WHAT DO CHILDREN NEED IN ORDER TO DEVELOP PROPERLY?

Scientific evidence shows that the quality of care during their early years has a significant effect on their life-long development and therefore recommends that priority should be given to public policies for this group.

Quality care requires parenting that respects the needs and characteristics of each child, encouraging interactions to promote their development in a loving and stimulating atmosphere. This means that parents and other caregivers must be sensitive to the needs of children, meet them effectively and provide stability to foster solid affective ties over time.

None of this is possible unless care services support parents and help them to play their role. Too often families are exposed to multiple stressors including money, work and the environment. In addition, social vulnerability in neighbourhoods and communities is very likely to result in negligent or violent behaviour in families.

For these reasons, the System of Comprehensive Protection for Childhood (Chile Grows with You) was created ten years ago, during the first mandate of President Michelle Bachelet.

This has become one of the most successful public policies of recent decades in Chile, promoting the fundamental goal of reducing inherited inequalities, from the cradle. The focus is therefore on early childhood development for all children regardless of social and economic status.

One of the main advantages of Chile Growing with You is that its mission is to monitor, protect and fully support all children and their families covered by the public health system, through actions and services of a universal character, also providing special support for the more vulnerable.

The approach adopted is one of the most modern used today, since it assumes that child development is affected by biological, physical, psychological and social factors, family and environment. Public policy must therefore take into account all these aspects and have an intersectoral approach.

To give an idea of the huge impact produced in one decade by this system of comprehensive protection of children, it should be noted that it has provided prenatal check-ups to almost two million pregnant women. In addition, over 1,650,000 newborn babies received care under the system. To put this in context: Chile has almost 17.4 million inhabitants.
Chile Grows with You represents a paradigm shift in early childhood care, for the following reasons: (i) its comprehensive approach to all factors affecting children’s development; (ii) its focus on bonding as a key variable for healthy, safe and empowering growth; and (iii) its involvement of the whole family in the children’s development, with a strong emphasis on stimulation and respectful parenting.

Thanks to this modern approach, its success and the paradigm shift on which it is based, this public policy has been emulated by other Latin American and Caribbean countries that have created and implemented important programmes and strategies for early childhood development.

One example is Canelones Grows with You. This started as an experiment in Uruguay’s Canelones province and was then expanded to cover the whole country under the Uruguay Grows with You system.

What lessons can be learnt from the past ten years of Chile Grows with You?

Firstly, child development is multidimensional and requires the creation of a series of mechanisms and conditions for children to develop skills in their different environments and spaces (personal, family, community and school).

Secondly, actions must be carefully timed and appropriate for the particular needs of each child.

Thirdly, the timely and appropriate provision of services requires intersectoral management, involving and organizing the various participating public agencies. Intersectoral policies allow personalized monitoring of life cycles, optimization of resources and simultaneous impact on related factors.

Lastly – and this is essential – a public policy of this nature must be a genuine State policy, because it not only ensures the comprehensive development of each child covered by the system but also builds a fairer and more equitable country with better human capital. And nobody can detract from this effort.

At this time, we are gradually expanding Chile Grows with You to cover children in the first cycle of basic education, meaning children up to eight or nine years of age.

The ethical conviction of our Government and what is guiding us in the design and implementation of this and other social policies, is that children should be able to go as far in life as their abilities allow and should not be limited by their social and economic origin.

This is a basic prerequisite for the construction of an inclusive society and for the strengthening of a democracy guaranteeing social rights.