

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LANCET SERIES ON THE NEXT 1000 DAYS?



DR. DAVID PHILPOTT
RESEARCH ASSOCIATE
ATKINSON CENTRE

The release of new research on the importance of the early years is hardly news. A plethora of evidence has been established to mould public policy and inform early interventions to optimize the developmental outcomes of young children. The early years have been well established as a diverse area of scholarship in disciplines ranging from education, health, public policy, recreation and economics. Why, then, would a series of articles recently published in The Lancet on early child development stand out? Quite simply, the messenger.

The Lancet is perhaps the most prestigious health journal globally. In circulation since 1823, it has an exceptionally strong reputation for high research standards, academic rigour, and editorial requirements. In the world of academic inquiry, certainly within health circles, it enjoys strong readership and respect. A series of articles on early childhood development and the next 1000 days (2.5 – 5 years of age) in a child's development earns the instant attention of an influential audience, many of whom might be new to the conversation.

The importance of the first 1000 days of a child's life and the compelling need for nurturance, nutrition and stimulation to ensure healthy outcomes is well established. When there is variance in this early care, there is variance in the developmental outcomes, often across the lifespan. In the new Lancet series, researchers focused on the next 1000 days (2.5 – 5 years). Two papers were released, the first describing why this developmental period matters, identifying the environments of care, risks, and protective factors that shape children's development. The second paper focuses on the implications of inaction during those years. Both are garnering significant attention.

The study was global in scope, drawing on varied and diverse sources of data, including PISA scores from 79 middle to upper-income countries, "to capture the multidimensionality of development in the next 1000 days and to understand the cumulative and continuous nature of this development from a life-course perspective". The results are compelling and present strong evidence that this time frame is as important as the first 1000 days. The authors identify it as an opportunity to recalibrate against earlier losses and capitalize upon developmental gains. Globally, numerous environmental risks persist for children in alarming numbers. During these years protections that shape developmental outcomes expand beyond the home environment to the community, unearthing the compensatory nature of quality early learning programs.

However, access to early learning varies, with low-income countries having little and Canada lagging behind many high-income countries. They conclude that children with access to early learning and responsive care are at least two years ahead in their overall development, and this boost does not fade. They posit that the next 1000 days are so critical to optimizing outcomes that the benefits of providing even one year of ECE to all children are between 8 -19 times larger than the cost. Inaction costs high-income countries 0.7% of their Gross Domestic Product and low-income countries 6.8%. Early childhood education is central to prevention and intervention globally.

This research validates what advocates of early child education have been saying for years. It reflects numerous longitudinal studies on the lasting academic, social, behavioural and economic impact that quality early learning has on children. We know that early learning is a wise financial investment and more than pays for itself. What is new is the audience this message is now reaching and the growing intolerance of inaction.