

Advancing Protection and Care for Children in Adversity

A U.S. GOVERNMENT STRATEGY FOR INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

2019–2023



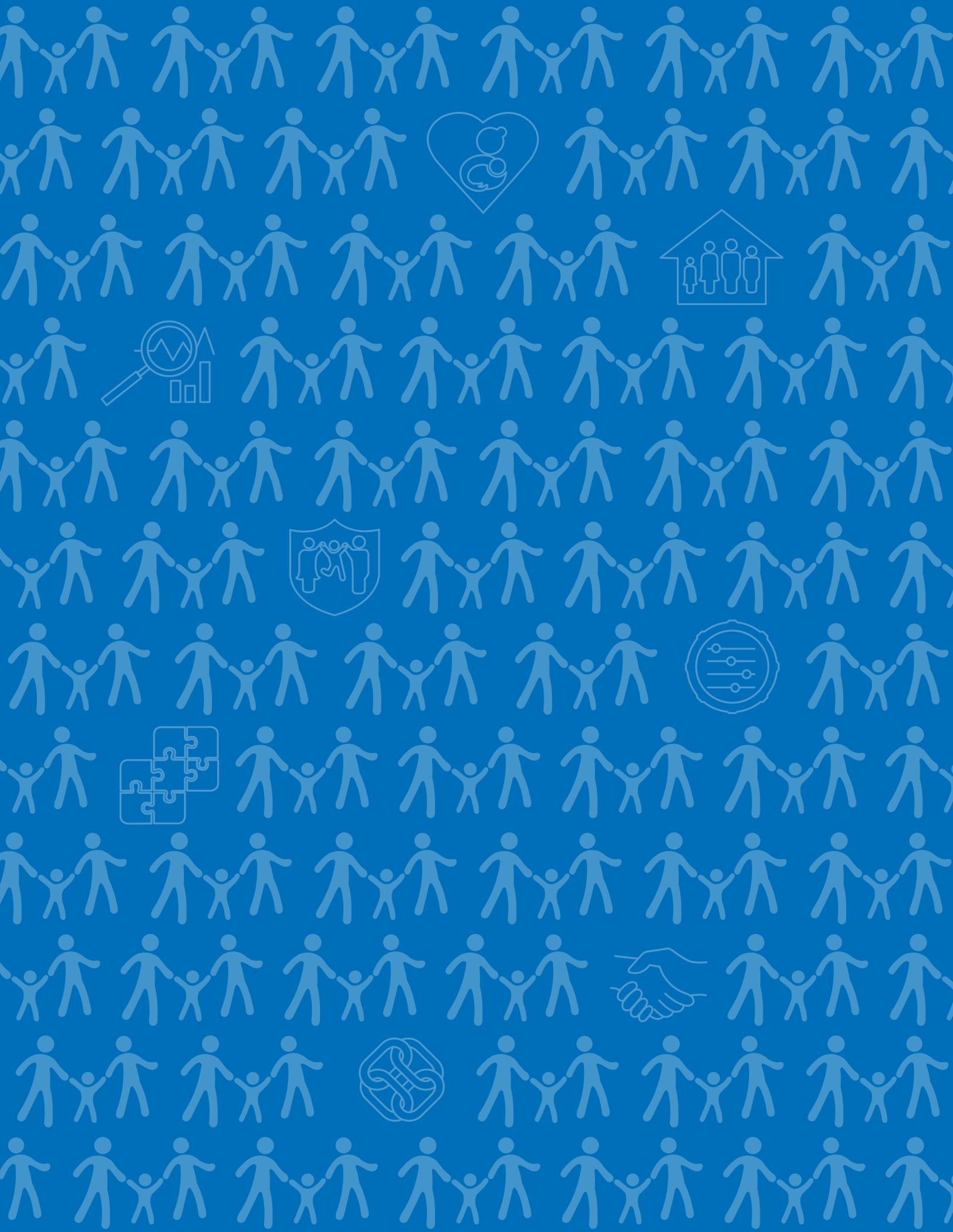


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On the cover: An Ethiopian poultry farmer is able to expand his farm production and support his family.



In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, support for children with disabilities helps ensure they can participate in all aspects of community and family life.

U.S. Government Departments and Agencies Contributing to *Advancing Protection and Care for Children in Adversity: A U.S. Government Strategy for International Assistance (2019–2023)*



United States Government Policy Statement

The United States Government envisions a world in which all children thrive within protective, loving families, free from deprivation, violence, and danger. *Advancing Protection and Care for Children in Adversity: A U.S. Government Strategy for International Assistance (2019–2023)* outlines the U.S. Government’s whole-of-government commitment and approach to investing in the development, care, dignity, and safety of the world’s most-vulnerable children and their families. U.S. Government partners involved in implementing this Strategy include the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, Labor, and State; the Peace Corps; and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

The goal of the Strategy is to ensure the U.S. Government’s investments for the most-vulnerable children and families around the world are comprehensive, coordinated, and effective in helping place partner countries on a Journey to Self-Reliance by which they can sustainably finance, manage, and deliver services that lead to stable, resilient, and prosperous families and communities. Through implementation of the Strategy, the U.S. Government will leverage and complement its foreign assistance investments in strengthening systems for protecting and caring for children, as well as in health, education, nutrition, and humanitarian response. The Strategy gives particular attention to strengthening families, because nurturing and loving family care is essential for children’s development, protection, and safety.

The Strategy starts from the premise that sustainable development depends on the capacity of parents who have the primary responsibility for ensuring the healthy growth and development of their children. Parents, together with other members of their families, communities, civil society, faith-based organizations, and governments, promote the safety and well-being of children, even in the face of formidable threats and challenges. The Strategy recognizes that when children’s safety or well-being is at risk, governments have a responsibility to strengthen families’ capacities to mitigate these risks; or when children and adolescents are outside of family care, governments must take steps

to ensure their adequate protection and care. It also recognizes that young people are allies and actors in promoting their own safety and well-being and that of others. In the Strategy, the word children includes newborns, young children, adolescents, and youth under age 18.



Children in adversity include boys and girls who are experiencing conditions of serious deprivation and danger. Such marginalized children include those who are living outside of family care; have been trafficked; are experiencing violence; are affected by, or are emerging from, armed conflict or humanitarian crises; have disabilities; are orphans; or are otherwise vulnerable, including because of HIV/AIDS, acute illness, or having been born prematurely.

The Case for Investing in the World's Most-Vulnerable Children

Ensuring that every child can survive, thrive, and reach his or her full potential with dignity is central to long-term national development. Strengthening the capacities of children, adolescents, and the families who love and care for them is one of the best investments a country can make to eliminate extreme poverty, boost economic growth, and promote a peaceful society.

The challenge of protecting children in adversity is enormous. Millions of children and adolescents around the world live without protective, nurturing, and loving family care as the result of poverty and other factors, including disability, disease, humanitarian crisis, exploitative labor, or human trafficking. Evidence shows that when children face chronic, unaddressed adversities, the resulting toxic stress can have life-long, debilitating mental, emotional, and physical effects.¹ This constellation of adversities has deleterious impacts, not only on the individuals and families concerned, but also on the societies and countries where they live, across generations.

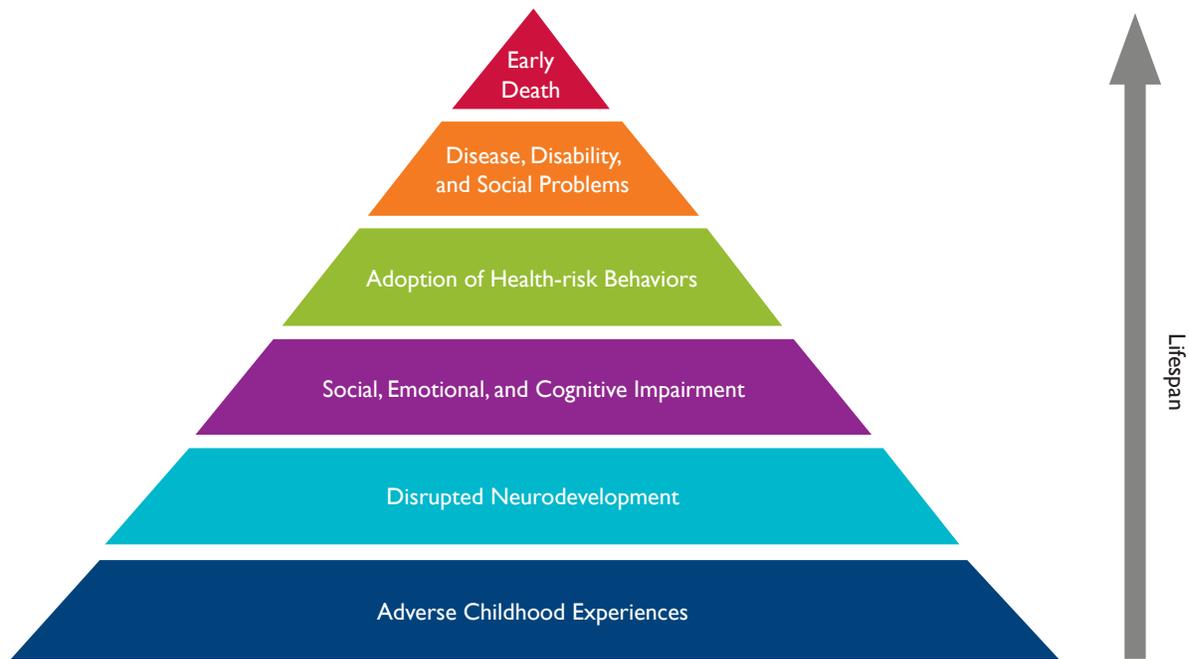
Some specifics:

- Each year, an estimated 5.4 million children globally die before their fifth birthday, 2.7 million of whom die from malnutrition;²
- In low- and middle-income countries, at least 250 million children under age five risk not reaching their full physical or cognitive potential because of stunting and extreme poverty;³
- As many as 93 million children, or one in 20 of those under age 14, have a disability of some kind,⁴ and the greatest risk of death and disability is among preterm and low-birth-weight newborns;⁵
- Neuropsychiatric conditions, often caused by trauma, are the leading cause of disability in children and adolescents in all regions;⁶

- Globally, one billion children under age 18 experience physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, including bullying;⁷
- 152 million children and adolescents are engaged in child labor worldwide, of whom 73 million are in hazardous work;⁸
- An estimated 357 million children, or one in six, live in conflict zones; of the 15 countries with the highest neonatal-mortality rate in the world, 11 have experienced recent humanitarian crises;⁹
- Children raised in residential care settings have, on average, an IQ 20 points lower than their peers who live in foster care;¹⁰ and
- The total number of children who are living outside of family care in residential care settings or on the streets is unknown, but estimates are in the tens of millions; and significant gaps in the data and services for children who are living outside of family care has rendered this population invisible.¹¹

The good news is that strategic investments in parents, children, and families can mitigate the effects of these adversities, and produce gains to children, families, communities, and nations. Recognizing and addressing the threats children and adolescents face can both prevent adverse childhood experiences and build resilience so they can thrive even under difficult conditions.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Influence Health and Well-Being Throughout the Lifespan



The ACE Pyramid¹²

In addition to alleviating suffering, investments that support children and their families also are cost-effective. When children are not able to reach their potential, they can be trapped in cycles of poverty and violence, perpetuated generationally, which can create greater burdens on social-welfare systems when these children become adults. However, investments in young children can boost their lifetime earnings, and generate returns up to ten times greater than investments in teenagers or young adults.¹³

To respond to the needs of children in adversity around the world more effectively, the U.S. Government must synchronize and harmonize its foreign assistance investments. Although international assistance for children tends to be organized by sector, the problems children face are not. Children and families confront poverty, inadequate access to basic needs (including water and

sanitation), disease, conflict, disasters, violence, and family instability not as separate threats, but more often as interrelated problems in their daily lives. To support the capacity of parents and families to nurture, love, protect, and provide ongoing care to their children, a coordinated and multifaceted response must take into account families' particular capacities and strengths, as well as their vulnerabilities and limitations.

Girls and boys can experience the same threats differently because of gender and cultural norms and expectations at the household and community levels. Therefore, by identifying such problems, and adapting interventions, both girls and boys are able to thrive. Inclusive programming and sound laws to provide legal protection can promote dignity and equity, protect children, and help them reach their full potential.

A Mandate for Action

The Strategy builds on progress achieved under the *United States Government Action Plan on Children in Adversity* in delivering better outcomes for the millions of children around the world who face serious deprivation and danger, and provides a shared basis for continued, technically sound, collaborative action.

In 2005, the U.S. Congress recognized the importance of a comprehensive, coordinated, and effective U.S. Government response to the world’s most-vulnerable children, when it passed *Public Law 109-95: The Assistance for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children in Developing Countries Act*. This Act required an interagency strategy and mandated the appointment of a U.S. Government Special Advisor on Children in Adversity to coordinate interagency foreign assistance to vulnerable children and their families.* *The United States Government Action Plan on Children in Adversity* (2012–2017) outlined the U.S. Government’s response to *Public Law 109-95*.

The Strategy sustains the commitment of U.S. Government partners to work within an evidence-based framework that reflects a broad range of international

programming on behalf of the world’s most-vulnerable children and their families. The Strategy recognizes that health and development, education, and protection of children are inextricably linked to their care-giving environments and that the U.S. Government and its partners must invest in families and communities to achieve positive, measurable outcomes for children and adolescents.

U.S. foreign assistance for vulnerable children and families in low- and middle-income countries depends on multiple legislative mandates and flows through many U.S. Government Departments and Agencies, according to their expertise. The decentralized mechanisms of U.S. foreign assistance make integration and coordination a complex challenge, but one that is achievable.



Nepali mothers receive training in optimal health and nutritional behavior, which will benefit their families.

**Public Law 109-95* calls for the appointment of a “Special Advisor on Assistance to Orphans and Vulnerable Children,” but because that term is closely associated with HIV/AIDS specifically, in 2012, U.S. Government partners revised the title to the “Special Advisor on Children in Adversity.”

Strategic Objectives and Guiding Principles

The Strategy builds on three evidence-based objectives that inform the U.S. Government's policies and programs to benefit the world's most-vulnerable children. These objectives are interrelated, interdependent, and mutually reinforcing. Success with each objective creates a multiplier effect by contributing to a solid foundation to protect children and adolescents from a wide array of risks and supporting their development, care, and safety.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES



GUIDING PRINCIPLES



The Strategy promotes efficiencies in the U.S. Government's approach to development by reducing fragmentation, fostering collaboration and coordination, and maximizing results across Departments and Agencies. Achieving all three objectives is critically important to the success of any U.S. Government program that aims to benefit the world's most-vulnerable children and to ensure the greatest return on the resources invested. These objectives promote many of the priorities expressed in other U.S. Government policies and initiatives¹⁴ and offer an opportunity to measure the overall collective effectiveness of otherwise separate programmatic and funding mechanisms.

The U.S. Government is committed to achieving these strategic objectives by adhering to a set of guiding principles that underscore each objective and are critical to their successes. Together, the strategic objectives and guiding principles promote greater coherence and accountability for the U.S. Government's diverse portfolio of foreign assistance to children in adversity. The following section covers the objectives and guiding principles in more detail.

Strategic Objectives



BUILD STRONG BEGINNINGS

The U.S. Government will promote nurturing care for the most-vulnerable newborns and young children, starting before birth, by funding and supporting comprehensive and integrated programming in early-childhood development to provide for children's health, nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving for social and emotional well-being, and opportunities for early learning.



PUT FAMILY FIRST

The U.S. Government will support those most vulnerable children who are, or are at risk of, living outside of family care by promoting, funding, and supporting nurturing, loving, protective, and permanent family care.



PROTECT CHILDREN FROM VIOLENCE

The U.S. Government will promote, fund, and support the protection of children from violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect by investing in preventative and responsive programming.

Guiding Principles



ADAPT APPROACHES

The U.S. Government will adapt programs and policies to a child's age, life stage, and gender, with attention to disabilities, to increase the effectiveness of the interventions it funds.



STRENGTHEN SYSTEMS

The U.S. Government will assist governments and civil society in partner countries to build and strengthen their capacities to support, manage, and finance their social-service and child-protection systems fully.



GENERATE AND USE EVIDENCE-BASED INFORMATION

The U.S. Government will use the best available data for decision-making and employ research, implementation science, and programmatic learning to design evidence-based and evidence-informed policies, programs, and practices and adapt them according to the findings.



CREATE SYNERGIES

The U.S. Government will work across Departments and Agencies to promote the best possible outcomes for children and families around the world by fostering synergies across sectors and breaking down silos where they exist.



PROMOTE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

The U.S. Government will engage and mobilize a broad range of resources and stakeholders, including governments, civil society, faith-based organizations, and donors to increase the scale and effectiveness of the U.S. Government's international efforts.

Strategic Objectives



OBJECTIVE I Build Strong Beginnings

The U.S. Government will promote nurturing care for the most-vulnerable newborns and young children, starting before birth, by funding and supporting comprehensive and integrated programming in early-childhood development to provide for children's health, nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving for social and emotional well-being, and opportunities for early learning.

Early childhood is a critical stage of human development, the time when nurturing and loving care by parents and families lays the foundation for life-long well-being. Investments in the ability of parents and other family caregivers to facilitate the physical, cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development of young children, from before birth until they make the transition to primary school, are critical to put them and their countries on the path to greater stability, resilience, and prosperity.¹⁵

The brain grows faster from conception to age three years than at any other time,¹⁶ forming billions of integrated neural circuits through the interaction of genetics, environment, nutrition, and experience. A child learns and adapts through sensory input and social interaction, creating a neural blueprint that life experiences and caregiving will continue to shape. In general, child development takes place in a series of predictable and common stages, as children reach milestones and advanced capacities in how they play, learn, communicate, act, move, and grow.

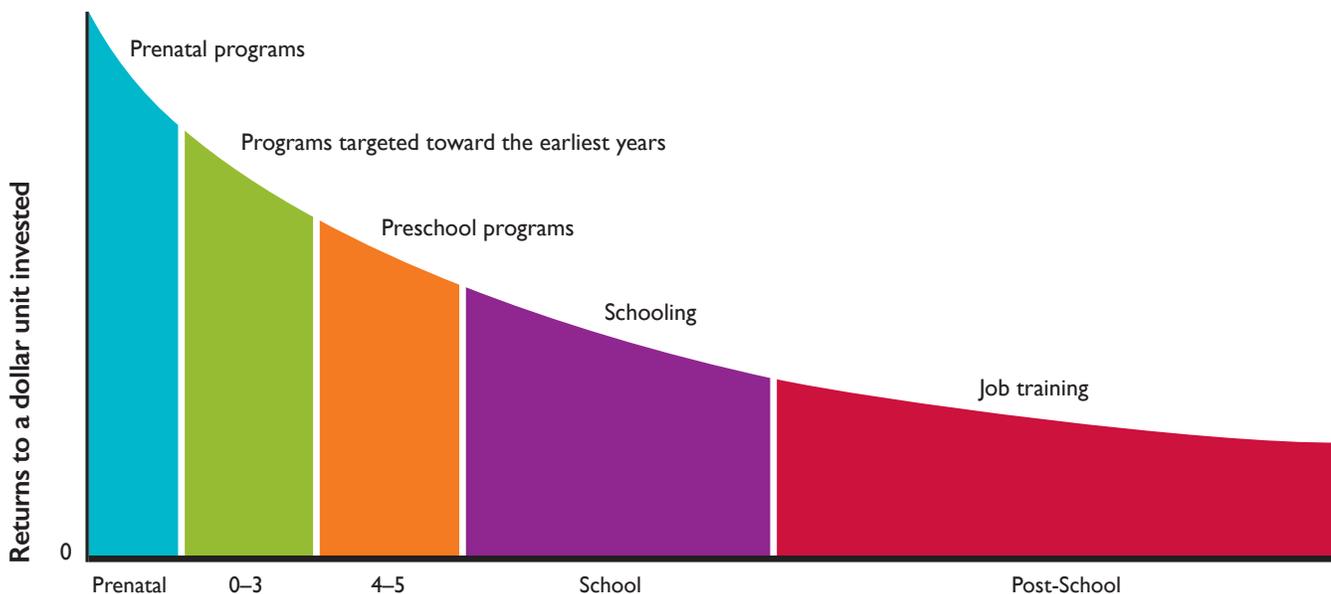
Conditions in the home play a key role in determining a child's chances for survival and development. Children from conception to birth are vulnerable to a variety of individual and environmental risk factors to which their mothers are exposed. These risk factors persist after birth and into childhood. Quality antenatal care and a nurturing, clean environment in the postnatal period, with adequate nutrition and protection from infection and toxic stress, promotes brain development. Children grow best in a loving environment with nurturing care, which includes safe and secure surroundings, responsive

parenting, adequate health care and nutrition, and opportunities for stimulation and early learning.¹⁷ Workplace environments and conditions affect the ability of parents and other family caregivers to care well for their children. Poverty, any form of malnutrition, violence in the home and community, environmental toxins, and poor physical and mental health of parents are among the major risk factors for less-than-optimal child development. Exposure to these risk factors early in a child's life is associated with toxic stress and a lack of stimulation that, in turn, can lead to life-long impaired cognitive functioning and stunted growth.¹⁸ Poor living conditions also can exacerbate the cycle of poverty.

Nearly one-third of all children around the world enter primary school without the cognitive, social, and emotional skills needed to fulfill their potential.¹⁹ During middle childhood, children acquire skills that build on the foundation established during their early years. Without intervention, children who experience poor development are likely to forego about one-quarter of average adult income per year.²⁰ Adverse environments can create deficits in skills and abilities that drive down productivity and increase social costs, which add to financial deficits borne by society as a whole.²¹ These economic losses can cost countries as much as twice their current Gross Domestic Product (GDP) expenditures on health and education.²²

Interventions that provide safe, supportive care to children, and build social and emotional skills, can mitigate, and possibly even reverse, the effects of toxic stress. Recent evidence-based programming shows

The Earlier the Investment, the Greater the Return: The Heckman Curve



how to affect the life trajectories of infants and young children in a positive way.²³ For example, comprehensive programming to safeguard against malnutrition during the critical 1,000 days between conception and age two can promote secure, stimulating relationships between parents and children.²⁴ Other best practices include co-locating and integrating services where possible, such as training for new mothers on breastfeeding and skin-skin contact at birth with delivery especially in health facilities; making developmental counseling and monitoring part of routine health care and nutrition programs; maximizing home-visiting programs to address health, nutrition, and parent-child interactions; promoting the mental health and well-being of family caregivers; and creating effective referral mechanisms to close gaps between interventions and providers. Schools

and other community-identified spaces can serve as a central hub for the delivery of nutritional, parental education, and other programs. These investments also are particularly critical for children with developmental delays and disabilities.*

In addition, high-quality early-childhood education,** when needed, pays dividends in terms of children's long-term development and learning. The benefits of building strong beginnings include increased readiness for, enrollment in, and completion of school, maximized through systems that promote access to the provision of high-quality education delivered by public and private providers. U.S. Government programs will apply these interventions at the discretion of parents and with their approval.

*Children with disabilities are those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments, which, in interaction with various barriers, can hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

**Programs for early-childhood education are typically designed with a holistic approach to support children's early cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development, and to introduce young children to organized instruction outside of the family context.

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT'S APPROACH

- Recognize the family and home environment as the critical place to enhance the quality of care and development of infants and young children;
- Fund and scale-up evidence-based, culturally appropriate parenting programs that promote loving, nurturing care; support the mental health and well-being of parents and other family caregivers; and address issues such as conflict in relationships, intimate-partner violence, and substance abuse;
- Support livelihood interventions and economic-strengthening, and social-protection programs to increase the income and resilience of vulnerable households;
- Strengthen systems to provide an enabling environment for raising children, including through the promotion of positive, family-oriented workplace conditions, policies, and programs that help parents, especially young parents, to develop their skills and create strong families;
- Promote developmentally supportive, family-centered care for medically fragile newborns in health facilities and in the home;
- Develop and support systems and professionals to monitor the process of children's development over time, identify as early as possible any potential developmental lags in young children, and refer children and their families to appropriate services as needed;
- Promote access to secure, caring, and safe places for young children, where they can learn, develop, and be protected, as a core component of humanitarian assistance;

The Benefits of Investing in Early Childhood

Early investment in young children's development can produce positive, long-term outcomes:

- Evidence points to a high rate of return on human-capital investments made during the prenatal and early childhood years;²⁵
- Early-childhood interventions are among the most-cost-effective investments, as some programs cost only \$0.50 per child per year when integrated into large-scale health and nutrition delivery programs;²⁶
- Reaching children in their early years can disrupt intergenerational cycles of poverty, poor health, and conflict;²⁷
- An average country's *per capita* GDP is reduced up to 10 percent as a result of current workers' stunted growth in childhood,²⁸ but reaching such children with early-learning and responsive caregiving interventions in their first years can boost lifetime incomes by 25 percent,²⁹ and
- Longitudinal data show that children who receive early stimulation achieve more years of schooling³⁰ and participate at lower rates in violent behaviors.³¹





Children in Ecuador benefit from a volunteer health program to build strong beginnings.

- Promote health, nutrition, clean water, and sanitation, particularly for pregnant women and children under age five, and incorporate interventions that contribute to healthy child development, such as age-appropriate early stimulation and the integration of developmental counseling and monitoring into routine health care and nutrition programs; and
- Improve the accessibility, safety, and quality of local early-childhood and pre-primary development and education programs.



OBJECTIVE 2 Put Family First

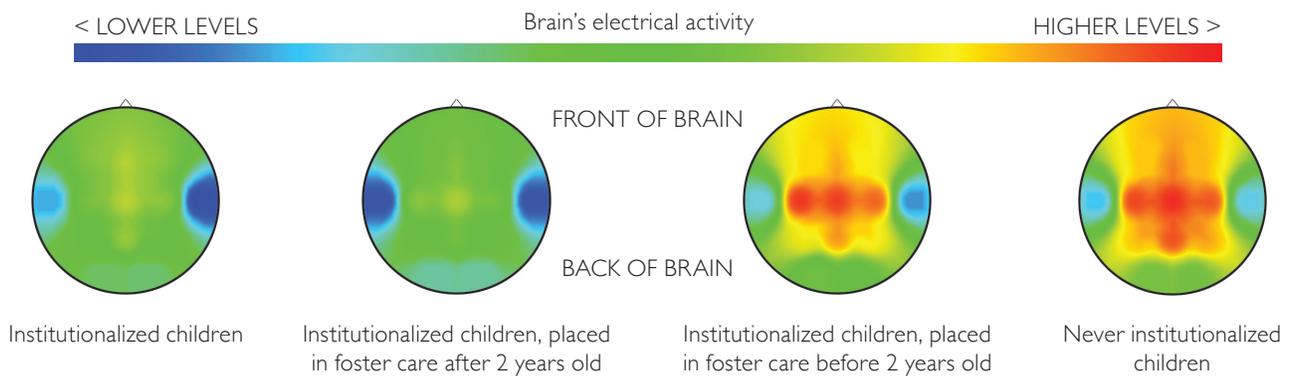
The U.S. Government will support those most vulnerable children who are, or are at risk of, living outside of family care by promoting, funding, and supporting nurturing, loving, protective, and permanent family care.

A child thrives when surrounded by consistent, nurturing, loving, and protective care from parents and other family caregivers. This provides a foundation necessary for a child to develop essential, life-long intellectual, social, and physical capacities. Having a positive relationship with a parent or other caring adult family members is a consistent protective factor for children against a variety of negative health and social outcomes. A family provides critically important connections for cultural learning, social integration, and economic opportunities, as well as support in difficult times.

The integrity of a family is threatened if it cannot meet the basic needs of its children. Challenges such as extreme poverty; inadequate access to education, health, and basic social services; armed conflict and humanitarian emergencies; violence; alcohol and substance abuse; and inadequate support to address disabilities can cause children to enter residential care settings;* live on the street; or leave them vulnerable to exploitation, including human trafficking.

The Negative Impacts of Institutionalization on Brain Function

The images illustrate some of the findings of the Bucharest Early Intervention Project, a randomized controlled trial that measured profound impacts of institutionalization on the brain function of children institutionalized at a young age, and the potential for recovery when removed and placed in good-quality family care.³²



*Residential care settings can include institutions, children's homes, orphanages, or group homes.

When children, particularly young children, live outside of family care they are at increased risk of developmental impairments and lasting psychological harm. Children in residential care settings, particularly those who enter at an early age or who stay for an extended period of time, can experience social, emotional, and cognitive delays, and negative effects on their physical growth, neurological development, and mental health.³³ A meta-analysis of 23 studies found poorer behavioral and psychosocial outcomes for children placed in residential care settings as compared to those in family foster care.³⁴

Children with disabilities are over-represented in institutional and other types of residential care settings, and are more vulnerable to violence than other children in these settings.³⁵ The physical and psychological effects of living in residential care centers, combined with societal isolation and often subpar regulatory oversight by governments, can place children in situations of heightened vulnerability to human trafficking.³⁶ In addition, residential care settings are generally more costly than supporting children in family care.³⁷

Children and adolescents who live outside of family care can be statistically invisible, as many countries do not routinely collect data on children who are in residential care settings, on the street, or otherwise living outside of family care. Without these data,

these children are too often left off national agendas. Unfortunately, in many low- and moderate-income countries, many residential care settings are unregistered. Such a lack of oversight can allow traffickers and other abusers to exploit children.

The U.S. Government's investments in child-protection systems should prioritize appropriate, safe, permanent family care for children to secure the best environment for their development. This includes reunification and reintegration, and when this is not possible, family care, such as kinship care, domestic and inter-country adoption, legal guardianship, kafalah,* and foster care. Long-term mentoring programs can also help support a child as he or she makes the transition into adulthood and beyond.

While permanent family care should be the primary goal, short-term, high-quality, transitional residential care in a setting as close as possible to a family might be necessary in instances such as the following: older children who have lived on the street for an extended period; children who need short-term mental-health treatment for a condition that puts their safety or that of others at risk; children who need temporary housing while waiting for family placement; or for a short-term response during the early stage of a humanitarian crisis.

*"Kafalah" in the Islamic tradition is the commitment to voluntarily take care of the maintenance, education, and protection of a minor.

The process of transitioning from a child-care protection system that relies on residential care settings to one that primarily supports family-based care requires careful planning, skilled social-services personnel, and sufficient resources. Gatekeeping processes help ensure that children are not unnecessarily placed outside of family care and that placement addresses a child's individual situation and needs in the best way possible.³⁸

Recognizing and responding to the particular needs of different family structures is critical to strengthening their capacities to nurture and protect children. These family structures include female- or child-headed

households, single fathers, parents or children with disabilities, and grandparents who care for grandchildren following the death or absence of the parents.

Formal policies and systems require local buy-in to succeed. Meaningfully engaging women and men, girls, and boys, across generations and social backgrounds, will ensure that initiatives are responsive and account for local variations. Actively consulting vulnerable and at-risk community members, especially young people, on reform policy issues can help ground them in reality, and increase the effectiveness of programs.

The Benefits of Investing in Family Care

- Children thrive best in loving, nurturing, and protective families who stimulate the development of IQ and language and cultivate the life-long ability to form attachments to others;³⁹
- Children raised in family care demonstrate better cognitive, physical, and social development than children in institutional care;⁴⁰
- Children moved from institutional care into good-quality foster care before age two have significant improvements in brain architecture, attachment, mental health, language development, and IQ;⁴¹
- Family care is more cost-efficient than residential care, which can cost up to ten times as much as supporting families to care for their children; and⁴²
- Investing in family-strengthening, including access to basic social services and economic support, training in parenting skills, and support for stable relationships between a child's parents, is fundamental to helping families stay together.



THE U.S. GOVERNMENT'S APPROACH

- Assist countries to transition from relying on residential care settings for children to supporting family-based care, including through the development of gatekeeping processes;
- Support community-based programs to strengthen families and to keep families together through the economic strengthening of households; the development of parenting skills and healthy relationships; access to quality, inclusive education,* and health care and social services and programs to reduce alcohol- and substance-abuse, all adapted to address different family structures;
- Support the reunification and reintegration of children living outside of parental care, including those in residential care settings, trafficked, on the street, in armed groups, or affected by humanitarian emergencies, into safe, nurturing, and loving families. Where reunification cannot support the safety and well-being of a child, other family-based care options will be promoted, such as kinship, foster care, or domestic and inter-country adoption, keeping siblings together whenever possible;
- Support family tracing interventions for children who are unaccompanied during emergencies and humanitarian crises;
- Strengthen the capacities of parents, other caregivers, and outreach support services to enable children with disabilities to live in family care, with access to inclusive education and other essential services;
- Raise public awareness of the imperative that children should grow up in families and the risk factors that cause children to live outside of family care;
- Increase political will to strengthen national and local legislation, policies, and systems for family support and systems to care for and protect children;
- Invest in the development of national systems to identify, enumerate, and document children who are, or at risk of, living outside of family care, including those living in residential care settings, on the street, and associated with armed groups, or who are trafficked or are experiencing emergencies, including temporary separation from their families;
- Support national governments to strengthen policies and practices as they relate to residential care settings, and increase domestic oversight of organizations that support residential care settings;
- Strengthen and grow social-service workforces through training and other educational efforts to improve the retention and performance of professional and para-professional child-welfare and protection workers; and
- Integrate evidence-informed, child-protection programming across sectors, including health, nutrition, education, labor, social welfare, security, justice, and humanitarian response, to reduce children's vulnerability.

*Inclusive education focuses on the full and effective participation, accessibility, attendance, and achievement of all students, especially those who, for different reasons, are excluded or at risk of being marginalized, including children with disabilities.



OBJECTIVE 3 **Protect Children from Violence**

The U.S. Government will promote, fund, and support the protection of children from violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect by investing in preventative and responsive programming.

Violence,* exploitation, abuse, and neglect against children occur everywhere across the globe, in all communities, and carry life-long negative consequences. Nearly one billion children, more than one-half of all children in the world between the ages of two and 17, are victims of physical, sexual, or emotional violence each year, including bullying.⁴³ Moreover, 152 million children and adolescents are engaged in child labor globally, often exploited and robbed of their childhood. Of these children, 73 million are engaged in hazardous child labor, which may expose them to physical, psychological, and/or sexual abuse and exploitation during work in agriculture, domestic service, construction, mining, or other sectors.⁴⁴

Witnessing violence in their families, schools, and communities can be similarly harmful to children. An estimated 275 million children and adolescents around the world are exposed to domestic violence every year.⁴⁵ A child's survival and development is most at risk from violence, abuse, and neglect during his or her first year of life, when critical brain and physical development occurs. Exposure to violence, particularly when such exposure is repeated or chronic, can significantly affect a child's brain development and function and cause life-long consequences, including poor mental health, hindered neurological development, slowed physical development, reduced learning, and risky health behaviors.⁴⁶



A grandfather proudly holds his granddaughter, both residents of a camp for internally displaced persons in Azerbaijan.

*All forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment, or exploitation, including sexual abuse.

Violence and exploitation disproportionately affect the world's most-vulnerable members of society. Children are at an increased risk of violence, notably children with disabilities and those who are of racial and ethnic minorities, those who are living outside of family care; in conflict or emergency settings; or in low-income, rural, and indigenous communities. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) youth are also at an increased risk of violence. Girls and boys can experience violence differently, face different vulnerabilities to varying degrees, and have different needs that arise from abuse.

During conflict and humanitarian crises, children are particularly vulnerable. Not only are children at a much higher risk of experiencing violence during humanitarian crises, armed groups and security forces recruit and use an alarming number of children during armed conflict in various roles, which subjects the children to direct physical, psychological, and emotional harm. One-third of children and adolescents are out of school in countries affected by war or natural disasters; 40 percent of youth between the ages of 15 and 17 in these nations have never completed primary school and nearly 20 percent have never attended school at all.⁴⁷

Girls face multiple, unique protection challenges, including child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM). They are particularly vulnerable to domestic and interpersonal violence and to sexual exploitation and abuse. More than one in ten girls under age 20, or approximately 120 million worldwide, have experienced forced intercourse, or other forced sexual acts, at some point in their lives.⁴⁸ Global data shows boys are also at risk for sexual violence, and are at higher risk for physical violence, including fights and peer bullying.⁴⁹ When children witness or experience violence, they



Based on the U.S. Government-supported Violence Against Children Surveys in sub-Saharan Africa, one in three girls will experience violence at a very young age, which often leads to a lifetime of violent experiences that increases a girl's likelihood of HIV acquisition and many other negative outcomes. Girls are up to 14 times more likely to be infected with HIV than boys their same age; and they account for two-thirds of new infections among young people in sub-Saharan Africa. Focusing U.S. Government efforts on preventing violence against children can exponentially improve the lives of girls and contribute to ending AIDS.

are more likely to repeat it, which thus reinforces the harmful cycle of gender-based violence. Engaging men and boys is critical to achieving transformational change.

Digital technologies offer children, young people, and their parents tremendous opportunities to advance their health, education, and potential employment and also enable children to communicate with their communities, peers, and leaders. Even in low-resource and humanitarian settings, children and youth are connected to digital technologies more than ever before. Digital technologies also play increasingly important roles in child-protection, by facilitating birth registration, rapid family-tracing, and case-management. Alternatively, increased digital access increases the risk of exposing children to harm, including disturbing or potentially harmful content, such as violent images, cyberbullying, sexual solicitation, the circulation of material connected to child sexual abuse, and live-stream sexual abuse, which can groom them for sexual exploitation and recruitment into trafficking. Human traffickers use digital technologies to recruit and exploit their victims.

The direct and indirect economic costs of children's exposure to violence worldwide are substantial and undermine the development of human and social capital, which can stunt a country's economic growth. School-related, gender-based violence toward boys and girls can be associated with the loss of one primary grade of schooling, which translates to a total yearly cost of around \$17 billion to low- and middle-income countries.⁵⁰ CEFM, which intersects with poverty, inequality between men and women, and low access to high-quality education services, health care, and workforce-development, will cost developing countries trillions of dollars by 2030.⁵¹



The U.S. Government has been a leader in developing a cadre of evidence-based interventions, including supporting the INSPIRE package (which includes seven strategies* for ending violence against children),⁵² new research, tools, and approaches to build evidence on how best to prevent and mitigate the negative effects of violence. By helping to illuminate the magnitude, nature, and consequences of the problem, the U.S. investment in the Violence Against Children Surveys has begun to help governments around the world to combat the global epidemic of violence against children.⁵³

*INSPIRE strategies are: Implementation and enforcement of laws, Norms and values, Safe environments, Parent and caregiver support, Income and economic strengthening, Response and support services, and Education and life skills.

Violence Against Children and Youth Causes Severe, Life-Long Consequences



Fortunately, targeted interventions for the world’s most-vulnerable children can not only mitigate, but also reverse, the negative impacts of violence. The resumption of familiar, safe, and nurturing routines, particularly within a family and an educational setting, mitigates the effect of adverse experiences and helps children heal, build resilience, and better cope with stress. Adults in caregiving roles influence a child’s coping abilities, as do peer and community support. Ensuring access to safe educational opportunities during a crisis can protect children and adolescents from increased risks of violence, commercial and non-commercial sexual abuse and exploitation, and recruitment into armed groups and other life-threatening or criminal activities.⁵⁴

Governments play key roles in preventing and responding to violence, especially when committed by parents or other caregivers, or when children do not have adult caregivers who can protect them. This includes investment in child-protection systems and case-management services; capacity-strengthening for the social-welfare workforce; and support to key government Ministries to lead integrated responses to violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect.

Researchers and practitioners have made great strides in understanding and operationalizing evidence-based strategies to prevent and respond to violence against, and the abuse, exploitation, and neglect of, children. Key community-based interventions that help individuals



In times of crisis, children's safety and well-being can be compromised, and they are at higher risk of experiencing negative impacts on their physical, mental, and emotional development. During these times, the U.S. Government has prioritized child protection programming and support for targeted and specialized child-centered programming that is life-saving and essential for survival as well as longer-term recovery, resilience and healing. These interventions include the establishment and strengthening of community-based child-protection mechanisms, psychosocial support, and family tracing and reintegration for children outside family care.

identify sources of violence, address risks, and employ evidence-based solutions have proven effective. Such interventions can raise the awareness and capacity of parents, caregivers, teachers, health care workers, social workers, faith and community leaders, and children themselves.

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT'S APPROACH

- Identify children and adolescents who are especially vulnerable to violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect and provide effective, equitable, inclusive education and social-emotional learning opportunities for girls and boys to build resilience and counter the harmful effects of violence;
- Fund and support programs that prevent violence and provide care, psychosocial support, high-quality education, and protection to survivors of violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect, and efforts to prevent re-victimization;
- Equip parents and other family caregivers, teachers, social workers, and faith and community leaders to identify children who have been exposed to violence and link them to appropriate care to develop violence-free homes, schools, and communities;
- Strengthen child-welfare and child-protection systems, and support the strengthening, implementation, and enforcement of laws and policies to prevent, respond to, and protect children from all forms of violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect, including children vulnerable to online violence and exploitation, human trafficking, and the worst forms of child labor including the recruitment and use of child soldiers;

- Foster coordination and strengthen interventions across sectors, including social work, education, maternal and child health, justice, nutrition, water, sanitation, and hygiene, to identify and respond to violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect;
- Invest in national surveys and country-led data collection, including during humanitarian crises, to document the magnitude, nature, and effect of physical, emotional, and sexual violence and exploitation against children and adolescents, to inform and promote evidence-based responses from national governments and partners;
- Build national and local capacity to interpret and apply data to inform evidence-based action;
- Use a positive-youth-development approach to engage young people directly in action to promote their own safety;⁵⁵
- Recognize the gendered nature of violence and raise awareness about the effects of violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect on the development, mental health, and well-being of girls and boys and address harmful norms and practices to reduce the prevalence of such violence and abuse in all settings; and
- Increase awareness of both the value and risks of online and mobile access for children, to reduce their exposure to disturbing or potentially harmful content, and to prevent exploitation.

The Benefits of Preventing Violence, Exploitation, Abuse, and Neglect

- Violence against children and youth is preventable through broad-based, multi-sectoral approaches that support children and families, including investments in safer communities, schools, and public services;⁵⁶
- Investments in parenting programs can result in safer, more-loving, and more-nurturing homes for children;⁵⁷
- Interventions to promote early-childhood development can help to prevent and counteract experiences of violence in early childhood;
- Interventions to prevent violence for school-aged children and adolescents that are both school-based and community-based not only reduce violence at schools, but also mitigate the impact of violence at home and in the community;⁵⁸
- Programs to prevent and respond to violence that address both boys and girls, and focus on breaking the cycle of violence, are effective to reduce future sexual violence; and
- Prevention of violence against and exploitation and abuse of, children can greatly reduce costs to a nation's GDP, and free up resources for essential social and economic services, such as programming for HIV/AIDS, education, health, and community development.⁵⁹



Guiding Principles

The U.S. Government will apply the following guiding principles when funding and supporting programs internationally to support children and adolescents in adversity.



Adapt Approaches

Programming for children must adapt to a range of individual considerations and circumstances. This approach encourages interventions that benefit the family unit, as well as the individual child; recognizes the importance of human dignity; and acknowledges that human development changes across life stages and milestones. The U.S. Government will adapt programs and policies to the ages and life stages of boys and girls, with attention to disabilities (physical, sensory, intellectual, and psychosocial) to increase the effectiveness of the interventions it funds. The primary focus of the Strategy is on children between conception and age 18.* There is substantial overlap between older children (puberty to age 18), adolescents, and youth, the latter generally defined as between the ages of ten and 29. The Strategy reinforces the importance of funding and supporting interventions at various stages of the development of children and youth.

The U.S. Government will fund and support age-appropriate interventions that ensure children have meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions regarding their care, in keeping with their current and developing capacities. Young people, themselves, are key actors regarding their own safety and well-being.

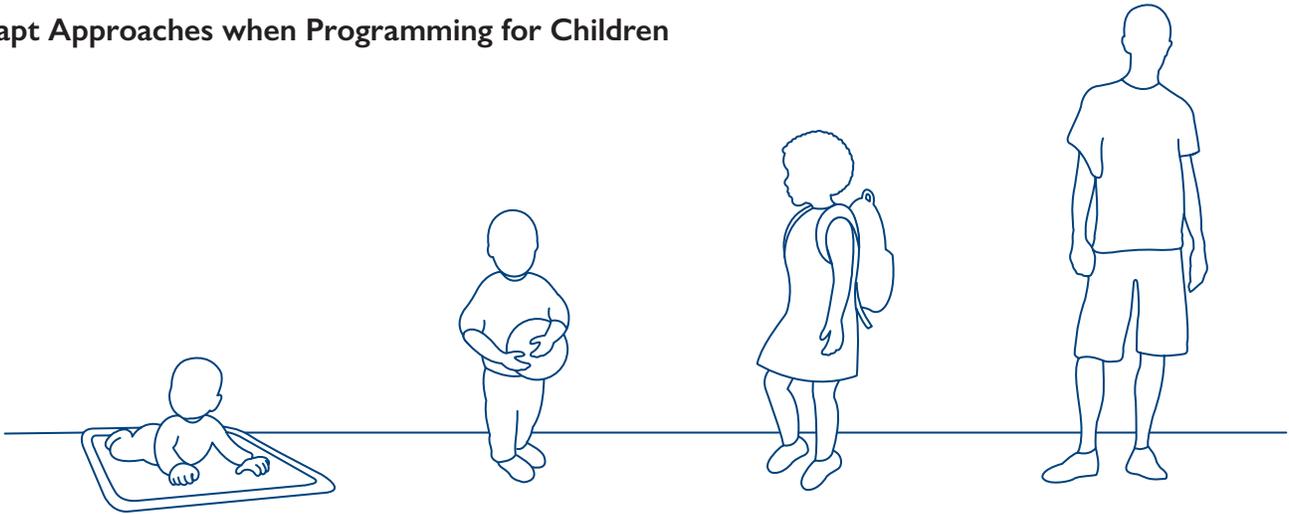
The U.S. Government will promote the principles and practices of equity, dignity, and equality between girls and boys, by addressing their different vulnerabilities, protection needs, and opportunities. Throughout its support for policy-change and programming,



Adolescence is a critical time to build on previous investments in child health, nutrition, and education, and to promote life skills and constructive behaviors. During this stage, significant physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes occur, and the brain is primed to develop critical thinking skills. Adolescence is a time of increased risk: threats include child labor and human trafficking, dropping out of school, early and forced marriage, sexual exploitation and abuse, early childbearing, and HIV/AIDS. It is also the time to help equip youth for a productive future, including civic engagement, family life, and work. Attendance and transition in primary and secondary school is especially important, as schooling is protective against a number of threats, and can help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

*Public Law 109-95 defines children as persons below the age of 18.

Adapt Approaches when Programming for Children



PROGRAMS AND POLICIES SHOULD BE TAILORED TO:



the U.S. Government will give careful attention to disability-inclusive development, and is committed to inclusive interventions, sensitive to the needs of girls and boys, that build on the strengths of individuals and communities.

Strengthen Systems



Effective, resourced social-service and child-protection systems benefit vulnerable families, newborns, children, and adolescents by improving their access to a broad range of help. Such services, delivered by both public and private institutions, include health care, nutrition, education, legal support, economic-strengthening, skills-building, and psychosocial support. The U.S. Government will assist governments and civil society in partner countries to build and strengthen their capacities to support, manage, and finance their social-service and child-protection systems fully.

National child-care and child-protection systems have multiple, interlinked parts, including policies, legislation, regulations, monitoring, and enforcement, as well as services that help prevent violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect; and identify and respond to children who are experiencing, or are at-risk of experiencing, hardships. Social-service systems often include formal, as well as informal and traditional, components and involve civil society, faith-based and community groups, family and community actors, as well as local and national governments.

The social-service workforce, composed of both professionals and paraprofessionals who focus on family-strengthening, children-protection, and developmental challenges, is essential to an effective social-services system and must be well-trained and supported to address the complexities that arise.

The U.S. Government will promote planning for, developing, funding, and supervising such a workforce by collaborating with local universities and relevant governmental and professional bodies.

To operate effectively, these components require commitment and collaboration among key stakeholders and leaders; human and financial resources; knowledge, skills, and capacities; and clear standards and procedures and the authority to enforce them. Strong social-service systems promote the best outcomes for children, adolescents, and families by preventing and responding to adversity, and are designed and maintained to withstand economic shocks and humanitarian crises. All programming, and any other action for or that involves children, must incorporate the principles and practices for safeguarding children.*



Generate and Use Evidence-Based Information

A strong evidence base is required to plan and implement effective policies and programming for children. The U.S. Government will use the best available data for decision-making, and employ research, implementation science, and programmatic learning to design evidence-based and -informed policies, programs, and practices, and adapt them according to the findings. Rigorous evaluations will measure the effectiveness of programs and highlight lessons learned, which will inform the design of new interventions and practices. The U.S. Government will fund well-designed, nationally representative studies of the prevalence of violence and abuse of children, for example.

The U.S. Government will also invest in measurement activities to capture data on the world's most-vulnerable populations; make efforts to identify and assess the characteristics of at-risk children, youth, and families; and compile data to help identify trends and the root causes of vulnerability. As children in adversity are often difficult to reach and remain uncounted, the U.S. Government will employ innovative methodologies to capture hard-to-measure data.

Scientific communities in low-resource settings often lack the funding and infrastructure needed to conduct high-quality research. The U.S. Government and its partners will build an evidence base by increasing the capacity for research and data collection in low- and middle-income countries to inform policies, programs, responses, and solutions. When possible, the U.S. Government will identify and align its supported research with existing and emerging global and in-country data collection efforts to avoid duplication, facilitate comparisons, and strengthen sustainable local capacity. The U.S. Government recognizes the importance of collecting data disaggregated by sex, age, and disability, and commits to complementing the work of other organizations, institutions, and networks.

The U.S. Government will draw on both global evidence and the information gathered through its programming to measure the impact of its foreign assistance investments.

*USAID has regulations and a policy on child-safeguarding standards that apply to both acquisition and assistance partners as well as to USAID personnel.⁶⁰



Create Synergies

The needs and risks of children, adolescents, and families are multidimensional. Addressing a single issue in isolation leads to a fragmented approach.

Children require integrated support, including through health care, nutrition, education, love, and protection.

U.S. Government Departments and Agencies will promote the best possible outcomes for children and families by fostering synergies across sectors and breaking down silos where they exist.

The U.S. Government will focus and coordinate its investments and delivery platforms to close gaps, and maximize efficiencies, across intervention areas. This approach includes leveraging existing programs to advance the Strategy's objectives, such as the U.S. Government's programs in child-protection, maternal and child health, nutrition, basic education, HIV/AIDS, household income strengthening, and humanitarian assistance.

U.S. Government Departments and Agencies commit to making a concerted effort to coordinate the implementation of their programs, and the measurement of results at the global and national levels.



Promote Strategic Partnerships

The U.S. Government will engage and mobilize a broad range of resources and stakeholders to support partners in developing countries as they build,

manage, and fund their own solutions to protect and promote care for children in adversity as part of their national Journey to Self-Reliance. The Strategy will be most effective when implemented through innovative partnerships, including with faith and community

organizations and the private sector, that increase the scale and effectiveness of the U.S. Government's efforts.

The U.S. Government is committed to working efficiently and transparently with new and existing partners, including national and local governments, the private sector, civil society, faith-based organizations, professional networks and associations, and public and private donors. U.S. Government Departments and Agencies will prioritize community-level partnerships to strengthen country- or local-level engagement and buy-in and will foster collaboration through co-creation approaches.

When providing international assistance to service-delivery programs for children, the U.S. Government will prioritize partners that adhere to best practices and use family-based approaches. Because of their positive aims and potential for improving children's lives, clear child-safeguarding policies and procedures for prevention and response, including screening, training, and monitoring personnel, as well as immediate reporting and action in response to any violations of law or program policies, must also be in place in any activity.⁶¹

Early and continuous engagement with partners will generate strong and substantive alliances, and lead to better collaboration, programming, and decision-making. The U.S. Government will consult with partners to share information, conduct analysis and research, convene them to network and identify opportunities, promote thought-leadership, align priorities, catalyze and unlock private-sector investments, co-finance programs, and seek out and incentivize market-based solutions.

Implementation Plan

The Strategy provides a basis for interagency coordination, both within the U.S. Government and with external partners, with the goal of maximizing efficiencies and return on investment. Ensuring an effective whole-of-government response requires sound mechanisms for implementation, oversight, and accountability; strong data on results for decision-making; and adequate funding.

The Strategy will guide the USAID's *Vulnerable Children* account and other U.S. Government funding streams to catalyze coordination and action across the Government and with external partners. These funds will promote the mobilization of domestic resources with partner governments so they are better equipped to raise and invest their own funds for children in adversity, a key step on the Journey to Self-Reliance.

Following the publication of *Advancing Protection and Care for Children in Adversity*, the U.S. Government Special Advisor on Children in Adversity will work with U.S. Government partners to develop an implementation plan within 180 days. The plan will detail coordination efforts, measurement plans, indicators of impact, accountability mechanisms, and targeted outcomes. The Special Advisor is uniquely positioned to report to Congress on how targeted funding can catalyze action to address the Strategy's three objectives, and support interagency consultation and collaboration. U.S. Government Departments and Agencies will use their funding and technical resources in accordance with

applicable law to address the objectives to the extent they are consistent with their own legislative mandates. The Special Advisor, with active input from U.S. Government partners, will prepare annual reports to Congress to highlight whole-of-government coordination efforts as required under *Public Law 109-95*.

The Special Advisor will work with U.S. Government partners to develop a measurement and accountability system that improves their ability to track progress in implementing the Strategy. With the goal of identifying key indicators and data sources, the process will include mapping of stakeholders, programs and activities; consultations with key U.S. Government Departments and Agencies; a desk review to identify commonly-collected data across the U.S. Government and global data sets; and a survey of current research and evaluation studies. The measurement and accountability system will adhere to the requirements for monitoring and evaluation described in *Public Law 109-95*.

Closing Statement

Advancing Protection and Care for Children in Adversity: A U.S. Government Strategy for International Assistance (2019–2023) outlines the U.S. Government's approach to investing in the world's most-vulnerable children and their families.

As described in the Strategy, the economic case for investing in children around the world is compelling; the cost of not doing so is devastating, not only to individuals and families, but also to communities and nations. Enabling children to reach their full potential will require common understanding, shared commitment, united action, and love.

The U.S. Government's commitment to the dignity and well-being of children and their families around the world has three objectives and five guiding principles for implementation. The Strategy is meant to guide actions both within the U.S. Government Departments and Agencies and between the United States and its partners worldwide. It is also broadly relevant to action to promote the development, care, and protection of children everywhere and provides a basis for inter-governmental and inter-organizational collaboration.



A young mother and child from Lesotho receive life-saving treatment in a remote mountain health clinic.

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