

Transforming Futures: The Role of Early Childhood Development in Building Resilient Societies

Nivrutti Yeduba Bodkhe

BSW, MSW

Alumni, College of Social Work,
Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar,
Maharashtra, India.

nivruttibodkhe@gmail.com

Abstract:

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is crucial for a child's holistic development, encompassing physical, emotional, social, and cognitive aspects from conception until the age of five. Engaging children in early stimulation, play, and communication activities from birth promotes well-rounded development and reduces the risk of developmental delays. This not only benefits children and their families but also has positive implications for societies and the global community at large. To improve the existing status of ECD, it is imperative to understand the behaviors of caregivers who play a pivotal role in children's early years.

To enhance early childhood development, it is recommended to invest in empowering caregivers with knowledge about early brain development and effective communication strategies. Furthermore, caregivers should be educated on developmentally appropriate activities, managing screen time, and the significance of warm and nurturing relationships. Encouraging fathers' involvement through targeted support can also contribute to optimal early childhood development outcomes. Implementing these recommendations will contribute to the overall well-being and future success of children, families, and society as a whole.

Keywords:

Early Childhood Development (ECD), Caregiver Practices (CP), Responsive Caregiving (RC), Play-Based Learning (PBL), Multisectoral Approach (MA), Holistic Growth (HG), Developmental Milestones (DM)

Introduction: The Importance of Early Childhood Development

All children have the right to a good start in life. Research shows that high-quality experiences in the early years are linked to positive outcomes associated with health, social, and economic well-being as adults. Early childhood development programs reduce inequality and benefit the community as a whole.

Early childhood is a transformative phase that lays the foundation for lifelong health, learning, and well-being. Research shows that experiences during the first five years significantly impact brain development, emotional regulation, and social skills. High-quality ECD programs reduce inequalities and contribute to societal advancements by fostering healthier, more educated, and economically stable populations.

Globally, disparities in caregivers' knowledge and practices affect children's access to nurturing environments. Despite the proven benefits of play, stimulation, and responsive caregiving, many communities still view formal education as the sole pathway to development. This research explores these gaps and emphasizes actionable recommendations to bridge them.

Objectives:

1. Assess caregivers' knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding ECD.
2. Identify gaps in caregivers' understanding of play and stimulation as developmental tools.
3. Evaluate the role of fathers and secondary caregivers in children's early years.
4. Recommend strategies to enhance caregivers' engagement and promote holistic child development.

Hypothesis:

1. Understanding the current baseline of caregivers' knowledge is crucial to identifying areas where empowerment can make a measurable difference in child development.
2. Play and stimulation are foundational to a child's physical, cognitive, and emotional growth, and addressing knowledge gaps directly aligns with empowering caregivers.
3. Involving fathers and secondary caregivers expands the support system for the child, fostering a more holistic approach to development.
4. Practical strategies empower caregivers by equipping them with actionable knowledge and tools to improve developmental outcomes.

Review of Literature:

Early child development—a winning combination 4 years ago, a Lancet Series on child development reported that worldwide, more than 200 million children younger than 5 years were failing to reach their developmental potential. In today's issue a follow-up Series documents progress in reduction of risk factors for poor development, such as inadequate cognitive stimulation, intrauterine growth restriction, HIV infection, and societal violence. The poorest and most vulnerable children benefit most from interventions, such as preschool programs, because risk factors accumulated over a child's short life produce greater inequality in educational achievements and development. The economic benefit of investment in child development are clear—a projected 25% per country uplift in preschool enrolment in 1 year would yield a return of US\$10.6 billion, largely due to increased schooling. According to Maureen Black of the University of Maryland School of Medicine, USA, a winning combination is created when children in the crucial early years receive stimulation through parenting and educational support, in addition to health and nutrition. The Series papers show the challenges that remain in both research and implementation. Evidence is weaker for children younger than 3 years, for whom there are fewer programs known to be effective. Scaling up of beneficial programs requires committed, funding, and ongoing monitoring to ensure access for the poorest.

Even in the present economic climate, there is an incredible opportunity to act. Following the UN Secretary General's 2010 launch of the Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health, there can be no sharper message to proponents of maternal and child health—that acting early in a child's life reaps the highest reward both for individuals and societies. “Many health programs use child developmental indicators as a measure of success”, says Black, but most have not integrated early development interventions. Governments and agencies who fight daily to save children from neonatal illness and infectious diseases are urged to give them the opportunity to reach their full developmental potential.¹

The early moments of life offer an unparalleled opportunity to build the brains of the children who will build the future. But far too often, it is an opportunity squandered. For nations, the price of not investing in early moments is children with poorer health, fewer learning skills and reduced earning potential. It is a weaker economy and a greater burden on health, education and welfare systems. It is intergenerational cycles of disadvantage that hinder equitable growth and prosperity. For children, especially children from disadvantaged communities, the price of this failure is lost potential.²

The period from pregnancy to age 3 is when children are most susceptible to environmental influences. That period lays the foundation for health, well-being, learning and productivity throughout a person's whole life, and has an impact on the health and well-being of the next generation.

We know what threatens early childhood development. The biggest threats are extreme poverty, insecurity, gender inequities, violence, environmental toxins, and poor mental health.⁶ All of these things affect caregivers – by which we mean parents, families and other people who look after children. The threats reduce these caregivers' capacity to protect, support and promote young children's development. We know what children need to develop to their full potential. They need nurturing care – the conditions that promote health, nutrition, security, safety, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning. Nurturing care is about children, their families and other caregivers, and the places where they interact. We know what strengthens families and caregivers' capacity to support young children's development. An enabling environment is needed: policies, programs and services that give families, parents and caregivers the knowledge and resources to provide nurturing care for young children. Community participation is a key part of this environment, which also needs to consider the diversity of children and families.³

Early childhood is a time of great promise and rapid change, when the architecture of the developing brain is most open to the influence of relationships and experiences. Yet, at the same time, significant disadvantages in the life circumstances of young children can undermine their development, limit their future economic and social mobility, and thus threaten the vitality, productivity, and sustainability of an entire country. A remarkable expansion of new knowledge about brain development in the early years of life, linked to advances in the behavioral and social sciences, is now giving us deeper insights into how early experiences are built into our bodies, with lasting impacts on learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health. These insights can be used to fuel new ideas that capitalize on the promise of the early years and lead to breakthrough solutions to some of the most complex challenges facing parents, communities, and nations.⁴

Early childhood refers to the formative stage of first six years of life, with well-marked sub-stages (conception to birth; birth to three years and three years to six years) having age-specific needs, following the life cycle approach. It is the period of most rapid growth and development and is critical for survival. Growing scientific evidence confirms that there are critical stages in the development of the brain during this period which influence the pathways of physical and mental health, and behavior throughout the life cycle. Deficits during this state of life have substantive

and cumulative adverse impacts on human development. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)' encompasses the inseparable elements of care, health, nutrition, play and early learning within a protective and enabling environment. It is an indispensable foundation for lifelong development and

learning, and has lasting impact on early childhood development. It is imperative to accord priority attention to ECCE and invest in it since it is the most cost-effective way to break the intergenerational cycle of multiple disadvantages and remove inequity, leading to long term social and economic benefits. India has 158.7 million children in the 0-6 years age group (Census 2011) and the challenges of catering to this important segment of population for ensuring the holistic development of children in the country are well acknowledged. The National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy reaffirms the commitment of the Government of India to provide integrated services for holistic development of all children, along the continuum, from the prenatal period to six years of age. The Policy lays down the way forward for a comprehensive approach towards ensuring a sound foundation for survival, growth and development of child

with focus on care and early learning for every child. It recognizes the synergistic and interdependent relationship between the health, nutrition, psycho-social and emotional needs of the child.⁵

The Early Stimulation Centers are a vital innovation in ECD, blending health and developmental services to address children's comprehensive needs. By strengthening community awareness, enhancing ANM capacities, and integrating FLWs' efforts, ESCs can scale their impact and empower families to nurture their children's growth effectively. This initiative represents a critical step toward creating a generation of

healthier, more resilient children. This future vision of system uptake, scaling, and institutionalization transforms cities into havens of holistic child development. By embedding ECD principles into urban systems, fostering inclusive designs, and building resilient governance frameworks, cities will unlock the full potential of their youngest citizens. This vision offers a pathway to nurturing vibrant, healthy, and thriving generations to come.⁶

The psychological and biological changes that occur as a child transitions from a dependent infant to an autonomous teenager are collectively referred to as child development. These changes include the development of language, cognitive skills (e.g., symbolic thought, memory, and logic), social-emotional skills (e.g., a sense of self, empathy and how to interact with others) and motor skills (e.g., sitting, running, and more complex movements, etc.). It is now well accepted that development is a process that is not determined independently by nature or nurture alone, but by "nature through nurture" (pp. 41) (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Changes throughout development result from multidirectional interactions between biological factors (genes, brain growth, neuromuscular maturation), and environmental influences (parent-child relationships, community characteristics, cultural norms) over time (Gottlieb, 1991; Pollitt, 2001;

Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). These interactions lead to the re-organization of various internal systems that allow for new developmental capacities (Thelen, 2000). For example, the emergence of locomotive skills results from the co-occurrence and interactions among physiological systems (muscle strength; the ability to balance), social-emotional change (the motivation to move independently), and experience (adequate opportunity to "practice" the emerging skill) (Adolph, 2002; Adolph, Vereijken, & Denny, 1998; Adolph, Vereijken, & Shrout, 2003). The conceptualization of development as a dynamic interplay between biological and environmental factors suggests that development is malleable and can be enhanced by interventions affecting the child, the environment or both.⁷

Research Methodology:

A cross-sectional study was conducted using a mixed-methods approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of caregivers' knowledge, attitudes, and practices. Data collection methods included:

1. In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with mothers and fathers, frontline workers.
2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Conducted with fathers, grandparents, and pregnant women to triangulate findings.
3. Sampling: A purposive sampling method ensured diverse representation across socio-economic backgrounds.
4. Data Analysis: Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, while quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Findings of Research:

1. Knowledge Among Caregivers Regarding ECD

More than 50% of the mothers had little knowledge about skills that can be learned through play. Play has not been perceived as a medium of learning in the community. More than 60% of mothers were unaware of different ways of engaging with their children. Knowledge about language stimulation was high in the community. However, speaking to a child in the mother tongue was the activity reported in language stimulation. The majority of the mothers reported introducing a variety of food for sensory stimulation of taste. Other than taste and language stimulation no other sensory stimulation was provided to children. Physical developmental milestones were not known to 70% of the mothers. Knowledge about colostrum feeding and early initiation of breastfeeding was high among mothers.

Low knowledge about play being an important aspect of development was observed among grandparents. Grandparents thought formal education was important for children rather than playing. They reported no need to engage children in play as children can play by themselves. Fathers expressed limited involvement during pregnancy or early years related to stimulation. Some of the fathers said that their main role is to earn and save for children's future. They like to play with children but expressed that playing with children can be possible generally after 2-3 years of age.

2. Caregivers Attitude

Mothers related upbringing and development of children with education, nutritional food, and saving for their future. Mothers were spending maximum time with children however they did not know how to engage children effectively during that time. More than 75% of the mothers reported unacceptable behaviour by children for which disciplinary action is needed. Shouting, screaming, and hitting the child were reported as some of the disciplinary methods.

62% of the mothers reported if parents are too gentle with their children then children become unmanageable. Punishment is seen as important and 71% of mothers reported that it will help children understand right and wrong. 60% of the mothers thought showing affection and love to the child in the early years of the child would spoil the child. Physical and emotional punishments are perceived as effective ways of discipline. Grandparents reported that there is no reason to play with children actively. Children can be supervised for their safety, and they can play on their own.

Father was generally seen as the key person responsible for disciplining a child. Some of the fathers reported that if the child does not listen to his mother, then the father has to intervene. Shouting or hitting was considered normal for disciplining the child. Some of the fathers even mentioned that they had been raised with similar discipline methods in their childhood and because of that today, they are in a good position.

3. Caregivers Practices

66.7% of mothers reported taking help from another family member to discipline the child. Shouting at the child (53%), hitting or slapping the child (17%), and ignoring the child (16%) were used as common methods for discipline.

Children spend maximum time with their parents. At home, it is considered mostly the mother's responsibility to look after the child. Teachers responded that a child is always the first parent's responsibility and their job is to provide education to children. In FGD grandparents, and grandmothers reported that grandparents are experienced people in raising children. They take care of children when their mother is busy, however because of their age sometimes they are unable to play or run behind the children. In another group discussion, a few grandmothers mentioned that they have completed their duties for children as a mother. Now it is their time to relax and do whatever they like. So, they do not want to be involved in raising grandchildren.

Nutrition was also given less priority by grandmothers. They shared that we should provide children with whatever they ask for at this age. Buying packet food (especially chips, and chocolates) is considered prestigious and they do it regularly to express their love and affection towards grandchildren. 95.2% of fathers are staying with children. Less than 10% of fathers are involved in the daily activities of children. Mothers perceived the father's main role as bread earner. 66.7% of mothers leave children with another person when they are away. 15.2% of Mothers reported leaving their child with another child below 10 years of age. Fathers from the FGD reported that they have more exposure to the outside world as they go out for work. The mothers primarily must take care of the child and the fathers' job is to earn money for the secure future of the children.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

The effort to help adults adopt responsive behaviours at the health, education, and ICDS is of high value. These are the services where caregivers of young children visit frequently in the early years. With the help of outreach services provided the importance of responsive caregiving can be communicated to the larger community. Investing time to learn about the benefits of providing a right start to each child is a prime responsibility for the government and non-government sectors. A multisectoral approach is necessary to prioritize access and quality of services available to families and children up to the first 6 years. The city-wide dissemination of the importance of early years will help in building a positive attitude of caregivers and front-line workers towards their role in raising children.

The following recommendations are derived from the study:

- 1. Education and awareness campaigns:** Conduct targeted campaigns to raise awareness among caregivers, especially mothers, about the importance of nutrition and age-appropriate activities for early childhood development. Emphasize the benefits of play, stimulation, and responsive caregiving.
- 2. Parental guidance and support:** Provide guidance and resources to caregivers on how to engage in simple activities daily with their children to promote age-appropriate skills and behaviours. Encourage positive discipline techniques that foster a warm and nurturing relationship.
- 3. Training for frontline workers:** Provide comprehensive training for frontline workers, including ASHA workers, ANMs, and preschool teachers, on early childhood development and evidence-based practices. Focus on enhancing their knowledge and skills to effectively implement early childhood interventions.
- 4. Inclusion of fathers:** Promote the active involvement of fathers in the daily activities and care of their children. Offer programs and initiatives that highlight the importance of the father's role in nurturing and supporting their child's development.

5. **Strengthen support systems:** Enhance family social support networks by facilitating community-based programs and support groups. Foster collaboration between caregivers, grandparents, and other family members to create a supportive environment for children's growth and development.
6. **Collaboration with stakeholders:** Partnerships and collaboration between healthcare providers, educators, community organizations, and policymakers to create a comprehensive and integrated approach to early childhood development. This collaboration will ensure a continuum of care and support for children's optimal development.

Overall, the study indicates a knowledge gap among caregivers and front-line workers regarding playful learning activities in the early years, the importance of warm and nurturing relationships, and the involvement of the entire family. Providing experiential learning opportunities and tailored inputs will enhance their engagement practices with children. By witnessing the joy and skills developed in children, attitudes towards ECD will strengthen, leading to improved caregiver-child interactions.

Reference List:

1. Lake, A. (2011). Early Childhood Development—Global Action is Overdue.
2. UNICEF (2017). Early Moments Matter for Every Child. UNICEF Global Report.
3. WHO (2020). Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development: A Framework to Help Children Survive and Thrive to Transform Health and Human Potential.
4. Harvard Center on the Developing Child (2016). From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts: A Science-Based Approach to Building a More Promising Future for Young Children and Families.
5. Indian Ministry of Women and Child Development. (2023). National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy.
6. InfoSutra Consultancy. (2022). Assessment Study of the Parents+ Program in Pune.
7. Fernald, L.C.H., et al. (2009). Examining Early Child Development in Low-Income Countries: A Toolkit for the Assessment of Children in the First Five Years of Life. *World Bank Human Development Group*.

