

# Giving The Gift Of Child Survival

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In this ever-changing world, there are few constants. Yet consistently, among the poorest of the poor, the most frequent victims of preventable death are children.

Every minute of every day, 20 children die somewhere in the world. Each year, one in seven children in developing countries - nearly 11 million children - die before the age of five. Would it surprise you to know that fully two-thirds of these deaths are avoidable?

Preventable or treatable diseases, such as diarrhea, measles, pneumonia, malaria, and neonatal illnesses, cause most of these deaths. Yet it is poverty that is really killing these children. As a result of their impoverishment, many and in some cases most children living in developing countries suffer from severe malnourishment, vitamin and mineral deficiencies, and unsanitary living conditions that each greatly increases a child's risk of dying from disease.

The suffering and loss of children of children due to avoidable or treatable conditions is needless. It is well within the means and the reach of the global community, and especially its wealthiest members, to make substantial and lasting improvements in child health that would save millions of lives. We have the money to do it. What is missing is the willpower.

Global health experts estimate that \$9 billion is needed annually to ensure universal access to basic health services. An additional \$12 billion is needed for prevention, treatment, and support services to combat the growing AIDS epidemic. On the scale of the global economy, such sums weigh laughably small.

America is spending \$1 billion each week in Iraq. We spend half a trillion dollars each year on our military. Compared to these almost incomprehensible sums, the amount needed to save millions of lives is a mere pittance. When you also consider that Americans spend \$17 billion a year on pet food and pet-related items, the question must be asked: Are our priorities in the right place?

Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden are the only countries who currently meet the United Nations target of 0.7 percent of GNP for foreign aid. The United States, by virtue of being the world's largest economy, may be the world's top donor of aid in raw dollars, yet the US ranks last amongst the wealthiest nations in foreign aid as a percentage of national income: only 0.16 percent - 16 cents out of every \$10 dollars - of its GNP. While Americans are truly a generous people, 98 percent of our generosity stays at home.

2005 may have changed all that. Americans opened their hearts and wallets as never before in response to an overseas catastrophe, a tsunami that killed more than a quarter of a million people. Having given an unprecedented \$1.3 billion, we somehow found \$1.7 billion more to give when a catastrophe named Katrina hit here at home. Understand, however, that the numbers of children dying from preventable and treatable causes are like earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes happening everyday.

Six million children's lives could be saved each year with basic, cost-effective measures such as vaccines, antibiotics, insecticide-treated bednets, vitamin A supplements, antiretroviral therapy for HIV-infected pregnant women, and improved breastfeeding practices. These solutions are low-tech, and have already been successfully implemented, even in some of the world's poorest countries. However, as a result of lack of adequate funds, these solutions have been implemented only to a limited degree, and too little of their potential to save lives has been realized.

Simply ensuring that infants receive immunization against polio, measles, and Hib would save hundreds of thousands of lives each year. Ensuring that pregnant women receive tetanus immunization would save 200,000 lives. Antibiotics costing less than a dollar could prevent two-thirds of deaths from pneumonia and from newborn illnesses, and save 3 million lives. Insecticide-treated bednets, costing about \$3 each, could prevent 90 percent of all malaria deaths and save 800,000 lives. Regular zinc supplements and readily available packets of oral rehydration solution, each costing pennies, could save 2 million lives. Vitamin A supplements, also costing pennies, dramatically reduce childhood blindness and inexplicably reduce childhood mortality by half.

If all the world's children could benefit from these low-cost, life-saving preventions and treatments, the risk of death in childhood would fall to about one-third of the current level. With the largest and most prosperous economy and the greatest wealth of human and technological resources in the world, the US, more than any other country, has the capability to make the largest contribution to global child health and survival.

Increasing childhood survival worldwide is our generation's Apollo Project, our moon shot. We cannot save every life, but every one we can, we must.

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Consider giving the gift of child survival this Christmas. The following are a few of the many reputable non-governmental organizations doing the work of reducing child mortality throughout the world:

- Concern USA ([www.concernusa.org](http://www.concernusa.org), or 212-557-8000), which has pioneered a Child Survival Program that focuses on enabling local families and communities to develop and coordinate local health services.
- Doctors Without Borders ([www.doctorswithoutborders.org](http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org), or 212-679-6800), a Nobel-prize winning organization working on the frontlines of poverty and catastrophe across the underdeveloped world.
- Heifer International Project ([www.heifer.org](http://www.heifer.org), or 800-422-0474), whose mission is to donate a cow, goat or pig to a family in need in order to help them earn a living. Families then pass on the gift by giving the offspring of the animal to another deserving family.
- The Global Fund ([www.theglobalfund.org](http://www.theglobalfund.org)), a global partnership created specifically to fight the three big infectious killers: HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria.
- Rotary International ([www.rotary.org](http://www.rotary.org), or 847-866-3000), which, in 1985, took on the task of eradicating polio from the planet with oral vaccines. Polio cases have plummeted from 350,000 in 1988 to less than 2000 in 2005.
- Save The Children ([www.savethechildren.org](http://www.savethechildren.org), or 800-SAVETHECHILDREN), which works in over 100 countries to fulfill its mission to create real and lasting change for the world's poorest children.
- CARE ([www.care.org](http://www.care.org), or 800-521-CARE), an international consortium of 12 member countries, dedicated to the reduction of poverty. It is one of the largest international relief agencies.

For more information about global child health, check out these sources:

- Global Health Council ([www.globalhealth.org](http://www.globalhealth.org))

- UNICEF ([www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org))
- World Health Organization ([www.who.int](http://www.who.int))
- Rx For Survival ([www.pbs.org/wgbh/rxforsurvival/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/rxforsurvival/))