

Short Report

Early child development - nurturing care: A nation's pride

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Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health, 2023; **52**(2): 202-203

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4038/sljch.v52i2.10455>

(Keywords: Early child development, Early reading, Early learning, Development)

Early childhood development (ECD) is the development of a child up to eight years of life. It is a very important period of life as one million neuron connections are formed each second. This pace is never repeated in life. ECD has a life-long impact on productivity, health, disease, socio-economic functioning, learning and education of a child¹. Lack of parental interaction, a lot of screen time, poverty, hunger, malnutrition, poor housing environment, lack of parental education and poor health hampers ECD². ECD comprises cognitive, socio-emotional, language, motor and regulatory abilities. Measures taken to strengthen ECD forms a solid ground for future health and wellbeing. Problems and support in pregnancy, childhood and adolescence have the potential to transform adult life, future and society.

The first thousand days of life from conception to 2 years are a vital period which determines the future wellbeing of the child as an adult³. After early childhood, neuroplasticity declines. The synapses which are less stimulated will get pruned and lost for a lifetime thereafter⁴. Children's brain development needs nurturing care in the form of responsive feeding, good nutrition and adequate healthcare⁵. Interventions for ECD-nurturing care should range from conception to adolescence and should concentrate even more on the early three years of a child's life especially in children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

The five components of nurturing care are good health, adequate nutrition, security and safety,

responsive parenting and opportunities for early learning.

- *Good health:* Parents and caregivers should be hygienic and teach hygiene to the child, should use preventive and promotive health services and should minimize infections. Parents should also access healthcare services to monitor the growth and health of a child.
- *Adequate nutrition:* Maternal prenatal nutrition and the nutrition of a child in the first thousand days of life are vital for his or her wellbeing. Child and adult health problems including hypertension, obesity and diabetes will be programmed by the nutritional status during this vital period. For normal brain development, calories alone are not sufficient. Key nutrients like protein, folate, zinc, vitamins A, B and D, iron, iodine, and polyunsaturated fatty acids are all required for normal brain development. Failure to provide adequate nutrition to the brain in this critical period results in life-long brain deficits which may not be reversed with subsequent nutritional repletion. Exclusive breast feeding for 6 months should be advocated unreservedly. Breast feeding should be continued with other complementary feeding up to 2 years of age, wherever possible. Public policies should be prioritised to provide adequate nutrition and to advocate healthy eating during this crucial time which would lead to good neurodevelopment which is a key factor in long-term health.
- *Security and safety:* The biggest risks to children are unsafe play environments, road traffic crashes, air pollution, low income, extreme poverty, violence and harsh punishment. Financial and other support systems for the most vulnerable households should be provided by social and child protective services. Maltreatment of children should be prevented and detected by community networks and other services, to be followed by urgent action.

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(Received on 07/07/2022: Accepted after revision on 22 July 2022)

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest

Personal funding was used for the project.

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- *Responsive parenting*: Children in their early years should get stimulating experiences in the form of constant face-to-face interactions with the parent. They should be exposed to positive, responsive parenting in the form of appropriate, prompt, consistent interactions with the parent or caregiver which comprises talk, love and play; food, sanitation and access to health services as required by the child to survive and thrive. Children also need a warm and affectionate relationship with an adult caregiver who will be responsive to the child's needs. The physical, neurophysiological and psychological health of a child depends on the responsive caregiving by the parent or caregiver. Responsiveness is a three-step process involving observation, interpretation and action by the caregiver.
- *Opportunities for early learning*: Early learning opportunities should be provided by the parent or caregiver to the children. Learning begins during pregnancy. Babies begin to acquire skills as soon as they are born through talking and singing, smiling and eye contact, by imitation and modelling and through play, through simple games like waving bye, bye and peek a boo etc. when children play with everyday objects like pots and pans that are at home they learn about usage of these articles and what to do with them. Reading books starting from four to six months of age builds knowledge, imagination and curiosity and allows children to name things.

There is only a decade left to achieve the millennium development goals and the statutes of the world's children remain grim. Millions of children die before reaching their fifth birthday and many of them die before 28 days of life. A large majority of these children's deaths occurs in the developing world due to malnutrition and poor health. A large proportion of these deaths can be averted by adequate health interventions. There is an urgent need to act on ECD to improve children's neurodevelopment and thus improve their scholastic performance and later economic productivity. Paediatricians should routinely talk to parents and caregivers and ensure that the five pillars of ECD- nurturing care are being delivered to the children.

As Nelson Mandela so succinctly pointed out, "there can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children".

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