Children are the future of Latin America and the Caribbean, and how they are raised will determine their future and that of the countries they live in. This book analyses the critical early years of the development of children and makes a strong case for government intervention in what is instinctively a family affair.

The outcomes of the child development process are determined by the complex interaction between a child’s innate physical and mental endowments, the context in which he or she grows up (including the community, the environment and markets), and the people who care for the child in these various contexts (parents, family members and teachers, among others). This book argues that public policy should focus on finding ways to improve the interaction between children and their care providers at home, in daycare centres and at school.

The book is organised in three parts. The first part provides a framework for thinking about child well-being in the early years and describes where this region stands in terms of the most relevant indicators. In health, the region is approaching developed country standards; in education it is not.

The second section delves into the role of public policy in the three main environments where child experiences are shaped: the home, daycare centres and schools. It describes the current status of programmes in the region and offers a vision of what is possible.

The final section looks at public policy from a more systemic perspective. First, it describes public spending patterns in the region and compares costs and benefits of different programmes to determine which ones are more likely to be cost-effective. Second, it analyses the institutions involved in delivering public services to children and families in the early years and the institutional architecture behind the formulation, execution, and implementation of public policy. Based on the findings of extensive research, the book closes with a set of policy recommendations for the region.

The early years are a key area of investment of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), both in knowledge creation and lending. Over the past 20 years, the IDB has helped countries bring about these important investments through more than 150 grants and loans involving early childhood development, totalling in excess of USD 1.7 billion. Similarly, many countries in the region are investing in a number of ambitious initiatives. The hope is that this book can provide valuable lessons for these programmes and inspire others to follow suit as countries invest in what is surely their most precious resource: their children.

Reference