
UNIT 1 EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION IN PERSPECTIVE

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Childhood is a state of wonder – a time when the world is fresh and every event is interesting. Ants crawling on the floor, a cat jumping from the wall, the sound of water dripping from a tap – each of these is a fascination for the young child. The child is born without fear and with a wide-eyed interest in the people and things around. It therefore becomes very important that the family nurture the child carefully, helping her to develop strong emotional bonds with parents and others, to realise her potential and to be a healthy individual – physically, mentally and socially.

All living species nurture their young ones. But of all living beings, the human infant has the longest period of dependency on adults, and is most vulnerable to deprivation. Care is essential for the survival of the infant. The continued affectionate attention of the caregivers to the child's needs in the early years is important for the child to thrive and to grow up into happy adulthood.

The argument for investing in early childhood development has been stated convincingly by several people and in different ways. However, we need to refresh our memories with regard to the tremendous significance of early childhood care and education (ECCE) for the future of our country.

In this Unit we shall recapitulate the scope and rationale of ECCE, even though you are familiar with the same, having studied DECE-1 and DECE-2. We will also take a look at a few examples from other countries of some well-known ECCE programmes.

Objectives

After studying this Unit, you should be able to :

- state the scope of ECCE
- discuss the rationale for early child development interventions
- suggest what should be done in the context of ECCE programmes
- enumerate some well-known ECCE programmes outside India

1.2 SCOPE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION (ECCE)

Appreciating the importance of ECCE and underlining its essential thrust and approach, the National Policy on Education (1986) states the following:

"Recognising the holistic nature of child development, viz., nutrition, health and social, mental, physical, moral and emotional development, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) will receive high priority"

"Programmes of ECCE will be child-oriented, focussed around play and the individuality of the child. Formal methods and introduction of the 3 R's will be discouraged at this stage. The local community will be fully involved in these programmes."

Child development is concerned not only with what is happening within the child, but also to the care that the child requires. It is imperative that the basic needs for protection, food and health care are met. It is equally important to meet the child's needs for affection and security, for stimulation and interaction. It is normal and healthy for the child to learn through exploration and discovery, through playing and fantasy.

Meeting the health and nutritional needs of the child is of course an essential prerequisite for optimum development of the child. Fostering a healthy foundation includes measures like improving maternal health, educating the mother and other caregivers about the importance of breast feeding, immunisation, supplementary feeding and growth monitoring, prevention and management of common childhood illnesses, as also about the nutritional needs of the child at different ages and how these may be met, regardless of the economic constraints. In addition to catering to the health and nutritional needs and providing physical care to the child, it is important to provide stimulation as well. Early childhood stimulation attempts to provide learning opportunities to the child so as to enhance her development. However, the learning experiences need to be so planned that they are in accordance with the child's maturational status: This stimulation should be provided from early infancy. By and large, stimulation comprises activities that involve a close interaction between the child and the caregiver. The basis of these activities is a warm, loving relationship between the child and the caregiver. Thus, an affectionate and aware caregiver holds the key to the child's optimum development. It is important that the trained ECCE worker instils this confidence in individual parents that even if they are poor and illiterate, they can provide stimulation to their child, and that it should be done right from early infancy. They should also be familiarised with how they may do so.

Upto three years of age, the stimulation aspect is primarily taken care of by parents and other family members at home. Subsequently, children start attending preschool centres. Therefore, not only family members, but also workers in preschool centres (be it the balwadi, anganwadi, a nursery school or an early childhood education i.e. ECE centre), who have to be educated regarding how stimulation should be provided to a young child.

There is research evidence built over a period of time, in a variety of settings from which the following facts are derived:

- Development and learning occur as children interact with people and objects. A healthy environment, space, materials and time for play as well as adults who foster learning and nurture relationships – these are the essentials.
- Children need to be actively involved in order to learn. Opportunities for them to play and try out things should be provided.
- A holistic approach to the child's development must be taken. Physical, mental, socio-emotional aspects being inter-related, anything that happens to the child affects everything else.

Giving due cognisance to these and similar findings, it is now universally agreed that it is necessary to have ECCE programmes and that these must be holistic in nature.

Recognizing and catering to the specific developmental needs of younger children, these programmes will increase the general awareness of the value of a commitment to children and will enable the community to reach its youngest citizens in a meaningful way.

1.3 RATIONALE FOR EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS

- There has been a large amount of scientific research in Child Development, all over the world, in the last eight decades. The conclusions, arising from a variety of studies, converge on one clear fact: that in the early years of childhood, intelligence, personality and social behaviour develop rapidly. As you studied in DECE-1, the

early years of life have been acknowledged as the most crucial for optimum development of an individual. The first six years of life are critical for development as the rate of development is most rapid in this period, and consequently, this is the time when environmental enrichment or deprivation makes its greatest impact. Since development is proceeding at a very fast rate, unfavourable experiences such as lack of adequate food, health care, nurturance or stimulation, unhealthy living conditions and exploitative working conditions hinder development to a considerable extent. In the same way, favourable conditions foster development. The effect is long-lasting since the foundation of development in later years is laid at this age. It must be appreciated that development is not simply the result of mechanical acts of feeding and physical care, but rather of a feeling of total well-being that arises from growing-up in a healthy atmosphere with love, warmth and opportunities for learning.

- The significance of the early childhood years is being increasingly acknowledged. This recognition assumes greater importance with reference to the underprivileged children in developing countries. The limitations imposed by poverty and its socio-cultural manifestations lead to multiple deprivations during the critical early years of life, preventing these children from realising their full potential. Due to cultural and socio-economic realities and ignorance, families, especially those from weaker sections, are unable to provide a healthy environment, adequate nutrition and stimulating opportunities to their children. A large number of women, particularly from low socio-economic strata, have to spend most of their time in earning livelihood. In these circumstances it becomes necessary to have ECCE programmes as an organized intervention to compensate the deprivations faced by young children whose mothers work outside the home.
- The evidence is growing that ECCE is the most effective area of intervention and it can be used to break the "cycle of deprivation". There have been many early childhood programmes around the world, and together they have given resounding support to the positive effects of such programmes on the child's development. With reference to the poor, the effects of poverty and deprivation can be compensated by early intervention. Even if a child is not from a deprived family, the ECCE input can provide enrichment, helping in healthy cognitive and affective development.
- Children need to be given tender loving care and attention, not just because they will one day become productive adults, but because they have the right, as children, to live and to grow to their full potential. In other words, at each stage of the development span, every person is fully entitled to enjoy human rights. Children have rights too and the right to develop fully should be universally accepted.
- Many persons argue that they themselves had no access to preschool programmes, growing up in the care of a loving family, and none the worse for it. What they fail to tell us is that they had a full time mother at home, in addition to one or two other adults who gave care. What they also ignore is the condition of less privileged children. Further, even the best of families cannot normally provide the kind of stimulating play activities and the company of other children, that a preschool is in a position to provide. There is a great advantage, joy as well, in collective activity, sharing, learning to wait, enjoying doing things together with others. There are universal values of harmony with others, compassion for all living things and so on, which can easily be communicated to the children in the course of the ECCE programme.
- Sometimes an argument for transmitting good values to children fails because people consider it too "idealistic". For such people, a more convincing argument is the economic one. Because of the investment in child development in the early years, children grow up being productive adults. Adults who are normally their caregivers can enter the labour market and improve their economic status considerably. Investment in children's early care has long term effects on their future as adults, saving social costs. For instance, children of deprived families who had quality child care have been found to show fewer instances of delinquency and drug addiction. In other words, investment in children during the critical period of the first six years will save the nation a great deal in terms of money and preservation of the social fabric.

- No nation, whatever its political ideology, today can afford to ignore the establishment of social justice, human rights and equity. Surprisingly, early childhood care is a measure of ensuring equity, both socio-economic and gender-related. The girl child, a lesser citizen in many South Asian cultures, will benefit from a good early child developmental effort.
- Early childhood care is such an overwhelming need felt by the families that any attempt to provide it along with other programmes for women, such as income generating schemes, is bound to be a success. For instance, in rural development schemes, where women come to upgrade their skills or to work, an added child development programme strengthens all fronts. Similarly, primary schools, which attach a section for the under-sixes, find that school attendance of older children, especially girls, improves while also ensuring that preschool age children are in a safe and stimulating environment.
- Having nostalgia for our past and overstating the importance of children in our traditions does not help face the harsh realities of the present. Today, around the world, family structures have changed. There are very few joint families; nuclear families tend to be more common. There are also single parent families and a substantive number of women-headed families. Furthermore, migration constantly alters the demographic patterns – throwing men into cities, sometimes with and sometimes without their families. Apart from rural to urban migration, common all over the world as populations are getting rapidly urbanised, there is regional migration. More women join the paid labour force, with no provision for child care at their work places. For many of these reasons, a substantial investment in early childhood development programmes is an absolute necessity.

Thus we see that from several points of view such as human rights, moral values, social equity and economic gains, early childhood development makes for the best investment. Having accepted the several reasons in favour of ECCE, what are the steps to be taken by policy makers? What should be done? In the next Section we will look into this aspect, taking into consideration some of the important issues involved.

1.4 WHAT SHOULD BE DONE ?

- We should reach children and families who are most in need. At present there are, in many countries, early childhood education schemes for fee paying children. But the real challenge is to identify the children at risk and to plan suitable interventions for them.
- Given the population of India and the magnitude of poverty, the number of needy children in the 0-6 year age group is very large indeed. Though the issue of large scale quantitative expansion of ECCE facilities to reach the maximum number of these children is important, the issue of quality of ECCE services provided is as important, particularly in view of the existing limitations of funds and facilities. To what extent is it possible to reduce the cost of an ECCE programme in order to reach the largest proportion of the target population while maintaining a good quality? In this context, experts are of the opinion that when inputs go below a critical minimum, the effectivity is lost and the programme fails to fulfil its objectives. Therefore, while quantitative expansion of ECCE programmes is important, the issue of making these programmes qualitatively effective through measures such as adequate and appropriate training of personnel and provision of sufficient and suitable materials and facilities is crucial, and needs attention.
- Even though the families of the at-risk children identified may not have formal education, we should not assume that they are ignorant. We should involve them in deciding what to offer to their children and how to monitor it. In this way, we would at least be sure that our programmes are culturally sensitive, and therefore can be sustained within the community.
- It is known that the first two years of a child's life are very important, and yet many of our schemes tend not to include them. Among the tasks that need to be done is that of providing holistic care for infants, be the programmes centre based or home based.

- Convergence of programmes has been a recently articulated objective. Instead of offering nutrition, health and education as piecemeal services, an attempt should be made to integrate them. An ECCE programme must be holistic in nature. Further, to increase its practical viability and success, logical, implementable combinations can be tried. For instance, child care can be attached as a service to existing income generating programmes for women.
- Persuading parents about the value of flexible, child-centered education should not be difficult. Yet, there is always a pressure for learning formal skills, which are more "visible" to parents and teachers. In most of the ECCE programmes in our country, the education component is either very low or is formal and focusses on the 3 R's (reading, writing and arithmetic). More effort is required to emphasise to families and early childhood workers, the value of play and the use of informal methods of education for young children. Early childhood education must essentially be through the play-way method and activity-based approach. Gradually the same should be integrated into primary schools as well, at least for the first couple of years, for better quality education and improved retention rates.
- As you have read in Block 7, DECE-1 and would study later in this Block too, there are several examples of small scale exemplary ECE schemes in the voluntary sector, but the question of going to scale remains. Large scale has obvious advantages and disadvantages. In India, ICDS is a good example of a child care programme operated by the State on a large scale. However, our insistence should not be on one model but on a variety and range of schemes which share the basic goal of early childhood development.
- A crucial factor with reference to ECCE programmes pertains to training of workers. Regardless of the model adopted, the most important input in a programme for young children is the human resource input. It is the education, experience, efficiency, attitudes and commitment of the workers involved that will have a major bearing on the success of the programme. This aspect, in turn, is related to factors like training, supervision and management. Given the considerable impact these factors have on how successfully a programme gets implemented, it is very important to give them due consideration.

And finally, the question of finances. There is no denying that in the thinking of the ordinary person, large investments in weapons, airplanes, bridges, petroleum, and roads is perfectly legitimate. However, investment in the development of human beings, especially at the earliest stage of the life span, is questioned. People want to know if a preschool programme is cost effective, whether it will yield returns. It is a comment on our times, that advocacy for the child's development needs a persistent and loud voice. One of the outcomes of this Course, it is hoped, will be the large increase in the numbers who will raise their voice on behalf of the child.

1.5 SOME ECCE PROGRAMMES OUTSIDE INDIA

While you have read about several ECCE programmes of our country in DECE-1, examples from other countries of some well known programmes for children are worth studying. Let's look at three such programmes.

● Nepal's Project Entry Point

The cost of the project is low; it is linked with existing schemes and reflects a creative response to the needs of the rural poor. Entry Point gives women time to pursue economic activities, while at the same time organizing collective responsibility for child care. Women divide themselves into small groups of five or six and on a rotating basis, each woman takes care of the children for one week, in her own home. All the mothers receive training and each group has a basic kit of materials. Gradually, other toys and play materials are added. Since it is a decentralised community programme, with decisions made by the mothers, it is a successful effort.

● Peru's Programme of Initial Education (PRONOEI)

The initiative for this came from a University, whose volunteers planned nutrition education and cooking mid-morning snacks for children from 3 to 5 years of age. The

areas selected were villages in the highlands, where the IMR was higher than 150. From these beginnings, a model of non-formal preschool emerged. The Government extended this model widely. Each Children's House has about 30 children. Mothers take turn cooking the morning snack. The preschool teacher, called 'animator', is provided with training, curriculum, materials and periodic supervision. From the rural areas the scheme has gone to urban children as well. Children attending these preschool centres were found to be socially and intellectually better prepared to enter primary school.

This is an excellent example of community participation, with materials and services being offered voluntarily and all decisions in the hands of the Parents' Committee.

● **Thailand's Integrated Nutrition and Community Development Programme**

Poverty alleviation tends to be the core of many national schemes in the developing countries. In Thailand a programme to eradicate poverty was combined with community based primary health care and with nutrition education, supplementation and growth monitoring. Nutrition education was followed by attention to interpersonal and psycho-social details, specifically caregiver-child activities. These were respectful of the culture, so that there was no sense of alienation. Video cassettes were used for the messages and so even the non-literate mothers could learn them with ease. Health communicators had several roles including as supplement distributors and video operators. Thus the operational costs were low.

In conclusion, investment in early childhood development is the best investment we can make for the future. The arguments in favour of doing so have been placed before you. After you finish the Course, you will be equipped to be a child development worker. Additionally it is hoped that you will join those who work for advocacy, influencing policy makers and implementers in your own areas.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1) Fill in the blanks :

- i) Of all living beings, the human infant has the period dependency on adults.
- ii) An ECCE programme must be in nature.
- iii) In the early years of life proceeds rapidly.
- iv) ECCE is an effective area of for preventing the cycle of deprivation from continuing.

2) What in your opinion, should be the purpose and approach of ECCE ?

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3) State, in your own words, the rationale for early child development interventions.

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4) Discuss any three important issues involved in delivery of ECCE services.

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5) What lessons can be learnt from Thailand's Integrated Nutrition and Community Development Programme ?

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1.6 LET US SUM UP

Early childhood care and education should meet the child's need for protection, food and health care, along with the need for affection, security, stimulation and learning opportunities. Good early childhood care ensures that children will realise their full development potential and grow into productive adults. Early childhood care and education has become a very pertinent issue, given the research findings pertaining to the importance of early childhood years, the fact that effects of poverty and deprivation can be compensated by early interventions, and given factors like changing family structure from joint to nuclear families, migration and an increasing number of women going out of the house to take up jobs. It is essential that every country should provide good care to its children in the early ages not only for economic reasons, but also as a matter of social justice and human rights, since every child has a right to be looked after properly. The programmes of early childhood care and education should be holistic in nature rather than providing nutrition, health and education services as piece-meal services. There are a number of these programmes being run in our country as well as in other developing countries. It is important to learn not only from one's own experience, but also from that of the others.

1.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISE

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1)
 - i) longest
 - ii) holistic
 - iii) development
 - iv) intervention

- 2) Refer to Section 1.2.

Your answer should include elements such as the following :

Providing for optimum development of the child by fulfilling her health and nutritional needs as well as providing stimulation, through play activities commensurate with her age, in an atmosphere of tender love and care. Parents, other family members, child care workers and local community should be involved in ECCE efforts.

- 3) Refer to Section 1.3 and state the rationale briefly in your own words.
- 4) Refer to Section 1.4.
- 5) Refer to Section 1.5 and identify positive aspects of the programme.