EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT: BUILDING SOCIETIES THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

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ABSTRACT: The World Summit for Children (1990) marked the dawn of a pleasant and brighter phase for the world's children. According to UNICEF, this World Summit reflected the world's hopes for children (UNICEF, 2002 p.ll). World leaders promised to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was approved by the United Nations General Assembly the previous year (1989). At the Summit, "they signed on to ambitious goals to reduce child mortality, increase immunization coverage, deliver basic education and a whole raft of other measures by the year 2000 (FGN/UNICEF, 2001p.ll). This gave the hope that an action plan with time-tied concrete goals plus a specific legal framework would transform the lives of children worldwide in a short time. This means that the issue of children's survival, development, protection and education were no longer matters for charity but legal obligations.

KEYWORDS: early childhood, building societies, partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

Among the goals of the Summit is to ensure the appropriate development of the child. Child development encapsulates the unfolding of behaviours from immature to mature and the evolution of a human being from dependency status to autonomous adulthood. This is an enormous task, which cannot be carried out easily. The complexities inherent in the development of the child call for partnerships in the business of child rearing. Nigeria, a signatory to the Convention has since then put issues of children especially early childhood development on the front burner, trying to meet the goals of the Summit. This chapter looks briefly at the various issues in child development and the roles of the various stakeholders in early childhood development. The partners identified in this paper include parents, government, religious organizations, NGOs, among others.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT: WHAT THEORISTS SAY

Transiting from babyhood to adulthood that is from a period of dependency to autonomy is an extremely complex matter. To understand development, it is important to know about children's growth and to recognize the various signals and milestones because growth and development complement each other. Development functioning, "can be divided into four categories: namely motor behaviour, adaptive behaviour, language behaviour and personal-social behaviour". (Caplan & Caplan, 1995 p.2)

- Motor behaviour typical of the new-born to six months old involves the maturation of skills that permit the control of the body (pushing up his chest to rest on his arms, reach for objects, roll over etc), while other motor behaviours manifest with increase in age, such as running and playing.

- Adaptive behaviour for a baby implies adjusting to different environments like learning to step out from the crib or looking out from it. Once a child can do this, that child can easily establish social contact with the person nearest to her. A

child's adaptive behaviour is to a large extent dependent upon muscle control, adequate and suitable stimulation as well as intellectual endowment.

- Language behaviour depends to a large extent on the early communication usually between mother and child. Language does not unfold on its own, it has to be learned and practised. A walking child needs language to communicate with peers and adults as well as members of his/her family. This calls for acquisition of words, which the toddler must learn.

- Personal social behaviour emanates from interactions and communications with family, peers and wider society. At the beginning of life, a child's role in social relationships is fairly passive, but as she grows, her responses grow increasingly active. As the child is "thrust abruptly into the complicated world with its myriad social institutions, values, ideas and language, he continually struggles to find his place". (Caplan & Caplan 1995 p.58). Initially, the child's immaturity keeps him/her within the confines and protection of his/her family, but with time, he/she becomes confident enough to venture into the wider society.

Psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud, social psychologists such as Erik Erikson and some others have been able to identify periods of great social, emotional, psychological and personality change in children. Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist, defined intellectual accomplishments and play by chronological age. Pediatricians like Arnold Gesell recorded bodily growth and motor accomplishment. Generally, there is a close relationship between patterns of behaviour, motor accomplishments and intellectual landmarks.

WHY GIVE PRIORITY TO EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT?

Child development is the base for human development. People grow and develop into adulthood from children. Good care during the early years is emphasized because research is replete with evidence that children who receive good care during early childhood are more likely to benefit from later education and other social services (UNICEF, 1999). 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. Scientifically, the early years are important in the formation of personality, intelligence and social interactions. UNICEF (1999) , observes that "for children to be alive and well, aware and learning, empowered and participating, attention to early childhood development is essential". Indeed the foundation of OMEP is rooted in the quest for good quality care for children during the crucial years before age 8, The founders of OMEP believed in years immediately following the 2nd World War, that young children who received good quality care and love are likely to grow up into peace loving adults-who would be a counterpoise or antidote to war mongers and aggressors who fuel the embers of conflict and delight in wars.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT: SOME KEY ISSUES

Early childhood issues include survival, development and protection. They are interactive, making each, part of a whole.

The FGN/UNICEF (2001), observes the following development issues as crucial: negative impact of nutritional deficiencies and poor health on physical growth and cognitive development; worsening conditions for early childhood in the home, due to decline of the extended family in urban areas, increasing involvement of women in the labour force and reduced options for child minding; negative effects of gender differentiation in child-raising and socialization; low involvement of fathers in child-raising; lack of books and toys for mental stimulation; inadequate number and poor quality of day-care centres and pre-primary schools; high fees, creating a barrier for the poor.

Some of these issues are weighty and debilitating. Nutritional deficiency for instance has negative consequences on a growing child affecting physical growth and cognitive development. Research has shown that the last 3 months of pre-natal life and the first two years after birth are the most critical period of brain growth. This is because more than half of the adult brain weight is added at this time (FGN/UNICEF, 2001). This grows very fast over the first few years of life, increasing to about two and half of adult weight by the end of the first year, 75% by the age of 2 years and 90% by the age of 5 years. The brain therefore is virtually full grown by the age of five years. The changing patterns of family life, from the traditional extended family to the modern, nuclear family has worsened the conditions for early childcare in the home. Families move to the cities with more mothers working and no extended family members to care for the young ones. These have also affected early childhood development. Some of the children are left in the hands of careless child minders and ill-equipped day care centres.

The issue of gender differentiation in child rearing and socialization has left the girl child in a disadvantaged position. It is the girl who stays at home to make room for the boy to be educated because of poor finances and the archaic notion that "a girl's education ends in a husband's home". Thus, it is believed that there is no need to make sacrifices to send the girl child

to school. This, actually, affects national development, considering the high population of females in Nigeria. Another development issue is the lack of books and toys for mental stimulation, both at home and in pre-schools. Many day care centres and nursery schools are bare, and dull; children there are condemned to repeating dull rhymes and lines, which mean nothing to them. Parental care and control are very vital for child development. Fathers are very important role models for both boys and girls; and they should not leave the duty of childcare to mothers alone.

WHAT ROLES FOR PARTNERS/STAKEHOLDERS IN DEVELOPMENT?

Having identified some of the key issues in the development of the Nigerian child, the questions now arise - who are the partners in this business of child development? What are their roles? The business of child upbringing is not a mean one and in most Nigerian cultures, definitely among the Igbo, it is assumed that a child belongs to the community and not just to parents alone.

Thus, the upbringing of a child traditionally is communal. With the establishment of schools and daycare centres, that responsibility has also spread to school authorities and government. Thus partners who are stakeholders include parents, teachers, caregivers, school nurses, community members, government at all levels, NGOs, PTAs, and religious organizations among others. In actual fact, the entire society should be partners in early childhood development in order to build a healthy and a productive society. The roles of these stakeholders are as follows:-

PARENTAL/HOME ROLE

Parents constitute the major stakeholders in this business because the children belong to them in the first instance. It is they who planned to bring them into the world so every parent has a special stake in their survival and their success. The foundation of habits, social behaviour, relationships, attitude to and perceptions of people and things; the foundations of moral behaviour are all laid during the early years of life. Many of these foundations for the vast majority of Nigerian children are laid at home or at least are determined and heavily influenced by the home which is dominated by parents and siblings. Even children's attitude to learning is influenced by the attitude and disposition of their parents towards learning and schooling. It is therefore the responsibility of parents to help their children deal with the world into which they gave them birth, teaching them self and social discipline. From the very early stages children should be spoken to, loved, played with and read to. They should be helped to distinguish between right and wrong.

They should be exposed to alternative methods of resolving conflicts and disagreements, of relating and of surviving in their environment. Both parents, father and mother in combination, Constitute a formidable force for good or evil in the development of the child.

ROLE OF THE SCHOOL/DAY CARE CENTRE

The preschool day care centre has a very critical role to play in early childhood development. They work in concert with the home, sometimes mapping the way for the home to follow in some rural setting. The preschool day care centre's climate is very important as a child-friendly school/daycare environment encourages a child to attend and be regular. The committed and caring disposition of caregivers, the order and attractiveness of the centre, the provision of functional toys and play materials are essentials to assist the children to develop properly as they step out from home into the society of their peers and others. The school/day-care centre in its totality is expected to play an important part in the intellectual, health and nutrition as well as Ihe psycho-social development of children.

THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY

The community is truly communal in the rural village setting where every one knows every one else. However, since tradition dies hard Nigerians have a duty to "export" their community- oriented concerns to the seemingly impersonal urban areas. After all when there are celebrations or mourning to do, neighbours and community rally round even in urban communities. The same communal concern should be exhibited in childcare and development because the welfare of children rubs off on the community. A neglected community child who becomes an armed robber is likely to begin his practice with the neighbours and those in the community. Community-planned, community-run childcare centres- are recommended for each community in their own interest.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

The role of government in child development is that of over all supervisor and Commander-in Chief. It has responsibility for making and seeing to the implementation of policy. The key issues identified earlier on have to do with the effects of government policy. Take the issue of poverty and lack of employment opportunities. These trickle down to debilitate families and affect the quality of childcare within these families. It has been said that children belong to their parents in the first place, but the government has responsibility for setting up the environment that would enable parents to take care of their children. Thus lack of employment, absence and inadequacy of basic infrastructure and services such as water, electricity, roads, transportation, even security-all these affect child development. Poverty lies at the root a nutritional deficiency and poor health, which in turn impinge on physical growth and cognitive development of children. Reduced earning by fathers and increased involvement of women in labour force are both outcrops of economic needs, which are negative factors in child well being.

As the federal government joins other world nations in endorsing conventions that will develop the child, it is her duty to ensure that issues agreed upon are implemented in our country. For instance, government at the local government level should provide as well as encourage the provision of pre-primary schools within every local government Area in the country. Federal and state governments should also spearhead the provision of child friendly schools for both boys and girls, ensure more girls participation in schools, provide equipment and materials for teaching and learning and provide adequate pre-service and in-service training for teachers. The organs of government should be used to facilitate instruction, supervision and execution of laid down policies while providing adequate funds. If structures were put in place by government, other partners would have no choice but to co-operate.

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOS) AND RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Non-governmental organizations which are currently in fashion in Nigeria are of various qualities. The good and committed ones can assist in moving the nation forward. They can provide good quality childcare centres as models which could be copied by private individual proprietors. Religious organizations which abound in Nigeria are under heavy obligation to practicalize their activities to reflect their teaching. In the case of Christians, there are very clear guidelines on the role to be played in child development. Nigeria requires the religious organizations to, apart from setting up institutions and childcare centres, bring to bear on their adherents the practicalized moral aspects of their teaching such that children are taught and so brought up to be honest, truthful, committed and patriotic.

CONCLUSION

Early childhood development is indeed the concern of the entire society. Since children are the adults and leaders of the future, if they are poorly developed, like the house that is built upon sand will crumble, so will the society of the future rest on shaky foundations. If we want to build a strong and reliant society, as is philosophically stated in our National Policy we must ensure proper early childhood development. The key issues identified in this paper must be taken care of and the partnerships discussed must be strengthened; all working harmoniously to build a society of well developed human beings.

In concluding this chapter, I use this opportunity to repeat concern expressed in my statement as OMEP Agric Regional Vice President in commemoration of the Day of the African Child - June 16, 2003. It reads:

In their total commitment to life, children present a model of faith. As we watch the social and political environment in Africa, we are hurt to behold the deprivations and suffering which children experience.

Many children experience these situations within their families through hunger, exploitation, malnutrition, "overwork", diseases and abuse. Others experience them while in school through sub-standard learning environment and paucity of learning materials. Many do not attend school at all some children in Africa live in war situations while others are refugees with no homes at all and no stability. Are adults in every situation and in whatever position doing everything in their power to ameliorate such suffering and deprivation? We join in urging governments to do more to improve the welfare of children. But our special message on this occasion is to appeal to all citizens to take more trouble every day to favour children. We urge on all citizens, a new resolve to exhibit more humane and child-centred disposition, such that children will have priority consideration in whatever are the good things of life, within their own community. Remember and pray especially for children on this day.

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