



NEXT Foundation & Foundation North

A Strategic Review of Early
Years Investment

July 2015

This Review

The economic cost to the New Zealand economy of poor child outcomes is 3% of GDP (approximately \$6 billion), through increased health care, welfare, remedial education, crime and justice and lower productivity.¹ This type of issue may be described as a ‘wicked problem’² – one with many etiological drivers and thus requiring a multi-layered response.³ Solutions to this wicked problem require long-term action plans that transcend policy cycles and tackle issues before they arise or worsen. In this respect, philanthropy has a vital role to play.

This report has three parts, and has been prepared for NEXT Foundation and Foundation North, who share an interest in effective philanthropic investment in the early years. The reports have been collated to:

- Identify effective early years interventions based on national and international evidence
- Provide principles and priorities for consideration to invest in social impact through strategic philanthropy in New Zealand
- Describe an ecosystem of early years interventions being provided that demonstrate evidence of success or promise as emerging investment opportunities for philanthropic funders to consider
- Summarise current New Zealand policy and government-led investment
- Outline an appendix summarising current policies and programmes in New Zealand. The appendix also includes suggestions for philanthropic action aligned with the New Zealand Productivity Commission recommendations for a well functioning social services system and additional information about useful early years resources.

‘Not all families in adverse circumstances will have negative outcomes. Children, adults and families develop resilience in the face of adversity when protective factors outweigh the risk factors.’⁴ In the context of this report, it is therefore important to consider the contribution that philanthropy might make to the development of a system that is responsive to vulnerability and ensures that families have access to the ‘social capital and social integration needed to achieve positive outcomes.’⁵ Dobbs (2015) writes that addressing structural risk factors – such as housing quality or the ‘accessibility and acceptability of local services’ – may contribute as much to child’s wellbeing as family-level risk assessment and intervention.⁶

This review is written through a strengths-based lens, and considers how interventions funded through philanthropy might address structural risk factors and provide opportunities for children and families to develop social capital, with which they are able to thrive, achieve, belong and participate.



Introduction

‘The children of today are also the parents, workers, business leaders and community leaders of tomorrow. To ensure future economic and social success, it is important that children are healthy, well nurtured and well educated so that they are well equipped to assume these future roles. Investment in children can reduce the emergence of problems that have high social and fiscal costs.’⁷

The first five years of a child’s life are the stepping-stones to future socio-economic success and wellbeing. From conception to infancy and school, children who are nurtured, safe and well housed are more likely to have their developmental, social, physical, emotional and cultural needs met and be supported on their pathway towards becoming resilient and healthy adults.

While it can be argued that all children are vulnerable in their early years, we know that babies and children from families with complex needs face numerous barriers to this success pathway. Evidence shows that the earlier these barriers can be removed or overcome, the greater the long-term outcomes will be for a vulnerable child. The highest social return on investment is achieved through early intervention, supporting parents through pre-natal programmes and supporting children 0-3 years old (see Figure 1).

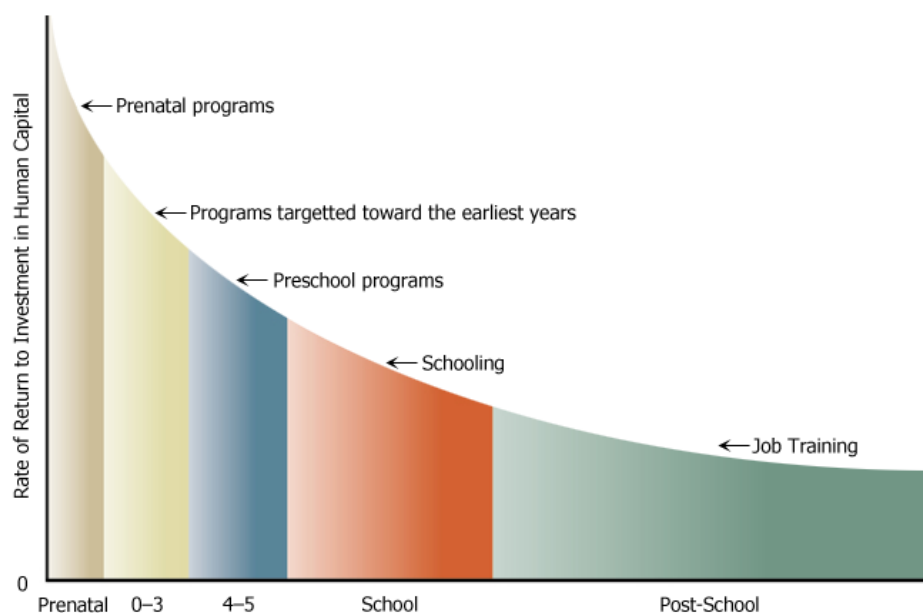


Figure 1. The Heckman Curve⁸ (Source: Heckman, 2008)

Children most at risk in New Zealand

Data published by the OECD shows that children in New Zealand are struggling behind those from other countries, and that action is badly needed to improve outcomes for children. Comparative data across 30 OECD countries (from 2009) shows that New Zealand does poorly across many measured dimensions of wellbeing, ranking:

- 29th out of 30 for child health and safety (indicators include birth weight, infant mortality, vaccination rates and suicide rates)
- 24th for child risk behaviours (indicators include smoking, alcohol and teenage births)
- 21st for material wellbeing (indicators include disposable income, household deprivation and educational deprivation).⁹

The *NZ General Social Survey (2010)* identifies 11 risk factors that correlate with poor outcomes for children. These risk factors include housing, health, economic and social indicators and describe family and community vulnerabilities that require a protective response. Households where children are at highest risk are categorised as experiencing five or more of these risk factors. The following households, although not at-risk by definition, are considered to be over-represented in the high-risk category:

- Large households of 6+ people (19% of high-risk households)
- Sole-parent-only households, i.e. households with no additional adults (47%)
- Māori (43%), despite making up only 15% of the population
- Households from the lowest income quintile (59%)
- Mothers who become parents under the age of 20 (20%)
- Households with no qualifications (30%)¹⁰

Exposure to multiple risk factors for vulnerability at any one point increases the likelihood that children will experience poor health outcomes during their first 1,000 days of their development.¹¹ This knowledge provides the basis for action to be taken early in a child's life to reduce these known risk factors of poor health and social outcomes.



Effective Early Years Intervention

Early intervention approaches support current and future generations

Early intervention approaches have been recognised internationally, both for supporting positive outcomes for vulnerable families now, and for preventing the intergenerational repetition of poor outcomes in the future.¹² New Zealand has problems in this area and a significant amount of effort across sectors and communities is being made to break cycles of violence and poverty where it is entrenched.

Community-based early intervention approaches have significant promise

Community interventions during the early years can be more preventative, reaching families before problems become serious. Key factors in the success of community-based programmes are that they are developed from the ground-up in collaboration with service users and have the ability to engage vulnerable families by providing services that are easily accessible. They can be culturally led and responsive and build resilience by connecting families to local networks of support (such as Iwi, NGOs and service providers). Such connections can be sustained over time.¹³ Put simply – it takes a village, not a government department, to raise a child.

Supporting families to thrive

Early experiences are vital

Healthy child development is consistently reported in literature as being compromised by a range of pre- and post-birth factors that include maternal mental health and health behaviours during pregnancy (including substance abuse), financial stress, housing quality and stability, parental behaviour and criminality, and exposure to family violence.¹⁴ These factors play a role in healthy early brain development, which ‘sets the trajectory for a child’s health, learning and behaviour for life.’¹⁵

Good nutrition in the first 1,000 days is critical

The ‘first 1,000 days’ has been identified as being critical to a person’s lifelong health and cognitive development. In identifying this window from the start of pregnancy to a child’s second birthday, *The Lancet* medical journal called for prioritisation of nutrition programmes, better integration of nutrition and health programmes and stronger cross-sector responses. It is estimated that every \$1 spent on improving early years nutrition can have as much as a \$138 return on investment, depending on the country.¹⁶

Risk can be balanced by developing resilience

Even in the presence of pre- and post-birth risk factors, children can be supported to thrive by balancing the scales with other protective and preventive factors¹⁷, including parent-child attachment, parents' knowledge of child development, family cohesion and coping strategies, cultural identity and social capital. Research shows that 'protective factors are mutually reinforcing; that the presence of each encourages and enables the development of others.'¹⁸ For example, a study by the Auckland City Mission of 100 Families showed that families with low incomes, poor housing and low education levels often manage to cope until unexpected debt or illness occurs, tipping the family into vulnerability. Such knowledge tells us that investing in financial and health literacy programmes could be great examples of developing resiliency factors, so that people know when it is critical to seek help and health providers and financial organisations know when it is critical to provide support.

The impact of violence in the home must be addressed

Children who are exposed to violence are more likely to experience a range of long-lasting adverse consequences. Evidence shows that child abuse and exposure to other forms of violence in the home, such as intimate partner violence, can have an impact on the child's developing brain as well as their emotional and physical wellbeing. The effects to brain development can cause issues such as: a predisposition for internalising emotion and stress, linked to anxiety and depression in adolescence; challenges interpreting visual and verbal cues, making it difficult for children to navigate social situations and learning environments; and developmental delays that affect milestones such as language progression.¹⁹

A report by UNICEF suggests that interventions for children who have been exposed to violence in the home should firstly seek to address and stop the violence whilst also facilitating access to a caring, responsive relationship with a safe, dependable adult who has the necessary skills to meet the needs of the child – whether these are the parenting skills of a family member or the professional skills of an assigned support worker.²⁰ This speaks to the need for a multi-level response for children exposed to domestic violence; one that targets violence prevention to reduce risks whilst also supporting families (particularly mother and child) to rebuild safe and nurturing relationships. Interventions should 'focus on building resilience, strengthening relationships, creating safe environments, helping children cope with loss, and managing challenging behaviours... In order to break the intergenerational transmission of violence, we need a two-generational approach directed at adults affected and their young children.'²¹

In NZ, the number of ethnic women seeking family violence intervention is rapidly growing. Culturally and linguistically appropriate services are vital to addressing this issue.²² Research recommends investment into interpreters, cultural training and community-level interventions to support quality service provision.²³ For Māori, the 'causes of family violence are acknowledged as complex and as sourced from both historical and contemporary factors... The complexity of the explanations demands complexity from the solutions if Māori family violence is to be successfully addressed...Initiatives aimed at the prevention of Māori family violence need to incorporate Māori values and concepts, recognise and provide for the diverse and specific needs of whānau, hapū and iwi and build the capacity of whānau, hapū and iwi to resolve family violence issues within their own communities.'²⁴

A nurturing home environment determines positive outcomes

The 'home environment remains critical in facilitating positive development, and relationship quality is a key factor determining outcomes.'²⁵ There is clear evidence that speaks to the effectiveness of interventions that promote emotional attachment. Long-lasting attachment experiences have 'a positive effect on self-esteem, independence, the ability to make relationships, empathy, compassion, and resiliency.'²⁶ This is especially important for our most vulnerable children – those with disabilities, those with parents/caregivers who have complex health and social needs and those living where domestic violence has compromised the safety of the home environment.

Home-visit parenting and attachment programmes can be highly effective

The most effective outcomes are achieved where home-visit parenting programmes are aimed at younger, first-time parents and include integrated, rather than separate, social support components - such as networking with other parents.²⁷ Home-based interventions that develop healthy attachment between mother and child and, more broadly, positive interaction with parents, contribute to a child's psychological development and mental health.²⁸

Overworking parents in poverty need contact with children at home

Auckland City Mission's Family 100 research outlines the family pressures experienced by working families in poverty, 'parents commonly speak of the difficulties they experience when trying to balance work with childcare responsibilities...Overworking keeps parents out of the home for extended periods, deprived of contact with their families and [putting] pressure on relationships.'²⁹ The Human Early Learning Partnership at the University of British Columbia has labelled the experiences of these families as 'Generation Squeeze'³⁰; families are 'squeezed' for income due to the cost of living and childcare, and squeezed for time with their children due to working up to 80-hours a week. We know we have a growing number of children of the 'working poor' in New Zealand, but there are few programmes and services available that recognise the limited availability of parents because of their job constraints. Employers have an important role to play in ensuring parents are able to support their children emotionally, culturally and socially, as well as financially.

Supporting children to achieve

Extended engagement with early education is most effective

High quality early childhood education is essential to educational achievement later in life and can mitigate the effects of poverty and risk for children.³¹ Evidence suggests that engagement with early childhood education, starting early, can support pre-reading skills, numeracy concepts and non-verbal reasoning. Extended attendance (1 year or more), and starting early (by at least 3 years old) is more likely to have an impact than shorter durations starting later, which on average produce much lower

gains.³² The positive impact of early childhood education can also be seen to extend to the wider family, acting as a gateway to social and other supports for parents.

Social and emotional learning are as important as literacy development

Studies of prevention and early intervention initiatives in Ireland over a 10-year period suggest that programmes aimed at improving social and emotional learning supported children to become more inclusive and tolerant of others. They developed a greater sense of belonging and cultural awareness and developed effective conflict resolution skills. The research found that facilitating a 'love of learning' is as important as focusing on the specific skills of literacy and numeracy.³³

Initiatives that involve family and child together, work

Programmes that support families and children together, or 'two-generation' approaches, have been in use since the 1990's. Latest developments in this field – or 'two-generation 2.0' approaches – have an explicit focus on promoting the human capital of parents and their children. There is a focus on supporting higher education for parents, and quality early education for children. Researchers argue that better-educated parents generally have children who are themselves 'better educated, healthier, wealthier, and better off in almost every way...although the exact mechanisms for such outcomes are still largely unknown [and] many of the second-wave programmes are still in the pilot stage.'³⁴

Ensuring children belong and participate

Child-friendly environments can help children to participate and belong

The wider community that exists around a child has the potential to have as large an influence on their wellbeing and success as their home environment. The nature of a child's community affects their opportunity to access informal learning environments and to participate in sporting and cultural activities. In this regard, community-wide and even citywide approaches to early intervention can be successful in creating environments that support children to flourish. In 2011, the city of Leeds (UK) established a vision to become the 'best city for children' by 2030, joining UNICEF's *Child Friendly Cities*³⁵ movement. The city's vision is that all children have a holistic experience of belonging to a place that is 'theirs' and that supports them to thrive, participate and achieve. Under the city's guiding principles, children in Leeds will:

- Be safe from harm
- Achieve at all levels of learning and have skills for life
- Choose healthy lifestyles
- Have fun growing up
- Have places to go, play and have fun
- Be active citizens who feel that they have voice and influence.³⁶

It is surprising that in New Zealand – with so many opportunities to enjoy the outdoors – there are many children who are prevented from doing so because of a wide range of actual or perceived barriers.

Recognising the role of culture in shaping identity, belonging and resilience is important

Research explores the role that culture takes in shaping the context in which a child develops. This cultural context may include factors such as parenting beliefs, the role of the wider family³⁷, the importance of spiritual wellbeing and interplay of language and learning. Cultural identity has been found to strengthen resilience and moderate risks that may exist in a child's ecological context.³⁸ In a paper written about identity, belonging and educational transitions, Ritchie and Rau (2010) write that 'if we are able to honour, respect and affirm the identities of Māori children (and, by extension, those of children of other cultures)... this affirmation of their 'being-ness', will serve as an anchor, a source of strength and resilience assisting them through daily transitions between home and [other environments].'³⁹

Any investment in early years interventions in New Zealand must also recognise the realities of the rapidly changing demographics of our population. Census 2013 results reported Asian as New Zealand's third largest ethnic group (11.8%), following NZ European (74%) and Maori (14.9%). Pacific Peoples were 7.4% and the Middle East/Latin American/African (MELAA) group 1.2%. There are now 25.2% of the NZ population who were born overseas and the majority reported their country of origin as Asia. These rapid demographic changes present a challenge for existing early years investments and new thinking. Not only do community organisations and government agencies need to ensure their services are capable of delivering effectively to all New Zealanders, there is also a need to build meaningful relationships and community engagement with Asian communities so they have access to opportunities and services they need to ensure their children are safe and well-nurtured. We suggest that building an inclusive future for all New Zealanders should be a guiding principle of all funders' strategies for early years investment.



Effective Early Years Philanthropy

Philanthropy has an important role to play in supporting early intervention and achieving lasting outcomes for children and families. Increasingly, philanthropic organisations in New Zealand are mirroring – and in many cases leading – best practice international models of giving. More kiwi foundations are using evidence to inform decision-making, developing clear theories of change and testing high-engagement modes of investment to increase impact. This review considers how such philanthropic practices have created a promising evidence base for early years investment.

Proven approaches

Investing in two-generation 2.0 programmes

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation in the U.S is one of many philanthropic foundations globally that has championed the evolving two-generation approach. The Foundation has invested \$18m since 1993 in support of a two-generation education programme called *AVANCE*. This is a nine-month programme that simultaneously provides high quality, culturally and developmentally appropriate early learning for children 0-3 years old, alongside development training for parents, including classes in finance, parenting and community resource awareness. Researchers have identified that 93% of *AVANCE* children are ready to enter school, cited a 216% increase in the number of mothers who attained tertiary qualifications and a demonstrated a 127% increase in employment amongst parents.⁴⁰

Funding clustered, two-generation services

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Centers for Working Families* programme provides support for low-income working families in the form of job coaching, occupational skills training, access to financial products, financial literacy support and counselling. Critically, these services are integrated as clients who receive bundled services are 3-4 times more likely to achieve a major economic outcome.⁴¹ Whilst parents are supported out of poverty, children have access to high-quality early learning on-site. As a result, 63% of children were reading on or above grade-level (6% before the learning centre opened) and the level of up-to-date immunisations rose to 97%.⁴²



Promising early years practice

Cultural responsiveness of practice models and interventions

Achieving sustainable changes for individuals, families and communities that promote children's social and emotional wellbeing is more likely when initiatives meet needs within people's own cultural frameworks.⁴³ Drawing upon the cultural values and practices of families and communities provides them with a familiar framing and a foundation upon which they can make changes. It is increasingly recognised that 'bottom-up' solutions that connect with people and their self-identified needs and priorities are more likely to be successful than 'top-down' initiatives that are imported into communities by funders.^{44 45}

Drawing on the experience and resilience of communities – both in design and practice

Family by Family is a social venture in Adelaide and Sydney established by The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TASCI) to 'enable more families to thrive'. It was initially developed in response to state government targets to reduce the number of families needing child protection intervention.⁴⁶ The programme was co-designed by TASCI and local parents, and uses a peer-to-peer model of family support that builds community capability and strengthens connections. *Family by Family* 'draws on the experience and resilience within communities – we find and train families who have been through tough times, match them with families who want things to change, and coach the families to grow and change together.'⁴⁷

Family by Family is now seen to occupy 'a new kind of intervention space: one that blends the behaviour change focus of professional services with the informality and universality of community development.'⁴⁸ The programme has shown a cost-benefit ration of 1:7 and after piloting is now seen as a scalable solution.

Generational shift through a place-based pipeline of family programmes

The Harlem Children's Zone is a place-based approach to addressing intergenerational poverty. Its aim to engaged an entire neighbourhood – creating a new community fabric and building a pipeline of integrated support from conception to college graduation and beyond. Beginning as a one-block community pilot in the 1990s, the programme grew through a 10-year strategic plan in 2000 and today over 70% of the children living in the zone are engaged in programmes. Research shows that 100% of children graduating from the Children's Zone pre-school programme test as being school-ready. The model was subsequently picked up by the Obama administration and scaled to 48 new communities through \$200m of government funding.⁴⁹



Philanthropic collaboration to understand the impact of parental engagement

In the UK, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, The Sutton Trust and the University of Oxford are working together through the launch of the *Parental Engagement Fund*. The fund is supporting six non-profit organisations over three years, each delivering programmes that support the cognitive learning of disadvantaged children aged 2-6 by engaging parents. The focus is on learning and evaluation to grow organisational capability and to better understand the ingredients that make parental engagement interventions effective. In this regard, the University of Oxford will ‘walk alongside’ the organisations as a ‘critical friend’.⁵⁰

Digital learning narrows the educational achievement gap

In 2011, ASB Community Trust (now Foundation North) invested \$1.3million into the *Manaiakalani Programme*. A 3-year grant was made through the Trust’s *Māori and Pacific Education Initiative* – a model of high-trust, high-engagement funding that was then relatively untried in New Zealand. Delivered across a cluster of decile 1 schools in Tamaki, *Manaiakalani* is a new model of education that focuses on digital literacy, igniting a passion for learning and closing the educational achievement gap experienced by low decile students in Tamaki.⁵¹ Through the programme, students become engaged lifelong learners, more connected to the global community, future-focused and at more comfortable in our increasingly digital world.⁵² Data suggests that, on average, students are reaching curriculum levels 1-2 above other local students from outside of the *Manaiakalani* cluster.⁵³

To be successful, the *Manaiakalani* model required a new pedagogy – new and innovative teaching methods and a whānau engagement. The latter aspect is critical, ensuring that learning can continue outside of the classroom, transferring to the home environment and supporting the wider family to navigate the ‘digital divide’.⁵⁴ The programme is now internationally recognised. Within the context of early years intervention, this type of practice has great possibilities and is now being pursued by NEXT Foundation, alongside Foundation North.

Redefining partnership: science-policy-philanthropy-practitioner collaboration

In 2011, the Center for Child Development at Harvard University launched the *Frontiers for Innovation Initiative*. This initiative brings together ‘more than 400 researchers, practitioners, policymakers, philanthropists, and other experts to create new, science-based strategies to help vulnerable young children and their families.’⁵⁵ This multi-sector partnership emphasizes innovation, rapid discovery, fast testing and evaluation – using new science about brain development and designing new programme concepts to support early years outcomes.

The *Frontiers for Innovation Initiative*’s theory of change hinges on a need to build the capabilities of the adults in a child’s life – from parents, to extended family and service providers – in order to form an environment of healthy relationships around a child to support their lifelong learning and healthy development.⁵⁶ In Washington State, this theory of change is being piloted through four programmes that are demonstrating promising results.

Early Years Philanthropy in NZ: Principles to Consider

‘What’s required in complex situations is the ability to take nuanced steps toward solutions, guided by a dynamic compass without relying on a static map.’⁵⁷

Follow key principles for effective early years intervention:

1. Focus investment on pre-birth and the first three years.
2. Support healthy brain development by investing in maternal health and wellbeing, good nutrition in the first 1,000 days.
3. Tackle domestic violence to create stress-free, nurturing home environments for the child.
4. Build a network of healthy support around a child by investing in parents and family.
5. Invest in programmes that work with children and families in environments that engage – including the home.
6. Invest in programmes that support key life transitions for both parent and child.
7. Invest in children’s social and emotional learning, as well as their access to early childhood education.
8. Ensure programmes are culturally responsive.
9. Invest in by-Maori-for-Maori and by-Pasifika-for-Pasifika programmes and interventions that include cultural competency and safety in their design.
10. Try new things that have promising evidence of effectiveness overseas but have not been tried in New Zealand.
11. Support programmes that encourage children to develop skills that build resilience and connections with places and people.
12. Support play and creativity for children, recognizing the value of play for learning, social development and emotional wellbeing.



Address the greatest needs, for the greatest impact

Giving2Kids⁵⁸ is a guide for philanthropic and Iwi organisations and businesses established by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner. It recommends that funding is prioritised towards children that face two or more of the greatest risk factors – children in sole parent families, children in severe and persistent poverty and Māori and Pasifika children (see figure 2).

Other priority groups for philanthropic giving include expectant or new parents, parents of developmentally-challenged children, children of prisoners, mothers experiencing depression and families with inadequate housing.⁵⁹

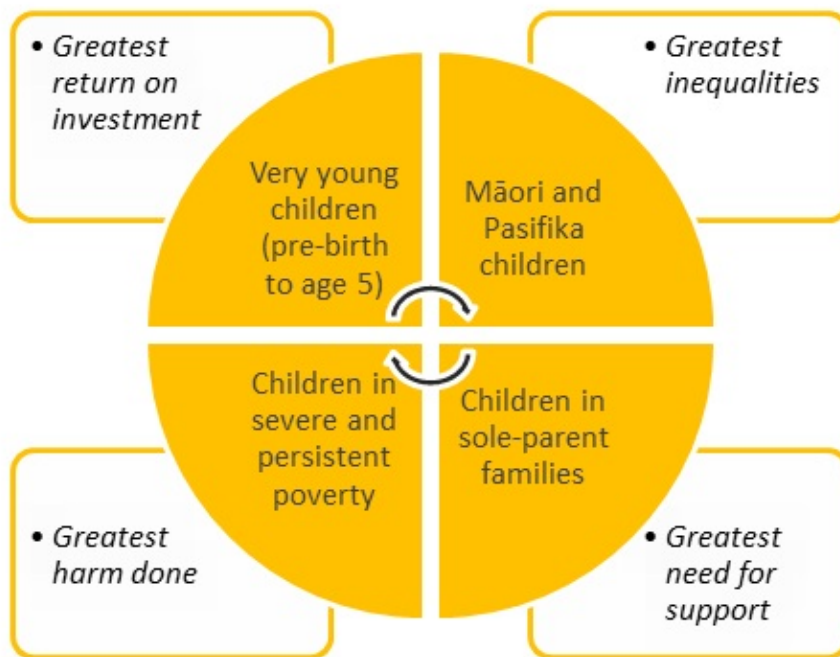


Figure 2. Where is help most needed? (Source: Office of the Children’s Commissioner – Giving2Kids)

Support innovation and emergent practice

In New Zealand, the social policy landscape is shifting towards a focus on proven programmes and purchasing results to improve the lives of vulnerable children. Evidence is of course important, but can be also used as a basis for trialing new approaches that may achieve greater impact. Philanthropy has a unique opportunity to try new ways of addressing complex problems by funding social innovation and emerging new practices. Funding emergent strategy in this way can ‘give rise to constantly evolving solutions that are uniquely suited to the time, place, and participants involved...It helps funders to be more relevant and effective by adapting their activities to ever-changing circumstances.’⁶⁰

Support communities to develop capacity and lead their own solutions for change

Community interventions are locally and culturally responsive, can be most effective at engaging the hardest to reach families and can build long-term resilience by connecting families to supportive networks that can be sustained over time. Effective interventions for children rely on highly trained professionals, so it is important to consider investing in training to ensure community-based interventions are effective. It is also important to consider the funding readiness of these ventures, particularly when considering larger investments and/or the scaling-up promising initiatives. Evaluation and organisational capacity development are vital considerations in these circumstances.

Make sure evaluation is part of the solution

Evaluation is an essential part of all philanthropy, not just investment in early years. It helps us to understand where most impact is achieved and to structure future investments accordingly. For the Shell Foundation in the UK, evaluation meant the difference between 80% failure rate with their grants to an 80% success rate.⁶¹ Evaluation is particularly important when funding complex issues through social innovation – fast testing and real-time learning are vital.



Endnotes

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