

## How to Change the World in One Thousand Days

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The first 1,000 days of a child's life represent a significant window of opportunity. It's during this vulnerable time that the foundations for their lifelong health are built. The ability of a mother to provide nutrients and a safe, physical environment for her baby will have a profound impact on the child's development.

The span of time between conception through a child's second birthday, the first 1,000 days of life, is when the brain, body, and immune system grow and develop significantly. Too often in developing countries, poverty and malnutrition weaken this foundation, leading to poor health and substantial loss of the child's neurodevelopmental potential. Conversely, when mothers and children have access to proper nutrition and healthcare, the benefits represent brighter, healthier futures that will impact generations.

### Every mother and child deserve the opportunity to thrive

Health in the earliest days of life, beginning with the mother's physical and emotional well-being before she becomes pregnant, strengthens the developing physiological systems that enable children to grow up to be healthy adults.

Unfortunately, for many women and children across the globe, this goal is unattainable. UNICEF estimates that 85 million children under five years of age are underweight worldwide. This means that 12.6%, or one out of eight children, are significantly below their normal weight. Tragically, forty-five million of these children are severely underweight or wasted and are struggling to survive.

Often, this level of malnutrition starts before the child is born. The growth and increase in complexity of a baby's brain during the first two trimesters is nothing short of miraculous. By the first month of pregnancy, a baby has an estimated 10,000 neural connections in his brain. By the close of the second trimester, the number of neural connections has increased to a staggering ten billion. This ten millionfold increase requires a mother to take in a considerable amount of nutritious food and vitamins as her pregnancy progresses.

This may be an impossible goal for many women, but the consequences are critical.

Because these children are not receiving the necessary nutrients to allow for appropriate brain development, they're more likely to have cognitive impairments that hurt their ability to function in society. They're often small for their age on growth charts and miss developmental benchmarks. As they enter school, they struggle to learn compared to other better-nourished children and are less likely to participate in activities requiring coordination, such as sports. These kids are more likely to have behavioral problems and may not finish school, thereby affecting their adulthood. They frequently aren't capable of jobs requiring more education and may be too small to engage in manual labor. Because they may exhibit behavioral problems, they struggle with sustainable employment and may turn to crime to support themselves.

The effect on their communities is significant. The low and middle-income countries, where most malnourished people live, can seldom afford to feed and house people who cannot support themselves. Many of these communities will collapse under the mounting burden of repressive hunger.

### There's good news

The first one thousand days of a baby's life are, simultaneously, some of the most vulnerable and some of the easiest to impact for good. To alleviate the developmental delays caused by malnutrition, it's critical that we prioritize food supply to those in need. To improve the accessibility of healthcare, we must engage medical professionals in the countries where it's needed most. These strategies aren't complicated, but without people saying "yes" to help fulfill these needs, it's difficult to create change for these at-risk populations.

LiveBeyond has taken a stand against these health inequities through its Maternal Health Program in Thomazeau, Haiti. The

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initiative includes comprehensive medical treatment of both mothers and babies, and as a result, there has been a reduction in both maternal and infant deaths. Additions of birth control, HIV diagnosis and treatment, and home visits to assess living conditions all have played a role in saving many lives.

Outside of this program, most mothers in this community receive very little education in prenatal and child health and nutrition, something we might take for granted in the United States. As we began to educate the women to address these deficiencies, we saw more mothers breastfeeding and serving their families healthy meals. The mothers are learning about childhood diseases and when to bring their baby to the doctor. They're learning about the perils of intimate partner violence and how to protect themselves.

Since the program's inception in 2012, we've had the opportunity to see the first babies grow up. They're now nine years old and

thriving. They've achieved normal growth and weight measurements, and their grades are good. As they continue to flourish, they can contribute great things to their community and country.

There's no doubt that maternal, infant and child health are three of the most important community health indicators in both developed and developing nations. We can change the world one life at a time by ensuring that all women and children have access to proper healthcare, nutrition and education.

**David Vanderpool, MD**, is co-founder and CEO of LiveBeyond, a faith-based humanitarian organization bringing general medical care, mother and child healthcare, nutrition, clean water, education, and community development to people worldwide. In 2012, LiveBeyond established a compound with all of the above in Haiti, and last year launched a program for children with disabilities in Israel. For more information, see [www.livebeyond.org](http://www.livebeyond.org).

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