

Early Childhood Care and Education – A Perspective

*Padma Yadav**

Universally, the early childhood years are expected to lay the foundation for inculcation of basic values and social skills in children. It is believed that these values are imbibed from the family as *sanskaras* and the scriptures advocate an attitude of *lalayat* or indulgence as the desirable mode of child rearing at this stage.

Consequently, in the past, much of the early care and education of the child was informal, within the family and largely through grandmother's caring practices, stories, and traditional infant games, handed down from one generation to the next. This wealth of developmentally appropriate childcare practices is gradually becoming extinct in view of more modern provisions for children and changing social realities.

With growing urbanisation, and an increase in women's participation in the work force across the country,

among all socio-economic groups, there has been a sea change in the social structure and practices in the last few decades. A significant indicator of this change has been the emergence of the nuclear family – a change which has converted child rearing from what was traditionally a



* Lecturer, DEE, NCERT

shared responsibility into the sole responsibility of the young parents. While in the higher income brackets, children are often left with paid, surrogate caregivers, in the lower socio-economic communities the responsibility of caring gets loaded onto the older sisters, often keeping them out of school and robbing them of their childhood. It was this changing social context, over the years, which laid the seeds for the introduction of the concept of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in the country.

Child development is a continuous and cumulative process and early experiences have a lasting impact on later years.

Generally, early child care programmes are known by various names — Early Childhood Care for Survival, Growth and Development (ECC-SGD); Early Childhood Education (ECE); Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE); Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD); and Early Childhood Development (ECD).



They are also known as Day Care Centres (DCC); Child Care Centres (CCC); Nursery Schools; Kindergarten Schools; Pre-schools; and Pre-primary Schools. There is no uniformity in the name, content, or scope.

In India, early childhood is defined as the period of a child's life from conception to eight years. It includes early stimulation programmes through creches/home stimulation for 0-3 year olds, Pre-School/Early Childhood Education Programme (ECE) for 3-6 year olds, and Early Primary Education Programmes as part of primary schooling for 6-8 year olds.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) has recommended a holistic approach of providing ECCE programmes which should aim at fostering nutrition, health, social, physical, mental, moral, and emotional development of the child. It has clearly recommended that ECCE programmes should be “child oriented, focused around play and the individuality of the child. Formal methods and introduction of the 3 Rs will be discouraged at this stage”.

Research provides evidence of the short and long term benefits of good quality ECCE programmes, particularly for children from underprivileged environments.

Investments made in early child development and learning have a positive impact on formal education by sustaining him/her in school for a longer period of time.



The child's brain has remarkable capacities for self-protection and recovery. The loving care and nurture



children receive in the first few years or the lack of these critical experiences, leave lasting imprints on young minds.

Consistent with the thrust of the National Policy, early childhood education programmes are being qualitatively and quantitatively strengthened in the public, private, and voluntary sectors.

In India all three sectors – public, private, and voluntary – are actively engaged in providing early childhood education experiences through a variety of modes and of varying degree in quality.

The following ECCE programmes are in existence —

- Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS).
- *Balwadis* run by voluntary agencies with government assistance.
- Pre-primary schools/classes run by commercial agencies, state governments, and municipal corporations.
- ECCE centres run under the scheme of assistance to voluntary organisations (VAS) by the government.

The coverage of children in the age group 3-6 years, receiving Early Childhood Education, is 20.95 per cent.

Programmes	Number of Centres	Beneficiaries Coverage
ICDS	744887*	23 Million
Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme for the Children of Working Mothers	22038** 38533	0.55 Million@
***Pre-primary School		(1,94,000) Approximately 0.02 Million
NGO Services for ECCE		Varying from 3-20 Million***
Private Initiatives		10 Million approximately (2001)****

* Ministry of Women and Child Development (as on 30th September 2005)

** Ministry of Women and Child Development – website (www.wcd.nic.in)

*** Early Childhood Care and Education – An Overview (Ministry of HRD, 2003)

**** Report of the National Focus Group on ECE appointed by NCERT under initiative of National Curriculum Framework Review, 2005

(Source: Lok Sabha, starred questions, 2004 reported in www.indiastat.com)

There is wide diversity in terms of curriculum, infrastructure, financial allocations, staff quality, clientele, etc. This diversity is evident not only programme-wise, but also within the same programme from one region to another.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) practiced today is not in keeping with the aspects which were recommended by the National Policy of Education.

Curriculum-wise most ECE programmes have become a downward extension of primary schools, where the basic philosophy and methodology of ECE are not being practiced. Children are required to sit in one place, in slouched positions for writing, which can adversely affect their posture and physical development.

The staff, in many cases, is not adequately qualified or trained in ECCE and does not have the basic knowledge of child development.

In urban settings, pre-schools are generally located in cramped, poorly ventilated areas, sometimes even in *barsatis* or rooftops, with no safe, open space for children to play in. In rural areas though there is no dearth of space, it does not meet the needs of ECCE i.e. trained manpower, equipment, and material are the major issues. There should be some system of licensing or accreditation of pre-schools/ECCE programmes. Certain prerequisites and standards should be formulated according to the contextual realities of our country to ensure some uniformity within the diversities with respect to different aspects/components of an ECCE programme.

In the present scenario, parents, policy makers, educationists, paediatricians, health departments, child welfare departments, and the media, all need to get together to address the problems of ECCE. The welfare department and the media also need to get together to address the problems of ECCE.

REFERENCES

KAUL VENITA. Pressure on pre-schoolers.

KAUL VENITA. NCERT. *Early Childhood Programme*.

NCERT. *Report of National Focus Group on ECE*.

National Consultation meet on Streamlining of Early Childhood Education Services, a report by NIPCCD.

Selected issues concerning ECC in India. *A case study*.

UNESCO. EFA Global Monitoring Report being published by UNESCO, NIPCCD.
