

## Action Sheet

OCTOBER 2019

### ACTION

Our action this month will be to write a letter to the editor that focuses on asking your U.S. Representative to co-sponsor the early childhood development legislation being introduced by Representatives Joaquin Castro (D-TX-20) and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA-01). The bill will mandate that Early Childhood Development interventions be integrated into the U.S. government's international programs focused on young children and their families; doing this will ensure our foreign aid programs will be as effective as possible in helping young children thrive.

### LASER TALK

When we invest in our values, we save lives. We value children—since 1990, U.S. international aid has saved nearly 100 million children. We value mothers—in that same time frame, we've seen maternal mortality rates drop 44 percent worldwide. But we can't stop there.

Children need to do more than survive; they need to thrive. That's why investing in Early Childhood Development, or ECD, is so important. Equipping caregivers with age-appropriate techniques—singing, reading, playing with colorful objects—will stimulate young minds and ensure a better future. It only costs 50 cents per child per year. And we know it works: the benefits of ECD programming are worth six times their cost. But the U.S. government doesn't integrate ECD into international programs for children. Our Catholic faith compels us to care for life from conception to natural death. That means giving each child a strong foundation from which to reach his or her God-given potential.

Will you join Reps. Castro (TX-20) and Fitzpatrick (PA-01) in cosponsoring legislation directing the administration to integrate Early Childhood Development activities across international child-focused programs, thereby improving the lives of vulnerable children?

### BACKGROUND

At Catholic Relief Services, we integrate Early Childhood Development (ECD) into both our long-term development and emergency programs using private resources. When working with migrant and refugee children and their families overseas, CRS endeavors to provide spaces where children can be safe playing, learning, making friends and just being children. The latest estimates show that there are 36.1 million children who are refugees and 17 million internally displaced children worldwide—and these numbers are on the rise.

Being uprooted from home as a young child can have significant negative repercussions on a child's overall development. For example, the chaos and fear associated with life on the move can directly disrupt a child's brain development given that when a child feels unsafe, his or her brain will spend more time focusing on survival, rather than on new areas of growth and exploration. Children experiencing toxic stress will grow smaller brains with fewer neural connections than children who are not traumatized; they may experience speech or reading delays, and later suffer depression, anxiety and behavioral issues. In addition, migrants often have a lack of adequate nutrient intake and limited access to health care. This can be particularly devastating if children experience these elements during key developmental windows, such as the first years of life. Studies

have found that forced migration during early childhood was significantly associated with poor cognitive well-being later in life.

Our work at Catholic Relief Services focuses on providing family support and learning activities for migrant and refugee children to mitigate the impact of such shocks. Playing and interacting with caregivers in a nurturing way, along with good nutrition, clean water and sanitation, health services and parental support are all components of the ECD that Catholic Relief Services provides to migrant and refugee children. In this way, CRS works to build children's resilience and promote their healing, so that they may achieve their God-given potential. For traumatized children, specialized interventions provided as early as possible are necessary to target the cause of the stress and protect them from its consequences. The United States should integrate ECD into its international humanitarian programs supporting young migrant children and their families.

### TAKE ACTION: Writing a Letter to the Editor

#### 1. Find the local newspaper you will write to.

- To learn what is required for letters to the editor, Google the following: "(Name of the paper) letters to the editor guidelines." Note the number of words they allow and how a letter is submitted.
  - Do you submit it on the newspaper's website or do they provide an email address to use?

#### 2. Think about the placement of the piece.

If you are writing a letter to a larger newspaper, find an article or editorial that provides a good angle for discussing Early Childhood Development (e.g. coverage on refugee camps, global poverty).

- *Example of approach for larger publication: "I read with interest the article on last evening's presidential debates. One subject that was missing from the discussion was needed action on ending global poverty...."*

If you are writing a smaller local paper, you don't have to reference an article, just write in a way that makes it clear why local readers would care about this issue.

- *Example of approach for smaller publication: "We know how important it is to make sure children get the stimulation they need in their first 1,000 days of life: reading, singing, and playing with colorful objects. But did you know the difference these same Early Childhood Development activities can make in the lives of the world's most vulnerable children?"*

**3. Research:** Read a few letters to the editor in the newspaper you are targeting to see how they are started and the general tone.

**4. Write your letter:** Use the guidelines the newspaper has provided and the information included in this Action Sheet. Share what values or experiences move you to work to support the world's most vulnerable children and have a member of your chapter provide some edits for your letter.

**5. Make sure to include the ask:** Urge readers to contact their U.S. Representative to ask them to co-sponsor and champion the ECD legislation being introduced by Reps. Castro (D-TX) and Fitzpatrick (R-PA). If your member of Congress is already a co-sponsor, thank them and urge them to work to build more support in Congress.

**6. Report back:** If your letter is published, let us know by contacting your CRS Community Engagement Manager. If it's not published, consider sending it to another newspaper.

**7. Celebrate!** Share it on social media. Send it to your members of Congress!