

Comprehensive Child Care

The total dependence of the child on the adult for his very survival and development puts him in an extremely vulnerable situation. In most societies the parents or the close relatives look after the children in the family. In many countries, some economically advanced and others with a socialistic pattern of government, the State plays a major role in child care, ensuring that his basic health and education requirements and physical needs are met with. In poor countries, however, if the child is unable to get proper parental or family care his future is bleak. It is a strange quirk of human nature that adults usually love and feel for their own offsprings and have very little concern and compassion for other children.

In most developing countries the majorities of children has very poor quality of life and suffer disproportionately from disease and deprivation and are subjected to abuse and exploitation. Even when parental care is available but not adequate, due to poverty, illiteracy, ignorance and many other factors, the child's development and education suffer and he does not achieve his full potential.

Magnitude of the Problem

Whereas many developing countries by and large face similar problems of children(1), India, in view of its vast population, easily leads in numbers(2). There are about 20 million children in organized labour work force, 30 million disabled children (2 million blind children) and more than 25 million street children.

The number of those suffering from malnutrition and diseases such as tuberculosis is extremely high. We have serious problems of destitute children, child prostitution and various other forms of child abuse and neglect and discrimination against the girl child. The numbers are mind boggling and the problems gigantic. It is very obvious that adequate care and full opportunities for development (stimulatory environment, proper education, health care) are available largely to the small affluent section of the society. (Education and affluence are of course no guarantee against child abuse and emotional deprivations, which are major concerns in some very rich countries; attitudes and a complex interplay of social, cultural and economic factors, may be more important in child rearing).

Causes of the Sad Plight of Children

A burgeoning population with associated increase in the child population, poverty, illiteracy and ignorance, poor state of villages (where the majority of children live), and increasing urban slums are important factors which lead to a poor quality of life for the majority of our children. Whereas child survival has improved, as indicated by a decline in various indices of mortality, the necessary inputs towards various other needs of children have been grossly insufficient. Despite lip service and regular expressions of concern, children have remained a low priority. For example, universal primary education must be a fundamental priority of every society, yet in India the expenditure on primary education has fallen from 56% in the first plan to about 35% in subsequent plans.

Concern and Advocacy

There are government departments and several national and international agencies, which are concerned with child health and welfare. Some of the latter have their own spheres of interest. Others may sporadically address specific issues. The IAP has been chiefly concerned with treatment and prevention of diseases and some promotional activities. While a very impressive decrease in mortality (especially from diarrheal dehydration) and prevention of vaccine preventable diseases can be cited as success stories, several serious problems of children have not been addressed with the urgency and energy required. By and large the society is indifferent or callous to the plight of children. The media, intellectual groups, social organizations have been preoccupied with various other matters. In such a depressing scenario the children's doctors and the IAP must act as the leading advocate for children. The IAP must raise its voice against injustice and crimes against children.

Children's Rights

The World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children in 1990 spelled out in details the child's rights and defined goals for the year 2000. The National Plan of Action of India (1992) specified our own goals listing targets for survival, health, nutrition, education and emphasizing several vital aspects including provision of water, sanitation, problems of children in especially difficult circumstances, the girl child, the child's environment and advocacy and people's participation. Some of the health goals (*e.g.*, eradication of poliomyelitis, reduction by 50% in deaths due to diarrhea in children below 5 years) are likely to be achieved, but massive inputs will continue to be required well beyond the year 2000

for universal education, prevention of diseases, sanitation and environment. Advocacy and people's participation are sadly lacking. Child labor and exploitation of children cannot be resolved until the society as a whole reacts to these evils and realizes its responsibility for children.

Comprehensive Child Care

Besides, curative and preventive health care, comprehensive child care comprises various aspects of child development, including a stimulatory environment, education and prevention of child abuse and exploitation. The latter encompass a spectrum of cruelty to children from mild forms of neglect to employment of children in hazardous industries, children as bonded labor and sexual abuse and child prostitution. These problems are multifactorial and extremely complex and, because of the large numbers involved, appear quite intractable. However, serious efforts to tackle them have only recently been initiated, but not in an adequate and concerted manner. Like many social evils, the problems of children cannot be solved by governmental action alone or by legislative efforts. In a country where exploitation of children, as that of other weaker sections of the society, has been a way of life for centuries only a wide social awakening and recognition of these problems as morally reprehensible and a disgrace to a civilized society can initiate massive efforts to tackle them.

Role of the Indian Academy of Pediatrics

Only pediatricians can look at the child's needs in their totality. We are trained to be experts in curative, preventive and developmental aspects and we are aware of various other problems of children. However, our preoccupation with the former has prevented us from involving ourselves with "sociocultural" problems of children. The IAP is now a sizable force

of about 9,000 members having a firm infrastructure with its State chapters, and city and district branches all over the country. The IAP must now take up comprehensive child care in a purposeful manner. Each pediatrician should devote a small (or large) proportion of his time to address various issues concerning child welfare. Clearly the IAP alone cannot make a dent into the existing situation. We should actively support the governmental efforts (e.g., against child labour), and join hands with a host of national and international organizations and voluntary groups which are involved in welfare of children. Besides our own individual and collective endeavors we need to sensitize others and catalyze action.

A largely illiterate country with limited resources, supporting a mammoth and increasing population is bound to have a multitude of problems of various kinds. In such a situation professionals, intellectuals and population is bound to have a multitude of those fortunate to be educated and supporting a mammoth and increasing resourceful cannot afford to play a limited or

passive role. Pediatricians in particular need to broaden their perspective and look at the problems of children in a comprehensive manner. All factors that adversely affect the development and the quality of life of children must be our concern and the targets of appropriate action. While pursuing advocacy and activism, we must convert words into deeds. The ugliness of existence must not be allowed to destroy the beauty of childhood.

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REFERENCES

1. The State of World's Children, 1995. United Nations Children's Fund, Wallingford, Oxford University Press, 1995.
2. Statistics on Children in India, 1995. National Institute of Publication Cooperation and Child Development, New Delhi, 1995.

NOTES AND NEWS

ACADEMY TODAY

Due to lack of sponsor, the June issue of "Academy Today" will not be forthcoming. The IAP will be bringing out a combined June/September issue of "Academy Today" as a sponsor is now available.