

## **Pre-Primary Education**

Many who are concerned with the welfare of pre-school children have watched with dismay and even horror, the turn of events in the field of pre-primary education. There is a feeling now among professionals and parents alike that modern pre-primary schools have totally forgotten the purpose and the importance of pre-primary education, and they have instead used these institutions for imparting formal education at a tender age. Unlike the young parents of the present day, our grandparents, who were not necessarily well versed with child development theories, had the practical sense in them to appreciate the fact that a happy childhood is vital for normal psychological development of the child. All that is common in early childhood, among great achievers of the world is only simple well-adjusted families that nurtured their childhood well. We have often questioned and rightly so, the futility of bombarding the pre-school child with facts and figures and expecting them to memorize and reproduce them. Even if some of them can do it very well, what is more important is for them to develop the right dispositions. For example, even if he cannot read the alphabet, he enjoys books, because they contain pictures and stories. Such a child would surely learn to love books in later life. The risk of early instruction in beginning reading skills is that the amount of drill and practice required for success at an early age will undermine children's disposition to be readers. Obtaining the disposition without requisite skills is not desirable either(1).

Macomber explains how Piaget emphasized the importance of handling carefully the vital period of 2-7 years, the pre-operational period of cognitive development with a thought process that is more of pre-logical, resulting sometimes in amusing and sometimes in baffling behavior(2). This is also the ideal period to acquire skills because children of this age are more adventurous, not held back by fear of hurting themselves. But the best and the most pleasant way of learning skills is through play. Many people, even today, regard children's play as a waste of time and feel that their time could be spent in learning something useful, which will prepare them for adult life. In fact play is a serious business, indeed the principal business of childhood, so much so play therapy is now an accepted mode of treatment in childhood behavior disorders(3). It is the vehicle of improvisation and the introduction to rule systems, through which a world of cultural restraints replaces the operation of childish impulses. We still have fond memories of our birthdays when our grandfather brought us rubber balls or toys and how much we enjoyed the gifts. But the children today often dread their birthdays because they are sure to get some intellectual puzzle games that sometimes even their parents do not understand. This, then means that today's "educational approach", with all the undue emphasis on competition should give way to a more reasonable "developmental approach", which automatically assumes that every child will grow and develop only

at his or her own pace and early need not always mean better (4). Emphasis should rather be laid on communicative skills, which again automatically means that the medium of communication in the pre-school should be mother tongue, whatever the medium of instruction be, in a cosmopolitan city atmosphere. This also then brings to focus the issue that pre-primary education is not a downward extension of primary education and hence more appropriate non-formal educational methods only should be adopted. It is in this context that the Government of India appointed a National Advisory Committee to suggest ways to reduce the academic burden on school students.

The Executive Board of the Indian Academy of Pediatrics has approved of the following recommendations of the IAP committee on Pre-school Education(5): (i) The minimum age for admission to Lower Kinder Garten (LKG) should be 4 years; (ii) Selection criteria should not be interview and testing; (iii) Medical cum immunization certificate should be a must; (iv) Mother tongue should be the medium of communication; (v) Emphasis on reading and writing should be avoided; (vi) Activities should be based on National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) recommendations; (vii) Grading should be preferred to ranking or marks; (viii) Regional Transport Officer (RTO) safety regulations should be strictly followed; (ix) Pre-school experience should not be a must for entry to Class-1; and (x) The Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP) should be involved in formulating guidelines at National and State level.

These recommendations should form the basis for country wide sensitization programmes by Pediatricians, to create an awareness among the public, regarding the long term bad effects of formal education at pre-school level. Looking back at the recommendations of the IAP Committee, I feel a little guilty, that we did not adequately emphasize on the issue of the

large number of unfortunate children, who in the first place never get a chance for entry into any sort of pre-school, be it an Anganawadi or Balawadi or any similar institution. Their problem is not too much teaching but too little teaching. The movement for setting up "mobile creches" at construction sites is a fine example of low cost innovative ideas in reaching out to the most needy, but un-reachable. Let us sincerely hope that by the turn of this century, every child of preschool age would have access to an Anganawadi. Now, that we have celebrated the 20th anniversary of Integrated Child Development Scheme and have rechristened it, and rightly so as "Integrated Mother and Child Development", it is imperative to direct attention to the quality of education that we offer at the Anganawadis. The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), a Government of India programme now being piloted in many districts in different parts of the country is probably the best opportunity to carry the message of "Quality in Pre-primary and primary education". It is illogical to separate pre-primary and primary education because we cannot improve the latter without improving the former. Hence every primary school should have a pre-primary attached to it, so that the concepts of non-formal education could be extended to at least classes 1 and 2. DPEP has been conceived with the realization that in many parts of the country, a class 4 student cannot read or write, reflecting the poor quality of teaching and hence the concept of "Minimum Levels of Learning" has been mooted. But, it would be making matters too simple if we assume that all the ills of primary education are because of poor facilities and poor quality of teaching. Surely, there is a third angle to the story, subtle mental sub normality in the child.

The Nursery Evaluation Scale Trivandrum developed and validated at the Child Development Center,

Trivandrum offers a simple remedy to tackle this problem. Here, with some training, a well experienced pre-school teacher familiar with the capabilities of the child for a long time, could make a functional assessment of the child and offer appropriate remedial measures, feasible in the school. She would be able to guide the parents regarding the readiness of the child to join formal schooling in class 1, straight away or after spending one more year in the preschool. There would be an occasional child needing more formal assessment by a Developmental Pediatrician or a Developmental Psychologist, who may also benefit, from Montessori schools or such ones offering appropriate "Remedial Therapy". But, such isolated efforts, which improve our experience, would not meet the expectations of millions across the country in the near future. Hence, a more logical approach would be to try and enhance the capability of our pre-school teachers by systematic efforts locally as well as at state and national level. The National Council for Educational Research and Training, the Indian Academy of Pediatrics and the

Indian Association of Pre-school Educators or similar bodies could work in partnership to usher in a sea change in the pre-primary scene in India.

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#### REFERENCES

1. Nair MKC. Pre-primary education in India-Changing trends. Kerala J Psych 1989,4:15-17.
2. Macomber LP. Piaget and Cognitive development. *In: Topics in Cognitive Development.* Eds. Appel MH, Goldberg L. New York, Plenum Press, 1977, PI.
3. Nair MKC. Play therapy. Kerala J Psych 1989,4:7-11.
4. Mistry VR. Report of National Workshop on Pre-School Education Programmes. New Delhi, September 27-29,1988.
5. Nair MKC, George B. Pre-school education: Future Perspectives. Bombay, Indian Academy of Pediatrics, 1994.

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#### NOTES AND NEWS

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#### ACUTE FLACCID PARALYSIS SURVEILLANCE

IAP members are requested to immediately report to the District Immunization Officer whenever they see a patient with acute flaccid paralysis. Further action will be undertaken, through the existing governmental system.