



## Mary Eming Young: International Global Health Adviser

Doctor Mary Eming Young calls *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* a blue-ribbon endorsement of the kinds of programs the World Bank is eager to support around the world.

“When the report was published in 2000, it helped to break down some of the ‘silos’ that had naturally sprung up in the disciplines of early childhood between education, health, and social protection sectors,” said Young.

“*Neurons* helped us to see that it was not only health and nutrition that affected whether babies thrive long term,” [but also] “that brain development and environment play an important part in the child’s well being.”

At the World Bank, funding programs for young children is seen as investing in the world’s future. So it makes sense that the programming target is ambitious — healthy development for every child around the world. It’s an immense task.

That task is based on the science of *Neurons*, particularly the idea that the early years matter, and the Bank’s belief that early childhood development programs are closely tied to economic and social development and to reducing poverty everywhere. Young, who has been working on the Bank’s early childhood projects in education, social protection, and health — says *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, along with other reports, helped everyone to understand that these early years when language and social skills are forming are critical periods of development.

But closing the gap between what scientists know and what societies do in terms of programming remains a challenge. The critical issues involved in taking the science into actual programming decisions require careful consideration.

“I definitely think, internationally, medical personnel need to know more, to be taught better,” Young said. “I know that they are translating *From Neurons to Neighborhood* in China. Can you imagine that impact?”

“I also want to see the knowledge spread further into education. There is still a disconnect between people who work in education and those who work in science. Educators see the failings of primary [school], they push more emphasis on kindergarten and preschool, but they don’t think education has to begin earlier.”



**“*Neurons* showed us that brain development and environment play an important part in the child’s well being.”**

Dr. Mary Eming Young is the lead specialist in child development for the Human Development Network at the World Bank. She is a pediatrician and public health specialist, committed to improving the development of young children in developing countries.

Educators worldwide need to better understand the importance [of early education] on long-term health and behavior, Young says.

Yet, for Young, the health group is an even bigger challenge. “Internationally, we are reaching out to the different ministries — the ministers of health, the ministers of social protection, and the ministers of education —but the health sector hasn’t jumped on understanding the effects of early experience on brain processes and the developmental origins of health and disease.” Young said the health sector sees its work “very much as sick child and child survival. Child development still is not paid much attention and it’s harder to get funding for.”

The World Bank is a lending institution, Young noted, so her work goes into preparing loans for governments to borrow and invest in health, education, and social protection programs. “When we start talking about what to do with the money, we start talking about a community-based program or a parenting-based program and right away [we are asked] what sector does it fall into?” She said that decision makers are still focused on loaning funds for a hospital for the community or for immunizations. They are not yet convinced that investments in a community-based program or a

parent education effort produce valuable effects on development.

Young said there are very few international examples of programming policies that are related to early childhood development. “There is one state in Brazil, which is very progressive,” she said “They have introduced a parenting home visiting program...they understand the importance of early brain development in relation to child development.” And Chile for years has been taking on early childhood development: “They had a very enlightened president who was a pediatrician,” Young said. She is hoping that more countries and more programs can learn from *Neurons to Neighborhoods*.

---

#### **For More Information**

Copies of the report, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, are available for sale from the National Academies Press at (888) 624-8373 or (202) 334-3313 (in the Washington, DC metropolitan area) or via the IOM website <http://www.iom.edu/neuronstoneighborhoods>. Full text of the report and a free pdf copy of the Summary are also available at <http://www.iom.edu/neuronstoneighborhoods>.

Permission is granted to reproduce this document in its entirety, with no additions or alterations.

*From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* is a report from the Board on Children, Youth, and Families in the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council.  
[www.bocyf.org](http://www.bocyf.org) 202-334-1935

INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE AND  
NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL  
OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES