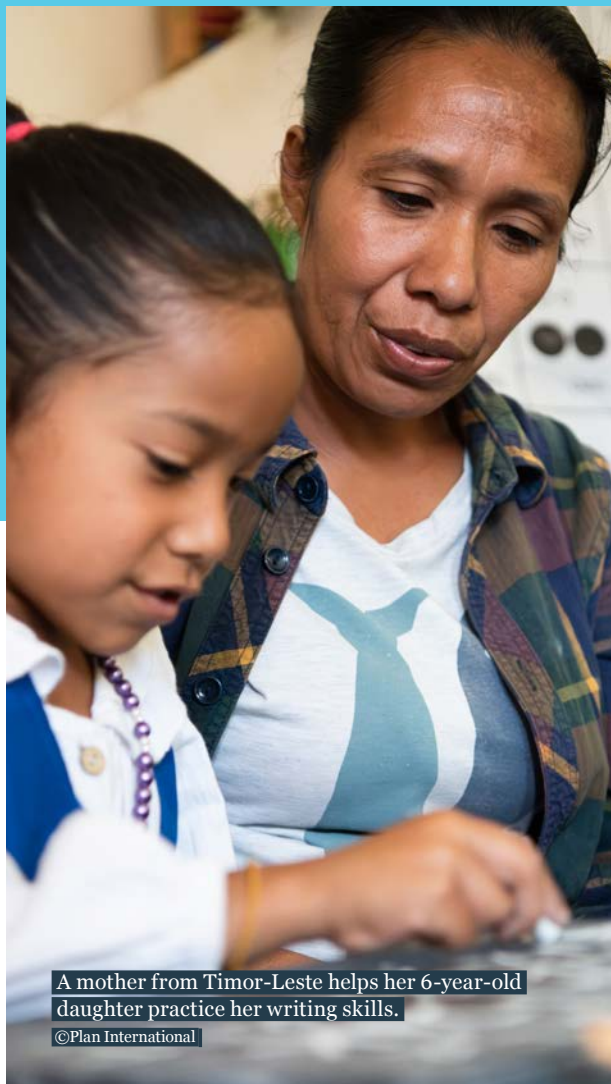
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Parents in **Rwanda** were, on average, undertaking one more child nurturing task per week 18 months after the end of Plan’s *Real Fathers* project, with fathers undertaking 69 per cent more nurturing tasks per week. This is strong evidence of lasting change in parenting practices.

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In **Uganda**, men became more involved in daily childcare needs, taking sick children to appointments, assisting with immunisations, cooking, and performing household chores, tasks previously considered “*inconceivable for men*” while mothers felt they were better able to care for their children without suffering anxiety or resorting to violence.

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A mother from Timor-Leste helps her 6-year-old daughter practice her writing skills.

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**Plan’s nutrition initiatives played a vital role in supporting healthy growth, cognitive development, and overall wellbeing for children.** In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, projects achieved 100 per cent of their goals for treatment of children with severe and moderate acute malnutrition, and in India and Vietnam achieved modest reductions in malnutrition rates. Dietary diversity also improved across India, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. In India, a nutrition garden initiative led to 93 per cent of households consuming vegetables daily, an 86 percentage point increase from the start of the project. This ensured children received essential vitamins and minerals from fresh produce, supporting healthy physical and cognitive development. In Cambodia, 27 per cent more caregivers were providing a minimum acceptable diet to children under two by project end while in Myanmar parents had “*learned not to feed their kids junk food*” and instead were “*put[ting] carrots and sweet potatoes into the porridge and giv[ing] eggs*”. Parents reported cognitive benefits including children’s memories improving.



A group of friends in Laos wash their hands using the new handwashing facilities.

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**Access to safe water and sanitation improved significantly across projects, with strong gains seen in Ghana, Malawi, and Nepal.** In Ghana and Nepal, projects constructed or rehabilitated boreholes, handwashing stations, and household toilets resulting in 88 per cent of children under five in Ghana having access to safe water by the middle of the project (increasing seven-fold since the start of the project), and 100 per cent of women and girls in Nepal having access to safe water by the end of the project. In Malawi, 98 per cent of households had access to toilets and handwashing stations, while rehabilitated boreholes reduced water collection times from 1–3 hours to under 30 minutes. This especially benefitted women and girls who often do this task, freeing up time for study and leisure and anecdotally reducing exposure to gender-based violence. Plan also helped secure sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene investments from governments. For example, in Nepal, local governments earmarked NRS150,000 (US \$1,080) annually for the operation and maintenance of drinking water systems, ensuring continued access for communities.

**Maternal health outcomes also improved through community outreach, health worker training, and facility upgrades.** In Senegal, through a maternal health project in Louga, assisted deliveries at health facilities rose to 96 per cent – a 34 percentage point increase that was driven by greater trust in medical equipment and ambulance services. Men also became more involved in prenatal care during pregnancy. In Vietnam, caregiver knowledge of obstetric danger signs rose by 33 percentage points by the midpoint of the project, with one woman expressing that *“I have learned more about how to take care of myself during pregnancy.”*

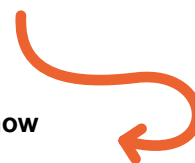
**Integrated programming across nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene, and maternal health consistently delivered stronger and more sustainable outcomes than standalone**

**interventions.** This is thanks to the synergistic effects of addressing interconnected determinants of child and maternal wellbeing. In Laos, for example, child stunting dropped by 15 percentage points and wasting by nine percentage points over the life of the project, with particularly notable gains for girls. Simultaneously, 81 per cent of households gained access to safe water and 85 per cent to improved toilets, contributing to a substantial reduction in diarrhoea incidence over the life of the project – from 27 per cent to 12 per cent – with potentially lifesaving consequences for children. Maternal health also improved, with a 17 percentage point increase in women attending at least four antenatal care visits and a 21 percentage point rise in those receiving postnatal care within 24 hours. Together, these outcomes demonstrate how integrated approaches amplify impact across sectors, creating a multiplier effect that strengthens early childhood development holistically and in a long-lasting way.

**Plan’s early learning interventions improved preschools, bettered parental and community attitudes to early childhood education, and enhanced teaching quality, boosting school enrolment.** In Togo, the *PADIPET* project achieved an 81 per cent enrolment rate for children aged 3–5 years old, a 33 percentage point increase from the start of the project. Many parents and teachers directly attributed this to the introduction of a school canteen, again demonstrating the links between early learning and sectors like nutrition. Plan’s 12-week programme on school readiness (*LearnPlus*) cost between US\$144 and US\$383 per child and had positive results in Cambodia and Tanzania, significantly increasing on-time enrolment in Cambodia, while contributing to improvements in children’s shape identification and puzzle-solving and social skills, empathy and conflict resolution in Tanzania. However, there remain opportunities to strengthen *LearnPlus*’ impact on foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes.

# Where we need to keep going deeper ...

The evidence available this year has informed insights which are relevant for Plan International but also the wider sector, in terms of how investment is targeted and how programmes are designed, to achieve gains in early childhood development:



## We need to continue to embed sustainable change.

Achieving lasting impact requires advocacy with governments to increase investment in early childhood development, and meaningful involvement of local communities in the management of water and sanitation infrastructure and early learning programmes. Clear maintenance plans for water and sanitation, school and health facility equipment are essential to ensure that infrastructure remains functional and effective over time.



## We need to continue to promote men's engagement and challenge gender inequitable norms.

While progress has been made, persistent stereotypes around caregiving and household roles remain, especially among community members that are not part of our programmes. We need to advocate for longer term programming that can sufficiently engage communities to result in longer term gender norm change.



## We need to continue to pursue integrated programming.

Linking mutually reinforcing areas like health, nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene programming can ensure children get the best start in life. Connecting early learning with nutrition helps keep children healthy, motivated, and able to attend school consistently, reinforcing both educational and developmental outcomes. Integrating mental health support into parenting programmes offers a way to strengthen parental wellbeing that can extend to the wider family unit. To fully realise the benefits of these integrated approaches, we need to develop better ways to ensure that programme design reflects the interconnected realities of children's and families' lives and measure these synergistic effects.



## We need to continue to test, pilot and build the evidence base for our early learning programmes.

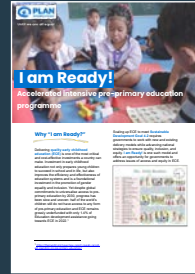
This year, we conducted three robust randomised controlled trials, which showed promising improvements in parenting practices and enrolment rates at affordable costs. However, progress in early learning outcomes was more limited. To strengthen impact, we need to refine our programme design by deepening engagement with parents to address barriers to preschool enrolment and attendance and improve instructional strategies for teachers. These refinements will ensure our programmes are ready for scale-up and deliver meaningful gains in learning outcomes.

# Read more



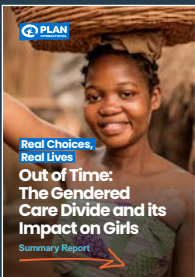
## [Changing Lives 2024: The impact of Plan International's child sponsorship programmes in Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda](#)

An action-oriented research series – conducted in collaboration with RMIT University – on the impact of child sponsorship, and how we can continually improve.



## [I am Ready!](#)

Learn about our accelerated intensive pre-primary education model.



## [Reports from the Real Choices, Real Lives Research Series:](#)

A study that has been following the lives of over 100 girls in 9 countries around the world from their birth in 2006 until they turned 18 in 2024.



## [Toolbox: Integrated Child Protection and Food Security Programming in Humanitarian Action](#)

A collection of tools to support the design and implementation of integrated Child Protection and Food Security programmes in humanitarian settings.



## Until we are all equal

### About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organization that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters, and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crisis and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national, and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

**We won't stop until we are all equal.**

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The analysis underpinning the full suite of 2025 evidence snapshots was led by the Plan International Global Monitoring and Evaluation and Research Teams, with inputs and collaboration from colleagues in the Programmes, Humanitarian and Policy and Advocacy Teams.

**Note:** Images used throughout this report are not of research participants. Consent was received for the use of all images.

**Front cover image:** Two young sisters from Cambodia.  
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