

1 Letter to the Editor

2 **UNICEF and Global Leadership for Disability-Inclusion in Early Childhood**

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4 We, the members of the Global Research on Developmental Disabilities Collaborators (GRDDC)—
5 a diverse, cross-cultural, and inclusive consortium of professionals, carers, and parents with and
6 without lived experience of disabilities—are gratified by the launch of the UNICEF Disability
7 Inclusion Policy and Strategy 2022–30.¹ This landmark report covers several bold and cross-cutting
8 commitments to partner with stakeholders, mobilise financial and technical resources, and provide
9 overall leadership, coordination, and accountability on disability inclusion in global health..
10 Although UNICEF has also pledged to establish a Global Research Agenda for children with
11 disabilities to generate, communicate, and use new research to guide investment in effective
12 interventions for children with disabilities, it is equally important to harness available evidence to
13 accelerate the realisation of existing global commitment on early childhood development for
14 inclusive education under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.² Education is
15 crucial for the lifelong wellbeing, independent living, and self-fulfilment of children with
16 disabilities, which is why achieving school readiness for inclusive and equitable education is at the
17 core of the global agenda on early childhood development for children younger than 5 years with
18 disabilities (SDG 4.2).

19 While it is practically impossible to tackle all challenges, UNICEF’s new report provides an
20 opportunity to address the conspicuous omission of school readiness in the prior Strategic Plan
21 2022–25.³ The well established programme on early childhood development for school readiness
22 under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in the USA offers valuable insights for
23 consideration and adaptation. As exemplified by this programme, a robust and sustainable funding
24 scheme that requires and supports governments to allocate dedicated funds for specific disability-
25 inclusive programming for children with disabilities should be prioritised. Realistic and measurable
26 benchmarks with indicators for monitoring progress both globally and nationally are also essential.
27 For example, the proportion of children younger than 5 years who receive screening and
28 intervention services in each country can be tracked to complement the existing SDG indicator on
29 the participation rate in organised learning, 1 year before the official primary school entry age.

30 Lastly, the concept of inclusive early childhood development that portrays inclusion on paper
31 without tangible benefits to children with disabilities and their families is unacceptable. Although
32 the principles of responsive parenting and adequate nutrition are essential for children with
33 disabilities, promoting the UNICEF-sponsored Nurturing Care Framework as the main global
34 programme on early childhood development for all children in low-income and middle-income
35 countries raises serious ethical, scientific, and operational concerns.^{4,5} As the Disability Inclusion
36 Policy and Strategy 2022–30 rightly noted, inclusion is not about inserting or annexing people with

37 disabilities into existing structures and programmes, but about transforming health, educational, and
38 social systems to be inclusive of everyone.¹ Moreover, inclusion does not guarantee priority
39 consideration.

40 We welcome this long-awaited initiative and urge UNICEF to rapidly operationalise the provisions
41 of SDG 4.2 on disability focused early childhood development if the global commitment on
42 inclusive education is to be realised by 2030.

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