

ENHANCING EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION THROUGH EFFECTIVE PARENTING

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Abstract

This paper is on effective parenting as a crucial strategy for enhancing early childhood development and education. UNICEF (1999) reported that children who receive good care during early childhood are more likely to benefit from later education, are more productive, healthy and law abiding, reduce cost of education, medical care and other social spending.

Coincidentally, Nigeria, like other nations has paid dearly for her failure to invest in the care of children in their early years. The educational system is wrestling with illiteracy, school dropouts, underachievement, examination misconducts, rush to "special centers" etc. These and other related problems would have been avoided if a comprehensive attempt was made to provide for their needs from birth. Parents are identified as the first duty bearer to

- childcare. The roles of parents in ensuring a good beginning for children's future learning in various aspect of development were discussed. Issues in parenting were also highlighted and ways through which parents could be supported were suggested.

Introduction

The realization that learning begins at birth has made the needs of children the focus in the agenda of many nations. The first call for children as holders of right to care was adopted at the 3989 United Nations General Assembly Art. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, it was recognized that the status of children needs specific forms of vulnerability, particular interest and entitlements (Otaala: 2004). Consequently, the Jomtien World Summit (1990), developed the convention on the Rights of the Child and stated Children's rights as "Child Survival, Development and Participation". Articles 1 - 12 of the summit discussed the child's right to adequate living standards, healthcare, protection from abuse, education that is free and to freedom from discrimination.

The survival, growth and development of young children are interdependent and can only be achieved if basic services are provided in health, nutrition, education, safe environment, poverty eradication, empowerment of mothers, social mobilization and good drinking water. The provision of these services by different sectors working together will produce a well-rounded child in all aspects of development.

Thus, the best education for children is the one that takes care of their all round development. This education begins at birth. It was in recognition of this fact at Jomtien 1990 and Dakar 2000, that parents were identified as the child's first teacher or key duty bearers. The parents were called upon to secure the condition of living necessary for their children's development. This has to be done within their ability and financial capability, with the government assisting them. The government ensures that adequate measures are taken to combat diseases and malnutrition in children by seeing to it that children are given adequate nutritious foods, clean drinking water and given the highest attainable standard of health. With the formalization of early childhood education under the Basic Education Programme, the responsibility for childcare has also been extended to school or teachers. Thus, raising a child well calls for the provision of high quality integrated efforts of the family, teachers, community and later, the government. This paper will therefore identify the roles of parents in various developmental aspects. Some issues that attract attention in parenthood will be highlighted. The ways through which parents could be supported by other stakeholders will be suggested.

Child Care

Child care, according to Myers, as cited in Ajaala (2006), consists of the actions taken by care givers in the home or non-domestic setting to ensure children's survival and to promote their growth and development. To Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) and the United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) (1996), as cited in Ajaala (2006), it refers to the provision of basic needs like food, shelter, health, security, affection, interaction and stimulation which are essential for survival, development and later education. Thus, a child may be born strong but if he is not cared for properly to overcome diseases, he may develop abnormally, be sickly, unable to work well in school or may even die during infancy. As the best beginning for children is advocated through adequate care, the health and well being of their mothers is also important, as it will improve on the care and attention a

child receives during the earliest years. Schweinhart and Weikart (1980), have confirmed that enriched childhood experiences permanently enhance children's competent in every day life, that is their ability to meet social expectations, advance appropriately in school, avoid trouble and have high aspirations for themselves. Good care for children during the early years is emphasized because research has shown that children who receive good care during early childhood are more likely to benefit from later education and other social services. They are also likely to be more productive, healthy and law abiding citizens. They reduce future costs of education, medical care and other social spending (UNICEF 1999).

Childhood Development

Maduewesi (2005), defines child development as the unfolding of behaviours from immature to mature and the evolution of a human being from dependency to autonomous adulthood. The FGN/UNICEF (2001), observes the following as key issues in early childhood development:-

- Nutritional deficiency and its Negative effect on a growing child.
- Urbanization/increasing involvement of women in the labour force and the need for alternative childcare arrangements by careless inexperienced child minders and ill equipped day care centers.
- Negative effects of gender differentiation in child rearing and socialization.
- Lack of books and toys for mental stimulation both at home and in day care/nursery schools.
- Inadequate number and poor quality of daycare centers and pre-primary schools, high fees reducing the number of children in pre-primary schools.
- Low involvement of fathers in child upbringing.

Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education is concerned with the overall development of the child socially, physically, emotionally, morally and intellectually. It lays the foundation of the life long process of bringing up an individual from infancy through adulthood. This process starts from birth through nurturing, proper care and provision of safe environment so that the child will be physically secured, socially competent and able to learn.

UNICEF, State of the World's Children (2001) defines it as "Comprehensive approach to policies and programmes for children from birth to eight years of age.

According to Federal Republic of Nigeria, (FRN) (2004), early childhood/pre-primary education is given "in an educational institution to children prior to their entry into primary school. It includes the creches (Day care centers), the nursery and kindergarten.

To Maduewesi (2005), the period (0-8years) is critical for both physical growth and development of cognitive function and are directly related to adequate care, health, nutrition and stimulations. The implication is that a malnourished child may not likely benefit from educational services no matter how good the services may be. Hence for children to be alive, well and also have proper all round development, adequate care should be taken of their upbringing right from birth (UNICEF: 1999). Education

Education is usually defined, explained and viewed in many ways by educationists, depending upon the subject matter to be highlighted. In this context, early childhood education is the theme of the discussion. Hence education is defined and explained as follows:

Mohammed (2004), feels that education builds a man and makes him useful to his environment. It aims at developing the individual to engage in useful activities. Madueke (1997), asserts that education should equip the youths with the needed knowledge and skills and be able to take care of the needs of the child and society.

Daniyan (1998), sees it as a form of investment in human beings that yields economic benefit and contributes to a country's future wealth by increasing productive capacity of its people. From all these definitions, one can rightly say that education is the key to development. It helps a child to develop his abilities and potentials in order to live positively in the society.

Sustainable Development

As summed up by the United Nations Development Project Administrator James Gustave Speth is "development that gives priority to the poor, enlarge their choices and opportunities and provide for their participation in decision that affect their lives... development that is pro people, pro nature, pro job and pro women"

Ogunlade (2004), sees it as development founded on self reliance and self sustainment and that its focus is what people are capable of doing or being, whether they can survive, be well nourished, able to

read and write, communicate and develop their minds and capable of escaping avoidable diseases. It also determines whether the people's human rights are guaranteed since education is a tool for livelihood and opens up avenues in all the areas spelt out under sustainable development, one can rightly say that it is central for sustainable development. To Iheonunekwu (2004), education for sustainable development should not be seen as merely the acquisition of literacy or preparing for employment but as a process of engaging an individual from the cradle to the grave.

Parenting and Child Development

To an average well-educated person, parenting and child care means proper provision of the child's or family's needs such as buying them good foods, clothing, financial support etc. parenting means more than this. It refers to the duty of parents in caring for their children and bringing them up until they are old enough to fend for themselves (Ugwu in Ajaala: 2006) ,

Parenting is therefore, the process of raising and educating a child from birth until adulthood. It usually takes place in the home by the mother and father. In African society, the culture presents certain roles for parents and the extent to which they carry out these roles will determine how responsible they are as parents. Nevertheless, certain skills are necessary for adequate parenting namely:

- Noticing what the child is doing
- Observing the child's behaviour over a long period.
- Acting in ways you want the child to act.
- Stating clearly the rules the child is expected to obey.
- Applying some punishment consistently for violation of the rules.
- Rewarding conformity continuously.
- Settling disagreements instead of accelerating them.

The central task of parenthood is to train the child to become a well-developed and competent adult.- Many people believe that parenting begins at birth but research has proved that mothers begin nurturing a child well before birth. Scientific evidence indicates that from the 5th month onwards, the unborn baby can hear sound, be aware of motions and possibly can exhibit short-term memory. Several studies e.g. that of Kissilersky et al in 2003 shows evidence that the unborn baby can become familiar with the parents voices. Other studies show that by the 7th month, external schedules cues can influence the foetus sleep habits.

Parents can perform these roles in different aspects:

Psychomotor, social, intellectual, emotional and moral. The child development is multi-dimensional. The child will be discussed along this line for easy understanding and clarity.

Physical Development

The duty of parents in caring for their children needs and bringing them up starts when the baby is still inside the mother's womb. Such a care is given through the mother by the father and the mother herself. Thus, the parental roles during prenatal as Otubelu (1999) has summarized include the following.

- Provision of balanced diet for the mother so that both herself and the unborn child will be nourished.
- Access to adequate medical care for the mother to protect her and the unborn baby from diseases
- Registering for antenatal care and going for check-up and taking all drugs given by doctors.
- Avoiding smoking, drinking of alcohol and consumption of drugs not prescribed by doctor to protect the unborn child from fetal alcoholic syndrome, mental retardation and irregularities of the automatic nervous system (Oladele 2005).
- Provision of emotional security for the pregnant mother by her husband through being close to her, providing financial needs of the pregnancy and acquiring the essential items in readiness for the arrival of the baby.

When the child eventually arrives, he/she is physically helpless and completely depends on the parents for his physical needs and survival. Medinnus and Johnson (1976), reinstate that mothering at this stage of infancy should be a continuation of the prenatal state. The child's physical well-being depends on how parents take care of his/her physical needs such as food, shelter, clothes, protection from diseases, being kept close and neat and adequate rest. Parents should therefore, ensure the following:

- Adequate feeding of the infant starting with breast feeding and gradually weaning the child to

solid food. Findings from a survey in 10 UNICEF assisted states revealed that on infant feeding practices, more than two-thirds of mothers do not practice colostrums feeding on the belief that is it bad for babies and that most mothers breastfeed their children for long period and that a significant number of mothers wean their children at about 3 months directly into family foods like rice, potato and yam. Thus, malnutrition has negative effects on children as they were seen with signs of caloric protein malnutrition. This can affect the brain functioning and learning.

- Protection of the child from diseases like fever, mumps, measles, whooping cough, poliomyelitis and other deadly diseases by immunizing the child as at when due. The primary healthcare programme of the Federal Ministry of Health to eradicate the six childhood killer diseases through the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) is a step in the right direction.
- Safeguarding the child from accidents and other dangerous conditions that can lead to deformity or even death e.g. drugs and self-medication.
- Keeping the child clean and neat as well as the environment. This will prevent transmission of diseases.
- Ensuring adequate medical care when the child is ill.

Psychomotor Development

Although most motor skills can be developed with little or no help from parents, they can create enabling environment for psychomotor development. The physical exercises involved in most skills demand that a child should not be lack any nutrient. Thus, a balanced diet is essential to provide energy and growth.

Toys and other visual aids that children can touch, manipulate, dismantle and assemble should be provided. This interaction with such objects will help children to learn.

Parents should provide opportunities for learning skills, like hopping on one foot, galloping, skipping, dancing, throwing, catching balancing (Fafunwa 1974).

Early weaning of children into local dishes that lack adequate nutrients should be minimized as it affects a child's motor development. Furthermore, parents should ensure that their child is free from infections as some children who have achieved the skills of sitting or standing or walking have been reported to lose such after suffering from one disease or the -other.

All these early experiences mediated by mothers and fathers serve as foundations on which subsequent learning are built and they endure through life affecting future behaviours for good or bad (Madrewell 2005).

Social Development

Educating a child does not begin and end with formal schooling. It includes all the influences and learning that equip a person to function effectively in his or her environment. Since learning starts at birth and since mothers handle the young child most of the time, it follows that women are the child first teacher. They help to socialize the child into the culture of the society, teaching him or her basic habits and attitudes, rules and regulations of the society, relationships and most important, the child's first language (mother-tongue). Durojaiye (1976), highlights these equal habits that parents can teach children through the process of socialization as:

- How to greet adults
- Eat with good manners.
- Talk politely.
- Keep ones temper and personal grievances
- How to work and co-operate with others
- How to give and take orders.
- How to be generous and cheerful.
- How to avoid quarrels.
- Sex roles and how to relate with the opposite sex.

Maduwesi (2005), is of the opinion that right from the very early stages, parents should communicate, show love, and read stories to their children. They should provide them with basic needs like food, clothing, shelter, play materials since parental deprivation can result in aggressive or withdrawal behaviour.

- Available resources in the family should be shared equally among the siblings to

discourage ill-feelings.

- Since social skills are acquired through observation and imitation, parents should avoid incessant display of aggression like physical combat, nagging, use of abusive language etc in front of children. Parents can discuss issues, entertain children's questions giving appropriate answers and encourage them to express their opinions on certain issues.

Research findings have shown that where mother-child relationship is close and satisfying, the so-called stress of adolescence becomes a trivial issue. Thus it is important that parents have more interactions and engage in language oriented activities with their children. By so doing it becomes easy for them to imbibe the norms, values and even the totality of the family culture and that of the immediate community. Parents can enhance language development through modeling, bed time stories, provision of picture books and readers etc. they can engage children in activities that will improve on their listening skills such as listening to stories, listening to music.

- * Parents can help in correcting language problems like stammering, poor pronunciations, lisping, lallying, etc. by using older siblings. Survey findings attributes lack of information about sexuality, lack of communication with parents especially about sex and HIV/AIDS to problems that affect child development like school drop-out, juvenile delinquency, cultism, drug and alcohol abuse etc. Children experiences should be shared with them. This can only be achieved if parents are loving, friendly and patient with their children.

Intellectual Development

Durojaiye (1976), views intellectual development of children as characterized by the ability to master and remember events and stimuli, deal with symbols, interact with adults and deal with several alternatives simultaneously. The ability of parents to lay the foundation of intellectual development will depend on their educational level (especially mothers) and the family socio-economic background. For instance, an educated woman is in a better position to understand her child's needs, help her with school work, is better equipped to practice hygienic living habits in her home and provide educative materials such as books and media equipment.

Research has also revealed that children of parents who have positive attitude to school and who urge, encourage and support their children's education are more likely to succeed than those whose parents are non-challant.

- Parents can lay the foundation for intellectual development between the last trimester of pregnancy and the first two and half years of birth. This is the time when malnutrition affects the child's brain development. Hence improved family feeding habit can be exposed to intellectual activities through observation, imitation and problem solving. They should engage in activities involving manipulation of objects. Hence toys, picture books and other materials they can see and touch should be made available to them.
- Parents can involve children in local games that require skills in counting, addition conservation, multiplication and division.
- Parents can teach historical events to children orally through stories. They can engage them in discussion of issues, questioning and answering and encouraged to express their opinions through debates.
- Proverbs, poetic verses, riddles and tongue twisters can enhance children's reasoning power and skill in decision-making.
- Children should be exposed to interact with their environment e.g they can observe plants and animals, engage in-group activities.
- Instructions can be given to children with intermittent demonstrations.

Emotional Development

Since young children express themselves through their emotions, they can also learn through that mode. Therefore, mothers can teach children how to love and be loved. This is because an unloved child grows up into an unloving and unlovable adult (Maduewesi: 2005).

Durojaiye (1976), pointed out that childrearing pattern in many African homes is often full of

emotions.

As the child is fondly and warmly carried and played with, emotions of joy and sadness, love and hatred, jealousy and affection are shown openly. Parents should encourage and sustain pleasant emotions while discouraging unpleasant ones. They should provide intimate human attention with love, affection and emotional satisfaction. Just as Medinnus and Johnson (1976), have noted, when a child is deprived of parental love, he feels inferior and insecure. A child can strive to win parental love through attention seeking behaviours, refusal to eat, temper tantrum, bed-wetting and where these fail, he/she becomes hostile or withdrawn. Parents should provide pleasant experiences necessary for development of love and affection. This will help the child develop basic trust and security on his relationship with parents and thus, extend some to himself and others. Parents can encourage children to share, mix up with others, have open mind about others, show tolerance, recognize and show respect to others and devise healthy means of coping with anger and frustrations like reading, writing, singing, painting etc. Parents should not make their children to fear them, hence threat should not be used to secure obedience from the child.

Moral Development

The foundation for many virtues such as fairness, sincerity, diligence and readiness to offer assistance to others is laid in the home. Parents should strive to teach children about good and bad conduct very early in life through instructions, reward, punishment, learning from other people's experiences and unconscious internalization of the lessons of morality and good manners from folk tales and proverbs. They can play major roles as models to their children by displaying acceptable moral behaviours for children to emulate.

- Stories can be utilized in teaching lessons of morality and good manners to children. Fafunwa (1976), reported the existence of a lot of proverbs and folktales on moral and ethical behaviour and the consequences of bad behaviour and misconduct abound in many traditional Nigerian societies.

Issues in Parenthood

Parenting is a delicate but critical skill that affects not just the family fortunes but sets the pace of communities and determines the culture of societies. The aggregate individual parenting efforts determine the quality of generations of children and subsequently, of adults. Certain issues have attracted a lot of attention in parenthood. Some of these are:

Family planning

This refers to the spacing of births for the health and welfare of mothers and children. It helps parents to have their babies when they want and the number they desire. Some fathers are non-challant about family planning so also some religious groups discourage the use of Intra-Uterine Devices (IUD). Most families, are burdened with children they are not ready to take care of.

Child Abuse and Neglect

This involves endangering a child's emotional and intellectual well-being by willful acts of parents or guardians through sexual abuse, starvation, abandonment of malformed babies, self medication, total absence of care, child battering, fatal poisoning and mutilation. A child may be neglected by parents through acts of omission like refusal to seek proper medical advise, default in chronic and inadequate stimulation and care by parents etc. most of these are attributed to ignorance, poverty, apathy and willful intent to inflict damage by parents.

Sex Education

This is giving correct information about the meaning and functions of sex to the young people and helping to cut down unwanted pregnancy and venereal diseases, remove prejudice and misconceptions and instill a sense of responsibility in the youths. Incidentally, parents do not consider it appropriate to educate children sexually thereby, exposing them to half or false information gotten from uninformed friends, pornographic films and pictures etc. There is need for a guided and purposeful sex education for our children.

Urbanization/Employment of Mothers outside the home

These have brought about the need for alternative childcare arrangements with its adverse effect on the children's upbringing. The house help or maid who is inexperienced in the job of motherhood now substitutes for the mother.

Teenage Pregnancy

This has devastating effect on both the teenage mother and the child. The implication of teenage pregnancy for child development include low birth weight, infant mortality," abortion and child dumping, poor start in life for the children in terms of love, care, attention and home education, inadequate guidance and stimulation. All these retard the child's intellectual growth and limits his ability to make meaningful contribution to the society.

Way Forward

The task of raising up a child is a responsibility that should not be left solely for the parents. It depends on the efforts and resources of the family, the community and the nation. In order to provide high integrated early years education and childcare, which will make a positive contribution to children's early development and future learning, the following support programmes are suggested:-

- Government should enact and implement laws and policies regarding the right of the child and mothers so that they can live decently and safely with opportunities to prepare children for purposeful adult life. Such laws should emphasize the need for child education, healthcare and protection from child abuse and neglect. A Draft of such law was produced in 1999 and is yet to be approved.
- Day care centers should be provided for working parents with facilities to cater for children left under their care. The caregivers should be trained. A conducive environment that would help parents take care of their children should be set up through provision of basic services such as water, electricity, good roads, good communication system, adequate housing etc.
- Provision of adequate health care programmes that will take care of the health needs of the child and the family with emphasis on parenting identification and care. The Expanded Programme on Immunization though in the right direction, needs to be reinforced.
- The government should improve on the socio-economic standard of parents by providing job opportunities and improve on their working conditions. This will reduce poverty and prevent some of its related problems like child abuse.
- Initiate parenting programmes to improve knowledge of parents, care-givers, teachers and community people about various tasks in bringing up a child such as better care, exclusive breastfeeding, health and other related issues. If such programmes already exist in Cuba, Indonesia, China and Turkey, and were able to reach large numbers of people, Nigeria should emulate them.

Conclusion

The central message of this paper is that all children must be given a good start in life through nurturing, proper care and a safe environment that enables them to survive and by physically secure, socially competent and able to learn. That educating and care of young children require more than keeping them safe and free from harm. It starts even before birth of the child with the provision of the basic human needs of food, shelter etc. and the non basic human needs of showing affection, interaction and stimulation, playing and socializing, protection from exposure to danger and providing a prepared environment for exploration. Thus, the better the care and stimulation the child receives at the earliest the greater the benefit for the child as well as for the society. The essence is to have well-developed and healthy children who will ultimately become competent manpower for national development.

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