

Busting the myths around Early Childhood Development in SA

You have probably come across these common misconceptions about Early Childhood Development in South Africa at some point. Maybe on social media, maybe in the comment section of a news website, or maybe during a heated argument at a social gathering. Here are the facts which separate the facts from the fiction.

Myth 1: Social grants are a waste of tax payers' money.

The Fact: The number of children living in poverty in South Africa [has declined from 79% in 2003 to 63% in 2014](#) – largely as a result of the expansion of social grants. Poverty has serious lifelong consequences on the development of young children, due to their increased nutritional needs and greater risk of infection. [Research](#) has found that early access to the Child Support Grant (CSG) reduces likelihood of illness in children, as well as stunting, which has lifelong negative implications on people's health. Children who receive the CSG early in life, complete significantly more grades of schooling, compared to children who accessed the grant after age 6 or not at all. These children also scored higher on mathematics and literacy tests, proving that the CSG impacts positively on school performance.

Myth 2: Poor people keep having more and more children, SA's tax payer base cannot just keep on supporting them.

The Fact: The population of young children in South Africa has not grown substantially over the past decade – showing that poor households are not, in fact, having increasing numbers of children. The number of children under 6 years in SA, is steady at around 6 million. The [number of births per women in SA is 2.4](#) – just under the 2.5 world average, and far lower than 5 birth/woman average in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Myth 3: Parents claim the child support grant for children who are not even living with them.

The Fact: The [Centre for Social Development in Africa](#) found that the overwhelming majority (92.2%) of Child Support Grant beneficiaries are in fact living with the caregiver who is claiming the grant. A [separate study](#) found that moms accessing the CSG are actually more involved in the day to day lives of their children – which is known to have positive social, emotional and cognitive benefits for kids.

Myth 4: People spend the Child Support Grant on alcohol!

The Fact: People who receive the Child Support Grant are most likely going to spend it on food, school fees, school uniforms and electricity – in that order. [This review of the grant](#) explains in detail.

Myth 5: The Child Support Grant incentivises teenage girls to fall pregnant.

The Fact: [Health Systems Trust research](#) found that only 20% of teenage moms are actually claiming the child support grant. The report also found that only 5% of all grant recipients are teenage mothers – disproportionate when one considers the national percentage of teenage vs non-teenage mothers. A Health Systems Trust survey also found that just 2% of pregnant women aged 15 – 24,

cited the CSG as an incentive. South Africa's high rate of teenage pregnancy is more accurately attributed to low levels of education around contraception and gender based violence.

Myth 6: Poor people have children just so they can access the child support grant

The Fact: Child Support Grant [uptake is low](#) for qualifying infants < 1 year, around 60% nationally, despite the fact that it takes just 3 days to process grant applications and caregivers can begin accessing the grant in the first month of their baby's life. If the assumption that people have children just so they can access the grant is true, then uptake in the first year of life would be much higher.

Myth 7: The achievement gap in schools is inevitable and can't be helped. People have different abilities.

The Fact: Arguing the case of an inevitable achievement gap in school would be fair if all children started Grade R on an equal footing. Quality mental stimulation before children enter formal schooling is essential for laying the cognitive and linguistic foundations for all later learning. In SA, access to early learning programmes is unequal across income groups, with only 57% of 3 – 5 year olds from the poorest quintile enrolled in a programme compared to 84% of their peers in the richest quintile ¹. This means that 1 million children from the most vulnerable households in South Africa are not attending any kind of early learning programme at all. These children start the first day of Grade R at a learning disadvantage and the gap between them and their peers widens over time. [Recent research](#) analysed data from the Annual National Assessments to find that Grade 4 learning outcome patterns closely mimic those in the final year of formal schooling, Grade 12, and reflect long-lasting disadvantage of students who have fallen behind early in their schooling careers. The study also found that schooling performance is closely linked to income quintile. In fact, more than 50% of pupils in the poorer income quintiles have already fallen behind the benchmark in Grade 2. The achievement gap in SA school must be considered in this context, until all children are given an equal start in formal schooling.

Myth 8: The South African fiscus is at breaking point! We cannot afford to fund expensive ECD programmes right now – subsidised day care is a nice-to-have for developed economies.

The Fact: The Harvard School of Public Health recently estimated the lost potential life-time earnings of children born in Sub-Saharan Africa this year to be over \$34.2bn – directly as a result of lack of quality Early Childhood Development (ECD) – specifically nutrition and physical delays. Children who receive quality ECD stay in school for longer and earn considerably higher than their peers; they enjoy better health and remain outside the criminal justice system. Their life long contribution to the economy is far higher than an individual who did not benefit from good quality ECD. Every rand spent on ECD today is an investment with a high return and a multiplier effect once individuals enter the job market.

Myth 9: Poverty is a fact of life in South Africa. We can't solve the problem in our lifetime.

The Fact: Poverty is deeply entrenched in South African society – the product of decades of divisive policy, structural dysfunction and a myriad of societal factors. Poverty is a cycle. Children from poor households fail to receive adequate education and repeat the economic behaviours of their parents.

¹ General Household Survey 2014, analysis by the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town.

While alleviating poverty on a national scale is a complex issue, requiring the action of multiple parties, it is possible to break the poverty cycle of individuals by offering them good quality Early Childhood Development during the early years. Benefiting from quality ECD means these individuals stay in school for longer, are more employable, earn more than their peers, and are more likely to make better health choices. Children who have received good quality ECD are more likely to offer it to their children – this is where the opportunity to break the cycle of poverty lies.

Myth 10: I don't even have kids. Subsidised Early Childhood Development services are not my problem!

The Fact: All society – including childless adults – benefits from quality ECD services provided to children from disadvantaged households. Investment in quality ECD results in economic expansion, safer and more stable societies and less strain on the health system.