

## EARLY CHILDHOOD: Building our Understanding and Moving Towards the Best of Both Worlds

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The plethora of parent education programmes developed around the world have tended to disregard parents’ and caregivers’ knowledge and achievements and use a deficit model. The need is for dialogue and processes which respect different views and allow different voices to be heard—valuing diversity and with an openness to creating new knowledge and new ideas.

The challenge is to find the right balance. On the one hand, to recognise, respect and build on existing strengths and traditions; to build confidence; to offer opportunities to share experiences and generate solutions—while at the same time acknowledging and responding to the need for access to information; building understanding of fundamental principles for effective support of children’s development; and addressing the fact that sometimes these fundamental principles are in conflict with dominant ideas.

Taking a dialogue approach, immediate programming and research opportunities are discussed, and examples of programmes are presented.

### WHO KNOWS BEST?

Worldwide there is an emphasis on ensuring that Early Childhood Development programmes are firmly family and community-based. The stress on the importance of the family is hardly surprising if we consider a few simple questions. For example “Who knows the child best?” “Where is the young child most of the time?” “For whom is it most important that the child develops well?” Children learn who they are and what life is all about from the people they are with. For the vast majority of children it is the family, in its many and varied forms, which is the most important influence on the child’s perception of self and others.

The recognition of this, plus our ever increasing understanding of the vital nature of the early years, has resulted in a plethora of parent/caregiver education programmes, which are often described as an essential component of any ECD programme. New evidence continually emerging indicates the younger the child the more critical the experience—whether it be positive or negative. The question for us therefore is: “How can programmes best influence the contexts in which young children live so that all those involved with the children are a part of supporting their overall development?”

## THE DEFICIT MODEL VERSUS BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

Worldwide the tendency of parent/caregiver education programmes has been to be message driven. Little time is spent on finding out what parents and other caregivers already know and do. It is now fashionable to include a child-rearing study in project designs. However, these are often conceptualized very narrowly and, in any case, the programme is not usually built on the findings (which often get written up months after the interventions have begun). Programmes are not, despite the rhetoric, designed to recognize and respect families' achievements in raising their children. They instead use a deficit model (focusing on what people lack both materially and in terms of knowledge and skills) and aim to ensure that people are "educated" about child development.

As Salole points out with regard to development programmes in general we "rush to create a programme to deal with their disadvantages, instead of a programme based on the skills people have at their fingertips".<sup>1</sup> Fugelsang and Chandler have pointed out how remarkable the creativeness of poor people is in using every resource available.<sup>2</sup> Yet we tend to devalue and ignore what people are able to accomplish. "We have systematically allowed people to feel incompetent and inadequate in raising their own children." (Salole). This seems a very strange situation to have developed when being a parent or raising children is one of the experiences that often binds us together as human beings more closely than almost any other. Why then do we have such "us" and "them" constructions and how do we break down those barriers?

The didactic style of many programmes probably relates, in part, to the fact that for many years very basic health messages formed the primary content of parent/caregiver education. Many of these were of such universal significance that the cultural context of child-rearing was often considered not to be critical. As the content has broadened out to encompass a wider range of topics, where there are no simple right or wrong answers, the approach has not usually developed accordingly. Yet around the world we might do well to draw on personal experience and recall what helps us in raising our own children to think about the sort of processes we need to be encouraging. This paper outlines a process which would enable us to develop an approach to parenting which is more dialogue-based and hence respectful of the cultural context and families' particular circumstances.

To validate people's innate skills is not a complicated process. Our most significant potential strength is to be familiar with the context in which development is occurring and to recognize and enhance what it is that people are already doing that is positive. We need to both understand the process of socialization within a particular culture and learn to fashion our child development agenda so that it is complementary to this. After learning with parents/ caregivers about their issues questions can be raised which may be outside of the knowledge or concerns of the caregivers. To do this in a way which is cognizant of the caregivers' own knowledge and concerns is not only the most morally acceptable strategy, it is also likely to be the most successful way of facilitating assimilation of additional information or new ideas to benefit children.

## VALUING DIVERSITY

All children have the same basic needs but there is no one right way to work in early childhood development. For programmes to work they must be rooted in the culture. The range of normal arrangements in which children are brought up is vast and it is vital to recognize, understand and

respect local childrearing practices and to build on existing strengths. The challenge facing us is how to maximise benefits to the child by interweaving practices that scientific evidence would suggest a child needs with effective traditional childrearing practices.

This is perhaps the key—a respect for different views, and a commitment to developing processes that allow different voices to be heard—with an openness to creating new knowledge and new ideas with all involved learning along the way. No one group has a monopoly on understanding of how to raise children. Given the extreme social dislocation of much youth in “developed” countries it is clear that we all have much to share and learn. The approach being advocated has to do with valuing diversity rather than insisting on one best way, with best practices emerging and changing as things develop.

Even with all its diversity much of the most inspiring of work with young children and primary school age children in “modern” approaches includes common key elements. There is an explicit emphasis on promoting self-esteem, co-operation, enthusiasm for learning, learning through doing, problem-solving and decision-making. If such approaches can be used in concert with some of the best of traditional methods (e.g., for teaching dance, music, craft skills, spiritual development) that have been such an important part of transmitting culture the result can be very powerful. After all one of the big questions for child development and education now in many parts of the world is how we can be developing ways to support children in gaining the skills they will need to deal with very rapidly changing societies without obliterating (indeed actively protecting) their cultural identities.

## FINDING THE BALANCE

In our efforts to respect cultural diversity, it is not helpful to have romanticized views of the ways families and communities operate. The fact is that families and communities almost everywhere are coming under increasing stress.<sup>3</sup> In situations where adults face conflicting pressing economic and family demands children are often neglected or ill-treated. Poverty, urbanization, rapid social change, armed conflict, environmental degradation, the increasing workloads of women all mean that family and community support systems are sometimes stretched to breaking point.

Societies vary greatly in the significance they attach to children’s early years. While there is a huge variety of ways in which we can influence the contexts in which children are growing up, there are some basic principles that need to be understood if programmes are to benefit children. In reality quite often these principles are in potential collision with the dominant ideas—either because of certain cultural beliefs or where communities are under pressure (due to poverty, rapid social change, conflict, etc.). We have to recognize that some cultural beliefs can be damaging and in direct contradiction to the rights of the child—e.g., beliefs that girls should not be educated or that children should be beaten. Programmes have to find ways to challenge such things—but from within the culture or community. It is important to remember that culture is neither static nor homogenous and there are always many different beliefs within a given culture. While the guiding principle of The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the “best interests of the child” there will be many opinions as to what those “best interests” are.

The challenge is to find the right balance.

- to recognize, respect and build on existing strengths
- to build confidence

- to offer opportunities to share experiences and generate solutions
- to acknowledge and respond to the need for access to information
- to build understanding of fundamental principles for effective support of children's development
- to address the fact that sometimes these fundamental principles are in conflict with dominant ideas (either because of certain cultural practices or where communities are under extreme pressure)

## A ROLE FOR CHILD-FOCUSED ORGANIZATIONS

A key question for child-focused agencies such as UNICEF and the Save the Children Alliance must be how to find that balance. UNICEF and Save the Children Alliance members have extensive early childhood programmes in the South Asia Region. We are already starting to address the issues discussed (such as through the positive deviance work in Vietnam, Bangladesh and Nepal, the study of caregiving arrangements for children of garment workers in Bangladesh, and re-thinking the approach our parenting/caregiving programmes are taking). Through further development and linking together a number of initiatives in the region we have the opportunity to engage in a learning process that could yield valuable lessons for a very wide range of programmes with children, families and communities.

## SOME KEY CURRENT ACTIVITIES AND IMMEDIATE PROGRAMMING/RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

### *1) Increase understanding of childrearing practices and values amongst different groups*

The Bangladesh study<sup>4</sup> was undertaken by Save the Children (USA) in Dhaka with the assistance of Tufts University. The aim was to find out about the caregiving arrangements availed by garment workers (most of whom are women working 12 hours a day) in order to design interventions which would build on what was working, as well as address problems. The study found that traditional patterns of childcare through the extended family were remarkably intact and that what was needed was support to those systems through individuals having access to information, education, appreciation and occasional additional support at specific times.

In Vietnam it was positive deviance studies conducted by the communities themselves which provided the key for a highly successful resource-based approach which is now being replicated and further developed in Nepal and Bangladesh. Positive deviance recognizes that even amongst the most impoverished of families some children fare well. In the nutrition context positive deviance studies usually reveal this is because of a combination of better caring practices and additional locally available foods ignored by others (in the case of Vietnam it was tiny shrimps, crabs and greens freely available in the paddies). Attention to positive deviance is a significant departure from traditional “needs-based” development in that it identifies resources already within the community as solutions to problems.<sup>5</sup>

In Nepal plans are already under way, with Save the Children (USA), Redd Barna, UNICEF and several universities involved in designing a childrearing study with 3 ethnic groups. The study will use a range of qualitative and quantitative methods and be closely linked to and feed into present ECD projects across the country. It will look at not only childrearing practices, but also patterns and beliefs which are based on culturally-based understanding of what children need

and what they are expected to become.<sup>6</sup> The practices include the actual activities, the patterns that are the generally accepted styles and types of care, and the beliefs which provide the rationale for why things should be done in a particular way. The study will also take into account the broader context which surrounds family and community to assist understanding of a) ways in which childrearing practices have developed, and b) ways in which they are evolving.

Children's interactions with their caregivers is a central theme. This includes observation of how caregivers facilitate interaction with/ integration in the environment both within and beyond the home. Building our understanding in this area will necessitate a range of approaches. One example is the mapping of children's interactions through a typical day at different ages. There are likely to be significant differences between age groups, and very significant differences from the normal interactions of a child in a nuclear family in a developed country. It will be interesting to consider the impact of these on the child's development—the child with a very extensive web of interactions from early on may be expected to develop quite different social competencies, etc.

The studies will need to take a perspective which somehow combines aspects of both developmental psychology and cultural anthropology approaches.

## 2) *Strengthen parenting/caregiving programmes*

In order to do this we can adapt existing materials and experiment with a much more process-oriented approach to parenting/caregiving. Existing materials (e.g., those in Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Cambodia) can be used as a guide—but are being/ have recently been re-worked in order to incorporate a more participatory, open-ended, confidence-boosting approach—building on participants' own experience and successful practices.

The recently revised Bangladesh parenting/caregiving materials are a good example.<sup>7</sup> Save the Children (USA) has now incorporated these into the curriculum used by more than seven hundred Women's Savings Groups in a very remote, impoverished area of rural Bangladesh. Those who have been monitoring the groups for years all comment that they have never before witnessed the same level of discussion and obvious enjoyment as they saw in these groups. I too witnessed a high degree of absorption and active participation. In one group the women were discussing developmental milestones with great confidence. In another they were making toys from banana leaves, clay, old medicine boxes and match boxes. In another they were listing games children play at different ages and what they learn from these. The increased confidence of the women involved in the programme and their delight in it, is clear in their attitudes and conversation. The group members' enthusiasm and commitment was echoed by the Community Development Promoters whose pride in this new programme and the achievements of their groups was palpable. Compared to parenting programmes which I have observed around the world I felt that something quite new is being achieved. The whole approach is based on the premise that mothers/ caregivers know and achieve a great deal; the programme focusses on drawing this out from them, building their confidence, and providing important additional information.

The Sri Lanka materials "Home-based activities for early childhood development"<sup>8</sup>—published by the Children's Secretariat with UNICEF support, offer a different, but very complementary approach. As Amarasinghe says, the stress is on the relevance of everyday activities in supporting children's development. Often all that is needed is to offer opportunities for learning through every day activities. Much can be achieved simply by talking with our children more in everyday situations such as bathing, dressing, cooking, etc. These situations can be used both as vital first-

hand experience and for language and play activities which will support children's overall development. The Sri Lanka materials are based on observations of children of different ages which are summarized in the UNICEF publication "Child's Day". They include eight booklets for parents/ caregivers—after waking up, washing, when visitors come, while cooking, eating, working outside, while going to bed. The booklets include ideas for talking with children and listening to their ideas about the activity, as well as exploring and using the everyday materials in a variety of ways. The key always is communication. It is very early days in the implementation of the programme but there is great enthusiasm amongst NGO workers, parents and communities alike, and Redd Barna plans to support the expansion of the programme.

While we need to be taking a serious look at the details of our programmes, it is important to keep in mind that the bottom line is always our attitudes—those of the people designing programmes and those on the front-line facilitating. Genuine respect and empathy is the key—and can't be packaged.

### *3) Develop generative curriculum*

In at least one setting we may develop a generative curriculum model. This will involve Save the Children Alliance members and partners working hand-in-hand with a particular group to develop a curriculum. Indeed the childrearing studies are being planned as an integral part of this. Pioneering work in this area is being done at the tertiary level by the University of Victoria's School of Child and Youth Care working with First Nations tribal councils.<sup>9</sup> The generative approach essentially involves pooling of knowledge bases—with both being regarded as valid. To elaborate a little: the content which the Alliance and its partners will wish to ensure is covered is recognized as being of value. It is also acknowledged that many of the key concepts and content are culturally embedded and draw heavily on essentially modernist, western perspectives. Other cultures have concepts and learning that have aspects which may be both similar or dissimilar. As Penn points out concepts of "intelligence" for example vary greatly in the extent to which they include notions of social responsibility or "biddability".<sup>10</sup> Concepts of "family life" clearly have massive variation. A couple of examples of difference of emphasis in many more traditional cultures would be i) a greater emphasis on attention to the child's spiritual development, ii) an emphasis on "community appropriate practice" as a balance to the "developmentally appropriate practice" so beloved by early childhood educators.

The point is to value views and information from the different sources. Key respected figures from the community are an integral part of the course. The curriculum is flexible and includes useful information from both mainstream and community perspectives. As Pence and McCallum point out, curricula that are not respectful of cultural diversity, that do not acknowledge that there are many trails that lead up the mountain, cannot expect to generate the pride and self-respect necessary to develop caring caregivers.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as the forces of modernization gather, we risk losing precious knowledge and even whole cultures. Different traditions contain alternative understandings about childrearing which provide an invaluable pool of ideas about development but which, once obliterated, are lost forever. Well conceived early childhood development programmes can be a powerful force in strengthening communities' confidence in their own culture, and in helping them to take what is useful from other ideas without losing what is strong in their own traditions.

A generative approach can be useful for parenting/caregiving, centre-based ECD programmes, or indeed primary or youth programmes. The same principles apply. We need as child-focused organizations to strengthen our ability to enable partners and communities to recognize, articulate and value local indigenous traditions. For example, the singing and dancing and greeting rituals which form such a central part of centre-based programmes in many parts of Asia reflect the incorporation of extremely rich cultural traditions. They are, however, often not recognized as an important part of the centres' role.

## CONCLUSION

Anyone who is closely involved with the development of young children—whether as a family member or as a professional—knows all too well that this is not an area where you learn all the right answers and that's it. It's a process where many people need to be supporting each other in partnership; it is not a product to be delivered. In most places there is a good deal of interweaving of traditional with modern, indigenous with imported, adaptive with dysfunctional. Listening to the different voices and taking account of the different perspectives in developing ECD programmes is an important part of working towards children being raised and educated in ways that enable them to function effectively as responsible citizens in a rapidly changing world as well as retaining a clear cultural identity and sense of values.

## ENDNOTES

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Side Trip—Early Childhood: Building our Understanding and Moving Towards the Best of Both Worlds