Jim Yong Kim Speaks at Event on Early Childhood Development with Novak Djokovic

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World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim
Special Event on Early Childhood Development with Novak Djokovic
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As Prepared for Delivery

Let me begin by thanking our hosts here at UNICEF for their generous support to this event and for their tireless advocacy and innovative programs that improve the lives of children around the world. Let me thank as well UNICEF’s executive director and my friend Tony Lake for his global leadership on behalf of the rights of all children. I’m also grateful to Novak Djokovic for being with us today, even as he prepares for the US Open.

Education is one of the surest ways we have to end extreme poverty in the world. When young children and their families have access to early childhood development - essential health, nutrition, education, and social protection services, they are afforded the opportunity to learn and lead healthy and productive lives. There is strong evidence that investing early in young children increases their capacity to learn when they enter primary school. In turn, this improves their chances of remaining in school rather than dropping out, and of moving on to secondary school. It also considerably boosts their earning potential as adults.

While we work to ensure that all children attend preschool, we must also ensure that their time in class is productive and that they are learning real skills. Sadly, too often more attention is paid to building the bricks and mortar ‘hardware’ of schools than the ‘software’ like teaching and mastering curricula. Across the developing world, in fact, 250 million children cannot read or write, though many have attended school.

These challenges demand that we increase our commitment to children, especially to the very young. It gives me great pleasure to announce today that the World Bank is entering
into a new partnership on early childhood development with the Novak Djokovic Foundation. This partnership will include global advocacy on the importance of early childhood development, as well as work in Serbia to improve early development for disadvantaged children.

The benefits of early childhood development programs are particularly strong for poor and disadvantaged children. We know from research that children from disadvantaged families who took part in an early childhood development programs earn 25 percent higher wages as adults. What produced these striking results? Evidence-based interventions – some as simple as encouraging mothers how to play with and talk to their toddlers at home.

We at the World Bank have invested $3.3 billion dollars in early childhood development programs between 2001 and 2013. But the needs remain great. Even in Serbia, which is an upper middle-income country, less than 10 percent of children from the poorest households go to preschool. The situation is worse for Roma children. Only 6 percent of Roma children living in settlements attend early education programs. Clearly, we need powerful advocacy for getting kids in all countries the head start they need.

But today’s announcements – both ours and UNICEF’s -- raise all of our aspirations for young children around the world. I’m inspired by Novak Djokovic, who is well known as one of the world’s top athletes, but only now being recognized for his commitment to put children on a better path in life. I believe that this new partnership between the World Bank and the Novak Djokovic Foundation will give much greater momentum for all of us working on early childhood development around the world.

On the tennis court, Novak is known for excellence in his all-around game. He has the game’s best return and he often seizes the opportunity to take control of points. My great hope now is that with inspiration from Novak, we will fully seize this new opportunity. We must have new resources and more attention to the early development of young people, and we think that Novak can bring the kind of attention that is urgently required. Universal access to early childhood development programs is the right goal for the world. We can succeed. To not seize this opportunity to work with Novak would constitute an unforced error of grave proportions. Thank you, Novak, and thank you to UNICEF and all of our partners for all the work that we do together to help young children.