

**Editorial:****The Nurturant Environment and Early Child Development****Vijay Kamale, Nimain Mohanty**

Early childhood is considered as the most important developmental phase for rest of life. The initial years are marked by most rapid growth and development, especially of the central nervous system. The surrounding to which child is exposed, including the quality of relationships and language literally “Sculpt” the developing brain. Various factors that are responsible for fostering nurturing conditions range from intimate realm of family to the broader socioeconomic context shaped by governments, international agencies and civil society. Such environment and its characteristics are the determinants of early child development (ECD). In fact, the ECD is responsible for future health, well-being and learning skills.

In keeping with international policy standards, early childhood is the period from prenatal development to eight years of age. The seeds of adult gender inequity are sewn in early childhood. Gender equity issues, particularly the gender socialization, feeding practices and access to schooling are determinants of ECD. Early gender inequity, when reinforced by power relations, biased norms, day-to-day experience in family, school, community in a broader society go on to have a profound impact on adult gender inequity. Gender equity from early childhood has impact on human productivity and empowerment in adulthood. Economists now assert on the basis of the available evidence that investment in early childhood is the most powerful stake any country can afford, with far greater dividend returns.

Healthy early child development includes the physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive domains of development. Each is equally important, strongly influencing well-being,

stunting or obesity, mental health, childhood onset of adult life-style diseases, competence in literacy, numeracy, criminality and economic participation life-long. Events happening in childhood are critical for child's developmental trajectory and future. The nurturant qualities of environment help children grow up, live and learn from the nature. Yet parents are not able to provide such conducive environment without help from local, regional, national and international agencies. It is important to find out these factors in government and civil society, from local to international, which can work in concert with families to provide equitable access to strong nurturant environment for all children globally. Recognizing the strong impact of ECD on adult life, it is imperative that the governments recognize the disparities in nurturant environments required for healthy child development, differentially influencing ultimate outcome on nations and communities.

Inequities in ECD translate into different life chances for children. In others however, disparities in ECD reach a critical point where they ultimately become threat to peace and sustainable development. Multiple stakeholders are involved in ECD, applicable to varied societies throughout world. One guiding principle is an “Equity-based approach” to providing nurturant environments for children everywhere. Multiple perspectives from provisions of human and child rights declarations to the realities reflected by research evidence highlight their importance. Programs and policies must create marked improvement in the surroundings so that the most disadvantaged children, not just in absolute terms, are equally benefitted, as compared to the most advantaged children. In every society, difference in socioeconomic resources result in

inequities in ECD. The relationship is much more insidious than solely differentiating the rich from the poor. Rather, any additional gain in social and economic resources to a given family results in corresponding gains in developmental outcomes of the children in that family. This step-wise relationship between socioeconomic conditions and ECD is called a “Gradient effect.” However, some societies are more successful than others at “Dulling” the gradient effect, thus fostering greater equity. Societies accomplish this by providing a range of important resources to children as a right of citizenship, rather than allowing them to be a luxury for those families and communities with sufficient purchasing power. Importantly, an equity-based approach is the correct way in creating high average ECD outcomes for a nation.

Societies that demonstrate higher overall average “Total Environment Assessment Model for Early Child Development outcomes” are those in which disadvantaged children are developmentally stronger than disadvantaged children in other nations. Whereas in all nations, children at the higher ends of the socioeconomic spectrum tend to demonstrate relatively strong outcomes.

Understanding of the environment and its characteristics play a significant role in providing nurturant conditions to all children in an equitable manner. It is crucial for planning programmes for ECD. Putting the child at the center of her or his surroundings acts as a guide to understand the relationships between these environments. The environments are not hierarchical, but rather interconnected. At the most intimate level is the family environment and at a broader level are residential communities, such as neighborhoods, relational communities (Those based on religious or other social bonds), and the ECD service environment. Each of these environment is situated in a broad socioeconomic context that is shaped by factors at the regional, national, and global level. This framework denotes the importance of a lifecourse perspective in decision-making regarding ECD. Actions taken at any of these environmental levels are bound to influence

children not only in the present day, but also throughout their lives. The framework also suggests that historical time is critically influential for children, large institutional and structural aspects of societies (e.g., Government policy-clusters and programs) influence ECD. , These are “ built” or “dismantled ” over long periods of time. Socioeconomic inequities in developmental outcomes result from inequities in the degree to which the experiences and environmental conditions for children are nurturant.

Thus action to improve ECD should stem from one overarching goal: to improve the nurturant qualities of the experiences children have in the environments where they grow up, live, and learn. These include those that are intimately connected to the child, and therefore readily identifiable (e.g., Quality of time and care provided by parents, the physical conditions of child's surroundings), but also more distal factors that in various ways influence the child's access to nurturant conditions (Whether government policies provide families and communities sufficient income and employment, health care resources, early childhood education, safe neighborhoods and decent housing etc.).

While genetic predispositions and bio-physical characteristics partially explain how environment and experience shape ECD, the best evidence leads us to consider the child as a social actor who shapes and in turn shaped by his or her environment. This is known as the “transactional model”, which emphasizes that the principal driving force of child development is the relationships. Because strong nurturant relationships can make healthy ECD, the socioeconomic circumstances are not the fate accompli. Family environment is the primary source of experience for a child, because family members (Or other primary caregivers) provide the largest share of human contact with children as families mediate a child's contact with the broad environment. Perhaps the most salient features of the family environment are its social and economic resources.

Family social resources include parenting skills and education, cultural practices and approaches, intra-familial relations and health status of family members.

Economic resources include wealth, occupational status and dwelling conditions. The gradient effect of family resources on ECD is the most powerful explanation for differences in children's well-being across societies. Young children need to spend their time in warm responsive environments that protect them from inappropriate disapproval and punishment. They need opportunities to explore their world, play and learn how to speak and listen to others. Families want to provide these opportunities for their children. However, they need support from the community and government at all levels.

Children and their families are also influenced by residential community (Where they live) and relational communities (Family social ties to those with a common identity) in which they are embedded. Residential and relational communities offer families multiple forms of support, from provision of goods, facilities, child rearing services to emotional connections with others that are instrumental in the well-being of children and their caregivers. At the residential and local level, both governments and grass-roots organizations also play a highly supportive or destructive role. Several resources available to children and families are provided at community level through local recognition of deficits in resources, problem solving and ingenuity. There are however inequities. Those are apparent among residential communities which must be addressed in a systematic manner.

“Relational community” refers to the people - adults and children, who help to form child's social identity; such as - tribal, ethnic, religious, language and cultural. There may or may not be a geographically clustered community. Relational communities provide source of social networks and collective efficacy, including instrumental, informational and emotional forms of support.

However, discrimination, social exclusion and other forms of subjugation are often directed at groups defined by relational communities.

The consequences of these forms of discrimination e.g. scarce economic resources can result in discernable inequities. Again, relational communities can be sources of gender socialization, both equitable and non-equitable. Relational communities are also embedded in larger socio-political contexts. As such, reciprocal engagement with other relational groups, civil society organizations and governmental bodies is a means of addressing the interests and resource needs of their members. The problems in India are mainly due to peculiar behavioral patterns of such communities.

There are principles of ECD programs and services that are readily transferable between places. However, many program features require tailoring to the social, economic and cultural contexts in which they are found. ECD services may be targeted to specific characteristics of children or families (Low birth-weight babies or low-income families), providing them in a more comprehensive manner. Each of these is accompanied by benefits and drawbacks. However, the goal of global community should be to find means of providing universal access to effective ECD programs and services.

Formal and organized health care systems (HCS) are key to provide important ECD services. The system is in a unique position to contribute to ECD since it can provide facilities and services that are more widely accessible in many than in any other human service. The system is already concerned with the health of individuals and communities. These employ trained professionals, having a primary point of contact for expectant mothers. Influence of the regional and national environments is fundamental in determining the quality and accessibility to services, besides resources to families and communities. Those are also crucial for understanding the levels of social organization at which inequalities in opportunity

and outcome may manifest. Also the organizational level at which action to be taken to ameliorate inequities. Eradication of polio through global effort is an example and is a guiding factor for such efforts.

There are many inter-related aspects of regional environments that may be significant for ECD: physical (e.g.- Degree of urbanization, health status of a population), social, political and economic. These aspects of the regional environment affect ECD through influence on family and neighborhood ECD services. In contrast to intimate environments such as the family, the significance of large environments like regions have impact on a large numbers of children. Thus, changing the environment at this level can influence lives of many. More research and accumulated knowledge are required in order to understand how regional characteristics can be modified to positively influence ECD.

The salient features of the national environment are its capacity to affect multiple determinants of ECD through wealth creation, public spending, child- and family-friendly policies, social protection and protection of basic rights. The chances that children will face extreme poverty, child labor, warfare, HIV/AIDS, left for care of a sibling, are determined by countries in which they are born. At the level of national environment, comprehensive and inter-sectoral approaches to policy formulation and decision-making work best for ECD. Although its outcomes tend to be more favorable in wealthy countries than the poor, this is not always the case. India spends a meager 1.3% GDP on health as compared to China 9% and Brazil 12%. A commitment of more than 1.5–2.0% of gross domestic product to an effective mix of policies and programs in the public sector can effectively support children's early development. Those nations with less economic and political power are less free to determine their internal policy agenda. They are more influenced by the interests of the international community, including multilateral countries and organizations. The expenditure mentioned is definitely within the

capabilities of any national government that meets the international criteria for a “Competent authority”. The global environment can influence ECD through its effects on the policies of nations as well as through the direct actions of a range of relevant actors, including multilateral economic organizations, industry, development agencies – Governmental and non-governmental; and civil society groups.

A major feature of the global environment in relation to children's well-being is the element of power in economic, social and political terms. Power differentials between types of actors such as nations, have many consequences. The resource-rich do try to influence the policies of the resource-poor, to suit their own interests. Although power differentials may have detrimental effects on ECD, they can be exploited to the advantage of children too. Requiring a minimum level of government spending on ECD and compliance with the 'Rights in Early Childhood provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as pre-conditions for international developmental assistance are two mechanisms that can be exploited.

Analogous mechanisms have been used effectively by civil societies groups in other areas of international development in the past acting at all levels of social organizations - from local residential level to global. Their ability to act on behalf of children is a function of “Social capital,” or connectedness of citizens in support of political institutions, in promoting expressions of civil organizations. When civil society is enabled, there are many avenues through which they can engage on behalf of children. Such groups can initiate government, non-government organizations and community action on social determinants of ECD. They can advocate on behalf of children to assure that governments and international agencies adopt policies that positively benefit children's well-being.

Finally, the civil society groups are instrumental in organizing strategies at local levels

to provide families and children with effective delivery of ECD services. These include improving safety, cohesion and efficacy of residential environments; increase the capacity of local and relational communities to better the lives of children. Although research on direct outcome of civil societies on ECD is limited, a strong statistical association exists between their strength and human development in societies across the globe. It leaves

little doubt about its positive impact on ECD. The availability of ECD programs and services to support children's development during early years are crucial components of an overall strategy for a fruitful and successful childhood. The quality and appropriateness of services are central consideration to determine whether the existing ECD programs improve outcomes.

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