

# Early investment: A key to reversing intergenerational disadvantage and inequity in Aotearoa New Zealand

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## Key messages

- The high numbers of children born into deprivation since the late 1980s are themselves now becoming parents who are at greater risk of disadvantage.
- The effects of intergenerational disadvantage start at conception with the growing fetus and infant potentially exposed to conditions that increase the risk of poor lifelong outcomes.
- This underscores the importance of targeting the earliest stages of life for maximum effectiveness. Economic analyses strongly support the cost-effectiveness of early investment.
- Maternal mental distress during pregnancy and infancy can affect brain development in ways that may impair a child's successful passage through life.
- A strong bond between caregiver and infant has major effects on long-term cognitive and socioemotional development.
- An integrated approach by the health, social development and education sectors is essential to effectively end intergenerational disadvantage.

Since the late 1980s there has been a dramatic escalation in whānau and child poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand that has persisted to the present day. Children born into deprivation from the late 1980s now comprise a cohort of new parents whose children are at greater risk of experiencing a continued cycle of disadvantage.

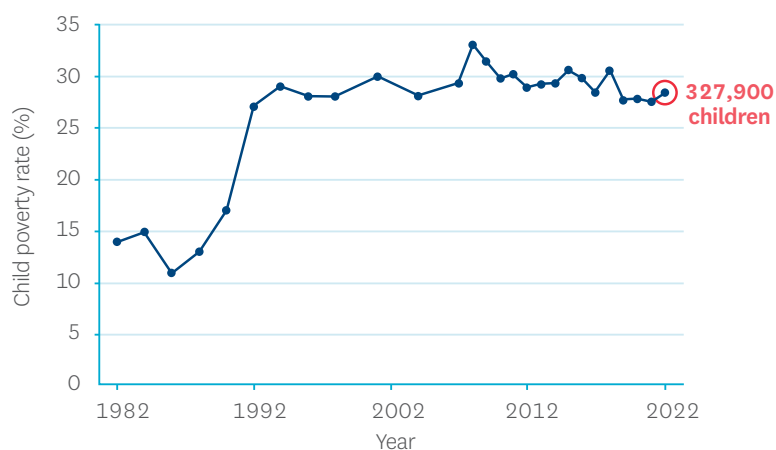
The impact of deprivation generally begins as early as *in utero*, where adverse developmental exposures can result in lifelong behavioural, physical and mental health effects.

Maternal depression during pregnancy, even when mild or moderate, affects fetal brain development leading to impaired executive functions. This affects many critical abilities that may set a child on a lifelong path of challenges that include educational underachievement, financial instability, poorer physical and mental health and poorer interpersonal skills. These outcomes in turn have a potential negative effect on the next generation. Maternal mental distress after pregnancy can also affect the establishment of a strong parent-child bond that is crucial for development of executive functions.

Clearly, early-life factors – from pregnancy exposures through to parenting behaviours after birth – are absolutely fundamental in setting up a child for lifelong success or failure. Hence for the best chance of breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage New Zealand urgently needs to **invest in young people (before they become parents), in pregnant women and their families, and in babies and children** (i.e. the 'first 2,000 days').

Reversing intergenerational disadvantage will require a more comprehensive systems approach involving interlinked initiatives from the health, education and social development domains all delivered in a culturally appropriate way.

The **health approach** requires the earliest possible engagement of all parents-to-be with the maternity system. Maternal mental health must also be prioritised, including universal screening for mental distress and family violence during and after pregnancy. Serve and return interactions between the parent/caregiver and infant in the first two years of life should be promoted.

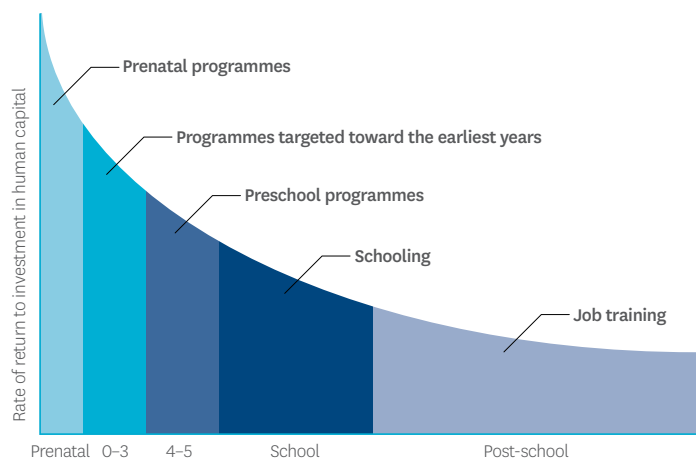


The **social development approach** involves the support of local kaitiaki (carers and educators providing tailored support to whānau) who can assist in facilitating access to healthcare and wider services and supporting children through the early years, providing continuity of care.

The **education approach** includes raising parents' awareness of positive caregiving behaviours, increasing engagement with the early childhood and primary-school sectors, and promoting health literacy in adolescents to promote positive outcomes in the next generation. Serve and return interactions should be continued in early childhood

education programmes, and preschool children should be screened for suboptimal executive functions to help identify those in need of targeted support. High-quality early childhood programmes aimed at disadvantaged children should be considered: these are exceedingly cost-effective, have numerous flow-on benefits in adulthood, and have positive effects on the next generation of children.

To be effective these approaches need to be bolstered by a significantly strengthened maternity system, a well-resourced kaitiaki workforce and an education system that is adaptable for ongoing meaningful community engagement.



## Actions for consideration

- An **integrated approach** involving the health, social development and education sectors and targeting the earliest stages of life is required.
- The **maternity system, including the maternal mental health system**, needs to be significantly strengthened to ensure early engagement with mothers and whānau and early referrals for appropriate social support.
- **Universal screening for mental distress and family violence** during and after pregnancy should be implemented.
- **Social, education and fiscal interventions** that reduce stresses on women and whānau, especially those living in deprivation, should be emphasised.
- The social support service needs to include a **local kaitiaki workforce** that is itself well resourced to provide tailored support to parents and whānau in a timely manner.
- **Education at all stages of life** is crucial:
  - Parents and caregivers should be offered parenting programmes and information about positive parenting behaviours;
  - Children and whānau engagement with the early childhood sector and school system should be increased;
  - High-quality early childhood programmes should be made available to disadvantaged children;
  - Adolescent health literacy, including pre-conception health, should be increased.
- **Preschool screening** of children for suboptimal executive functions will help identify those most likely to benefit from interventions.
- **Serve and return interactions** with children should be widely promoted among parents, caregivers and early childhood educators.

To read our full evidence brief on the importance of early investment in reducing intergenerational disadvantage, visit [informedfutures.org/early-investment](https://informedfutures.org/early-investment)