

## REVIEW ARTICLE

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: GUIDE FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AND TEACHERS CARING FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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In today's complex world of relationships and affiliations, especially with the invasion of technology in our routine lives and lot of environmental factors; parenting has become a challenging phenomenon especially from the perspective of values and morals. Children's upcoming/growing behaviour is a reflection of early childhood parenting, which is not only depicted in academia but as well as in their psychosocial interactions and behaviours. With the passage of time, several challenges of child rearing have been brought forward to parents to sustain a society based on values and morals held high by the human civilization. Since ages, the need for parent education has eventually increased (training parents to aptly choose between correct and incorrect strategies to deal with their children). Based on the case study, this paper will discuss about the childhood parenting challenges and the recommendations to subdue this demanding issue along with possible resolutions.

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Human behaviour is shaped by several environmental factors. Therefore to shape the individual constructively, one required a conducive environment to nurture. During the early years of a child's life, 'parenting' is the most critical element which has the prospective to shape human personality and behaviour. Literature also supports the impact of early caregiving experiences. One important facet is the development of a healthy relationship with caregivers. A child in a protected relationship uses his or her caregiver as a strong foundation to explore the world and develops resilience to face the challenges. It is depicted that children who have established healthy relationship have performed better academically and engage well socially over time.<sup>1</sup> Literature also reveals that the habits formed by a child at an early age are more likely to become part of his/her character as he/she grows older. Therefore, parents are considered to be the first and best teacher to their child.<sup>2</sup> In order to judge the degree to which parenting has been successful for an individual may refer the culmination of preferred behaviour and personality in him. Based on the concept of Early Childhood Development (ECD), World Bank has defined early childhood period beginning from conception to age of eight years.<sup>3</sup> It has also been reported that children begin to learn rapidly since from their birth (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)).<sup>4</sup> First three years of life is rapid development period for a child. Evans *et al* also supports the notion that early childhood education particularly first three years of child care as it has positive impact not only on individual child or family but it sheds strong influence on country and society as a whole. All important brain development pathways are active during this period, which lay down the foundation of a good brain for subsequent learning during later

stages of life.<sup>5</sup> In today's world parenting has become more crucial and significant in shaping human personality and behaviour.

Based on the importance of role of effective parental practices and their impact on childhood development, a local NGO took an initiative of identifying the need for parent education programs. Thus, they have started imparting trainings in community settings for parents. To identify the need and effectiveness of parent education program for enhancing positive child rearing practices in the community and to share parents' experiences in child rearing practices as lessons learnt. The training was based on a need analysis of child rearing problems faced by parents of pre-school and lower primary level children. The analysis in this project is based on a sample of 25 participants of this training, who attended the program in a youth centre in Karachi, Pakistan. The outcome of this training was evaluated through anecdotal evidence obtained during the stage of post training interviews.

The anecdotal evidence showed that the training induced positive parenting practices which were extremely helpful in combating child rearing challenges such as rebellious attitude, aggressive behaviour, and use of belligerent language. It is strongly recommended that the notion of educating parents through such training programs be encouraged as a contributive attempt to enhance the quality of child rearing phenomena.

Minghat and Jaramillo have expressed that provision of ECD and educational services are the alternatives that can help communities in the achievement of four, of the millennium development goals, i.e., eradicate extreme poverty, hunger, reduce child mortality, achieve universal primary education and promote gender equality and empower women.<sup>6</sup>

Study shows that 'vision of learning from birth is far from a reality. In many countries including Pakistan, ECD is still understood as pre-primary education for children over three'.<sup>2</sup> The consultative group working on early childhood care and development supported the notion of improving early childhood development and learning the best strategies, is to work with parents. This will help the parents to acquire the information and the skills which they need to become better parents.<sup>7</sup> Effective parenting has been emphasised by Marsh *et al*.<sup>8</sup> According to them, 'Positive traditional parenting practices should be reinforced. When raising children, it is important that traditional positive practices used over generation are continued such as showing affection, taking care of other family members, talking gently to children during bathing and feeding times, reciting rhymes, telling stories.... If we do not use our old, but very effective childcare practices, they will be lost. There may be other things that don't necessarily help children to adapt to rapidly changing societies which people may decide need changing'.<sup>8</sup>

Primarily there is a need to realise that, it is the nurturing that is imparted from parents which shapes the attitude and personality of a child. Such an act is a step of self-empowerment. Parents are empowered, through proper upbringing, to rear individuals into successful human beings. Therefore, it is absolutely imperative to enhance and modify parenting skills to ensure a sustainable human rearing mechanism. The first step towards affective parenting is developing and sustaining a healthy parent child relationship. After interviewing from parents, it was evident that the following pointers will prove beneficial.

#### **Keeping abreast of child development:**

Keeping abreast of child development may be regarded as a foundation block in building a healthy parent-child relationship. As the popular saying goes 'you would have understood if you were in my shoes', so in order to develop a good understanding with a child, a parent must have an insight into what his/her child is going through and what he/she must expect from him. This shall bring a profound improvement in parenting style. Elementary awareness of the fact 'that during the age of 2-3 years a child frequently uses the word 'no' in an attempt to assert his identity and authority', could save a parent from misperceiving the child of being stubborn or rude. Therefore, efforts should be made by parents to explore as much as possible regarding the physiological and psychological development of their child. According to Ahmann,-E 'Understanding a child's normal development process is a first step towards positive parenting, so that parents can decide which behaviours should be considered normal or else unacceptable'.<sup>1</sup> This will help to save the parents from needless worry, and the child from unnecessary scolding.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Involving child in decision making:**

This approach has multiple benefits. Reviewed in a broad spectrum, the strategy plays an eminent role in maturation of a child, both intellectually and emotionally. Provision of authority to choose, triggers the thinking and reasoning process of a child. The outcome of the decision making may also sharpen his/her judgment skills.

To focus the effect of this strategy on a child's emotional growth, this paper views it in the light of Erickson's theory of developmental stages. This theory highlights that during the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> year of a child's life, he/she goes through a crisis of autonomy versus doubt.<sup>10</sup> The child craves to seek the answer: if he would be free of self-doubt. At this crucial stage, involvement of a child in decision making process signifies parent's trust in him, whereas the act of decision making builds confidence in him. Moreover, it was also proved that involvement of a child in decisions increases his/her compliance as this strategy culminates a sense of responsibility in the child and prevents the parent from being portrayed as unfair individuals. This strategy may exterminate the root causes of rebellious attitude among children.

#### **Defining Family Structure:**

It is observed that aggressive behaviour among children was high in instances where parents were inconsistent in their parenting styles.<sup>11</sup> It was also emphasized that adopting of control techniques which are illogical and inconsistent is one of the least successful parenting styles.<sup>12</sup> This can be associated with the confusions of such parental attitude begets in a child's mind regarding his parents' temperament and their expectations. In a few grim cases, parents stated that they exploded on their children owing to the frustration originated from this communication gap. Therefore, it is suggested that a parent must explicitly define to oneself after resolving with his/ her spouse; how each of them will handle different child behaviours. This is significant because a child can usually pick how to behave with whom in different situations. It may be useful to bear in mind that extremely different or extremely similar parenting styles can both prove ineffective. The focus should be to adopt complementary styles with inter balance. This way the child neither feels being ganged up by grown-ups, nor attempts to take unnecessary advantage of vastly different parenting styles. Another point of significance is that parents, even while they are going through a difficult period, must always keep a healthy level of communication with each other and their children. This will bring consistency in their attitude towards their children. Also, assuring a child that a parent is always there to support him/her and that the parental love is unconditional, as it works wonders in developing and sustaining a healthy parent-child relationship.

The most empowering job incumbent with parents is attitude building or personality development of their child. This involves outlining the way in which one perceives and behaves towards his or her environment. It has been shared during the training that personality and attitude of parents that children observe ultimately affects their personality development. The disciplinary strategy plays a key role in preventing and resolving conduct problems. The feedback that parents give for their child's action also carries the potential to nurture a child to develop positive attitude towards life.<sup>13</sup> Application of these pointers, is lucidly illustrated below.

#### **Role modelling by parents:**

Children can be regarded as active receptacles. Whatever they observe, plays a pivotal role in developing their perception of the world, the relationships and the right and wrong. A 'family' is a tremendous institute which provides a platform to culminate in children the morals and values held high by parents.

Very often, it may be observed that children mimic their adults. A daughter may impulsively urge to wear make-up like her mother does or it maybe difficult for a son to keep away from his father's sunglasses and car keys. This fact is validated by social learning theory. Indeed children are the best mimickers, therefore it must be understood that there is a high tendency in a child to copy and develop his/her parents' behaviour. Style of communication used by parents reflects to a great extent on a child's way of communication, so it is wise for parents to be polite and soft when talking to children rather than adopting a dominating mode.

If parents encounter their child using an abusive language, the first step must be, to check the peer company of their child. Maybe he/she has adopted these words from peers at school; therefore a sustainable solution to this conduct problem would be to resolve the issue from its root cause. However, the immediate response of parents should be to politely explain the child that use of such language is not appreciable. Completely ignoring the child or responding by extreme reprimands are both considered damaging.<sup>14</sup>

Another important thing that parents must keep in mind is that it is both unrealistic and unfair to expect the child to uphold values that parents themselves do not keep. For instance, a parent wants to teach his child to respect others, but demonstrates no respect for the house keeping member at home. This hypocrite behaviour bears the risk of begetting confusion in a child's mind which in turn begets frustration and rebellious behaviour at a later stage. Thus insight into ones own's behaviour and attitude is also an important part of effective parenting.

#### **Utilizing appropriate disciplinary strategy:**

Most of the parents today are well aware of the importance of discipline in an individual's life. A

common trend for disciplining a child is to formulate a set of rules for him/her to abide. Parental interviews suggested that for some parent this strategy works wonders, for others however it proves to be more damaging than beneficial. Conclusion drawn from the analysis of these antagonistic results is that, this rule proves to be affective in disciplining only when implemented properly. The following discussion will help parents correct their disciplining strategy.

Rules must be firm —this establishes 'authority' of parents which is absolutely eminent in disciplining a child. Secondly rules must be consistent, that is they shouldn't vary according to mood of parents. As, if this is the case the child will never be fully aware of consequences of his/her behaviour. He may even be swerved to believe that he can easily get away with things. Thus the goal of developing sense of discipline will remain unachieved.

Both attitude building and disciplining are successful when reinforcement of rules is accompanied by age appropriate explanation. If the child is to internalize the message and make it a part of him, he would need to know that the specified action is wrong not only because his parents say, but because it is intrinsically unhealthy or unacceptable. The ultimate success of the task —disciplining children—also depends on the way parents respond when their children breach rules. Parents must understand that punishment should be in accordance to the grimness of rule breached, so that, the child can understand the difference between actions that are merely regarded un-preferable and those that are seriously condemned.<sup>13</sup>

Once this is understood, question that lies ahead is: 'what mode of punishment should the parents choose?' The worst strategy is to resort on physical disciplining and there are several reasons for this statement. First of all, adopting physical disciplining is in fact demonstrating that violence is the solution to all problems. According to Lopez-Stewart 'Physical punishment is a form of intra-familial violence.' It also implements that the person practicing it approves the act of hurting somebody smaller or less powerful than oneself. So there is a high probability for physically disciplined children to demonstrate aggressive behaviour and bullying attitude.<sup>15</sup> According to Javo C, 'Children inflicted with physical punishment reported a higher rate of behaviour problems.' Moreover 'physical disciplining' triggers positive behaviour based on fear, not morals. Thus it only acts as a temporary disciplining tool rather than a sustainable solution and carries the risk of breeding aggressive behaviour in a child's personality.<sup>16</sup> There are however alternates to physical disciplining which have proven constructive. Examples of these include: grounding, temporarily denying permission to watch TV, imposing extra duties like cleaning up the house and deducting from pocket money.

No matter which mode parents choose, it must be borne in mind that any punishment or reprimanding act should not be done in a way to damage the child's self-esteem. Often parents scold children in public, thinking that such an act will deter the child from repeating the act. What goes unheeded is the risk that this strategy can backfire by damaging their child's self-esteem. As a result he becomes immune to parental reprimands and punishments. Respecting a child develops self-esteem, inner discipline and responsibility in him/her.<sup>9</sup> Experience suggests that respecting an individual even in his/her early years of life builds up his/her self-esteem increasing his sensitivity and compliance to disciplinary measures.

#### **Praising more than criticize:**

Parents must reflect on this as their approach here directs the development of their child's perception. The question posed to them is, 'whether they want their child to adopt a particular behaviour due to fear of punishment or because of his drive to please his parents and feel good about him?' Thus, appropriate use of this pointer shall imbibe positive attitude in children. Moreover, it is logical that a child who receives a lot of criticism and hardly any praise will often continue the cycle of negative behaviour because he thinks that praise is hard to get. According to Kochanska *et al* children subjected to frequent criticism by mothers are reported to have developed more behavioural problems, and lower internalization of rules.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the parents were discouraged to practice 'negative labelling' as a child has a tendency to associate his/her personality to what he/she is perceived to be.<sup>17</sup> During the post training discussion many parents shared experiences which supported this intervention. One of them reflected that, as opposed to negative labelling, association of positive qualities to a child's personality induces that trait in him/her. She further contributed her own experience when she has praised her daughter in front of her friends by saying that she never lied. The participant noticed that this act of hers, motivated her child to try being honest. Also, 'negative labelling of children' has a negative effect on the parent's motivation which in turn affects their parenting quality.<sup>18</sup>

Having said that the importance of parent training programs should not be underestimated and neither should be the value of positive parenting. Parent education programs have the potential to train parents for rearing children into individuals who are well equipped to succeed in all spheres of life and sustain in a society based on values and morals which the human civilization has held high since ages. Furthermore, the notion of

'parent education programs' has been designed to improve the quality of child rearing on a continuous basis by bringing up different parenting challenges in focus of knowledgeable and experienced individuals and thus resolving them efficiently. Community health care providers could certainly take this notion ahead in community to work with parents in order to achieve the goal.

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