

## ANNEX 1

### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FIRST 1,000 DAYS

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- The first 1000 days of human development – from conception to the end of the child’s second year, is the most unique and distinct phase of life, that lays the foundation for not only individual development, but also for the development of societies and economies. How healthy a child will be, how successful she will be at school and later in life, how she will interact with other people and how much she will contribute to the community and society in adulthood – it all is influenced by the first years of life.
- The first 2-3 years of life are particularly **sensitive period for the development of the human brain**. Although human brain continues to develop throughout life, the first years, including prenatal period, are the period of the most rapid brain growth and highest plasticity. Genes provide a blueprint for brain development. However, the experiences and the environment in which the child is born and raised in their interaction with the genes shape brain architecture, function and capacities. Early environment and experiences can either enhance or diminish the innate genetic potential of the child providing a strong or weak foundation for future health, learning and development.
- In the first years of life, children’s brains can form 700 to 1,000 neural connections every second. These connections are built through the stimulus the child receives from the environment.
- Science tells that children need **nurturing care** for healthy brain development. Nurturing care refers to a stable and predictable environment created by caregivers that ensures children’s good health and nutrition, safety and protection from harm and provides children with diverse opportunities for learning from birth. Stable, warm and responsible relationships with the primary caregivers are critical for health brain development.
- **Children’s interactions and experiences with the primary caregivers** have an influence on their brain’s structure and function. Babies and children pursue interactions through facial expressions, babbling, gestures, and words. When parents respond with the same kind of vocalization and gesturing in a warm and stimulating way over time this helps build and reinforce neural connections. For example, when a parent responds to the child by naming what she is seeing, doing, or feeling, this sparks and reinforces important language connections in her brain.
- Caregivers can support healthy brain development by talking to, singing with, cuddling, and playing with children, by providing safety and protection against harm, by ensuring adequate nutrition and giving children a sense of security and emotional support.
- **Adequate nutrition** during the first 1000 days is critical for the healthy development of the child’s body and brain. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months provides the best nutrition for the child and helps establish a strong emotional bond with the mother. After the first 6 months children need introduction of complementary foods and a diet that meets the nutrient needs of their developing bodies.
- **Health care for** the mothers and the child are also essential. Mothers’ physical and mental health, as well as nutritional status influence the developing brain. At least 8 contacts with a qualified medical professional for the provision of antenatal care, including

counselling on healthy diet, exercise and avoidance of alcohol and smoking are recommended for positive birth outcomes. Health care for the child including immunizations, disease treatment and prevention, early identification of children with specific health conditions - chronic diseases, disabilities or developmental difficulties is essential for healthy start. Access to health services can also help detect and address parental problems such as maternal depression or domestic violence, which may negatively affect child development.

- **Protection from violence, neglect and abuse.** Early brain development depends on protection from violence. When an infant or young child experiences violence, that can disrupt brain connectivity.
- **Children who are exposed to adversities during their early years** like extreme poverty, poor maternal nutrition and poor health (physical and mental), violence and neglect, limited cognitive stimulation and responsive caregiving, inadequate feeding, or environmental toxins are at greatest risk of sub-optimal development with lifelong consequences.

## UNICEF PROGRAMS AND GOALS

**The issues:** Bulgaria has a range of policies and services aiming to support the best start in life of every child. However, serious challenges remain and require to improve the national support for early childhood development. Some of the main challenges include:

- **Poverty:** 43,7% of the children in Bulgaria live at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Poverty affects child development in many ways and can seriously compromise the chance to lead a healthy and productive life.
- **Lack of access to prenatal care** for pregnant women without health insurance. Approx. 8,000 women without health insurance give birth each year, the majority of whom did not have any contacts with the health care system during pregnancy.
- **Infant and child mortality.** Bulgaria continues to have one of the highest infant and child mortality rates in European Union.
- **Low birth weight:** Every year **8.5 - 9.5 % of the newborn babies are born prematurely or with low body weight at birth.** Babies with extremely low weight at birth are at an increased risk of disability and likely to encounter difficulties in their physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. Parents need special support to cope emotionally with the situation and ensure adequate support for the development of their children.
- **6%** of children aged 1-5 years are **stunted i.e.** they did not receive adequate nutrition mainly due to family poverty or inadequate caregiving;
- **17%** of children aged 1-5 years are **overweight** and **5% are obese.**
- The feeding of young children is not in line with the World Health Organization and UNICEF recommendations. For example **only 1.5 % of the children are exclusively breastfed** at 4-5 months, many children receive complementary foods too early or are given foods inappropriate for their age.
- Caregivers as well as professionals have **insufficient understanding of the importance of positive interaction, nurturing and responsive caregiving** from birth for a child's mental health and cognitive development.
- **Only 26% of parents are involved in book reading/telling stories to children at 6 months of age<sup>1</sup>.** Many parents do not talk to their children during the first year because they believe that children are too young to engage in interaction and communication. Research shows that babies with caregivers who talk to them are better at processing language at 18 months and know more words at 24 months.
- **Opportunities for counselling and support to caregivers for strengthening parenting skills are very limited.** Health care professionals, both pediatricians and general practitioners, do not offer sufficient support to parents for developing their capacity to provide nurturing care as part of their regular maternal and child health care activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Data from an UNICEF research (unpublished) in Sliven region.

- Many **disadvantaged children do not have access to** essential health, social and educational services.

**UNICEF program:** The main goal of the UNICEF Country program for the period 2018-2022 is to ensure that all young children in Bulgaria benefit from a nurturing family and social environment to attain a high standard of development, health, learning and well-being.

UNICEF will apply a comprehensive strategy that includes:

- **Evidence gathering and research for** identifying children most at risk of poor development and for promoting policy change to ensure equitable start in life;
- **Policy advice** to the Government to support the development and implementation measures that strengthen parenting skills, improve quality health care during pregnancy and around birth and facilitate early detection and support for children with disabilities and at risk of developmental difficulties.

UNICEF will provide policy advice to the relevant ministries (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labor and Social Protection and the Ministry of Education and Science) to ensure that national policies for young children and families provide a holistic support for child development. Particular focus will be placed on support for development of **a National Early Childhood Development Strategy**.

- **Raising awareness, promoting change in cultural practices and public attitudes** to increase the understanding of the child's social, emotional and cognitive development in the first 3 years after birth.
- **Building the skills, attitudes and knowledge of the caregivers and communities to provide nurturing care to young children.** Through training and technical support UNICEF will support health care professionals (general practitioners, pediatricians and nurses), to educate caregivers on ECD and promote responsive and sensitive caregiving, to detect children at risk of sub-optimal development due to adverse environmental (maternal depression, neglect, abuse or poverty) or biological factors (disabilities or low body weight at birth) and ensure adequate support.

UNICEF will support the development of guidelines and tools for professionals, parenting guidance materials and communication for development strategies to strengthen parenting of young children. Positive parenting will be also promoted through parenting programs implemented in cooperation with local authorities and local community based organization.

UNICEF will continue to work with the Ministry of Health for introducing home visiting for expectant parents and families with children below 3 years of age, as a mechanisms for strengthening support to parenting, early identification of children at risk of developmental difficulties and early intervention.

- **Building an integrated alliance to support the children's rights realization, including media, business, civil society organizations, academia and influencers.** UNICEF will support the promotion of children's rights through building

advocacy and mobilizing resources partnerships with key stakeholders which will support the CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child) agenda by raising awareness and its promotion among the general public; developing skills and capacity of the media and PR professionals (including students in partnership with academia) and engaging with influencers.

**Impact: It is expected that UNICEF interventions will contribute to the following main results for children and families:**

- Every pregnant woman irrespective of her health insurance status has access to quality prenatal care for positive birth outcome;
- Every child benefits from nurturing care (access to health care, good nutrition, safety and security, protection for harm and responsive caregiving) during the first years of life;
- Every expectant parent and caregivers of young children have access to individualised support, advice and guidance for ensuring nurturing care during the first critical 1,000 days of the life of the child;
- Children with developmental difficulties and disabilities receive timely and adequate support for developing their potential.

**What the funds will be raise for: Key area of work is support for development and sustainable implementation as part of the existing health system of interventions that build the capacities of parents and families to provide nurturing care. Particular focus will be placed on introducing home visiting service for expectant parents and families with young children in all regions of the country.**

The home visiting services provides individual support, guidance and advice to caregivers with a view of strengthening their skills and knowledge for nurturing care, early identification of children at risk of developmental difficulties due to poverty, lack of stimulation, disabilities, violence or neglect and early intervention. Over the past years UNICEF in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and the Agency for Social Assistance developed and tested in two regions of the country (Shumen and Sliven) model; home visiting services. More than 10,000 families with more than 11,705 children aged 0-2 years benefited from the support of qualified nurses in the areas of health, breastfeeding, complementary feeding and adequate feeding, child safety, early stimulation and responsive caregiving, positive discipline, etc.

In 2018- 2019 the Ministry of Health will roll out the home visiting service to all regions of the country. UNICEF will support the process through provision of technical assistance, policy advice, training of the visiting nurses, development of quality standards and guidelines.

Funds will be raised for:

- Provision of individualised support, advice and guidance to expectant parents and caregivers of young children aged 0-2 years of Age in Sliven and Shumen regions through the established Centre for Maternal and Child Health until early 2019 (when the Ministry of Health is expected to provide funding);

- Development of educational materials for caregivers and professionals on child development and aspects of nurturing care;
- Preparation of training materials for health professionals to strengthen counselling of caregivers in the area of nurturing care and child development;
- Technical support to the Ministry of Health for rolling out home visiting services in all regions of the country.