

# Early childhood development programmes and children's rights

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*The author is Regional Child Development Adviser (Asia) for Save the Children (USA and Norway). In this article she asserts the centrality of children's rights – and therefore the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) – to early childhood development (ECD) and its programming. She therefore argues strongly for holistic ECD programming and against focusing solely on basic education, a restriction that would eliminate much of the potential of ECD programmes to directly support the aims and spirit of the CRC. Her article also reflects on what else the ECD community could and should be doing to ensure that the CRC does indeed help to shape programming for young children. To provide a practical example of what rights oriented ECD programming can mean, she surveys a qualitative study that was carried out in four villages in Nepal to discover how parents contribute to ensuring that the rights of their children are met.*

## ECD – an essential component in any child rights strategy

ECD programmes are about influencing the contexts in which children are growing up, including their families, communities, and local institutions such as schools, health centres, and so on. They are also about influencing the policies that help to create these contexts, and addressing the issues which slow down and damage children's development. Overall, the point is to ensure that contexts are supportive of children's development so that they

grow up healthy, well-nourished, protected from harm, with a sense of self-worth and identity, and enthusiasm and opportunities for learning; and that they learn to think for themselves, communicate effectively, get on with others, and play an active role in their families (and later their communities). Much of this relates directly to their rights. Indeed, it is true to say that ECD programmes are about children's rights and the obligations of the state and of all adults to protect the individual child and create the conditions in which all children can develop their potential.

This is quite different from a widely held perception of ECD as simply a piece of basic education (or which sometimes equates ECD only with preschools). ECD programmes are about opportunities for learning. But they are also about a far broader range of concerns. This holistic view of children's well-being, while by no means new, has been validated and encouraged by the CRC. The basic need for food, healthcare and protection has always been central to child-focused agencies' work and has been long embedded in government policies. It is

only more recently that these have been understood not just as needs but as rights (implying duties and obligations); and also only recently that the rights to affection, interaction, security, stimulation and opportunities for learning have been accepted as being just as fundamental.

Within the child rights framework, ECD programmes are called upon to occupy the very position which the best of them have already assumed as a responsibility for many years. With the impetus of the Convention, this



Nepal: Watering the plants  
photo: D. McKenzie

interpretation of the role of ECD is increasingly being taken on board by many agencies and governments. But clearly there are still serious gaps in understanding here, as is evidenced by the endless frustrations many of us have had with the preparations and documents for the United Nations Special Session on Children. At the time of writing (June 2001), there almost seems to have been a relentless watering down of references to supporting young children's overall development in successive documents. Attention to young children's overall development as capable, confident and caring people is minimal, and the only piece that receives appropriate attention is survival and good health.

This treatment of ECD is inconsistent with the priorities of any child rights

agency, making it all the more imperative for the ECD community to think through how we can make our voice heard even more clearly in support for ECD as central to both education and to overall child rights strategies. The justification for this is based on two complementary perspectives:

- young children's rights must receive the same levels of attention as do those effecting older children. Too often agencies simply ignore this age group – which includes over one third of all children – or focus solely on survival. Yet international trends (migration, changes in nuclear families, heavy workloads of girls and women, increasing school enrolments, globalisation and dependence on the cash economy and resulting threats to women's decision-making control,

insecurity, and so on) affect every aspect of young children's lives.

- It can be done: a wide range of initiatives fall under the ECD umbrella - from working with families to changing systems that marginalise or exclude some children.

And there are proactive (rather than just reactive) approaches to helping to ensure young children's rights. Within these approaches, two essential components are:

- building families' and communities' sense of engagement with their children's rights from an early age, thus increasing the supportiveness of the environments in which children are growing up and reducing the number of children who need protection or rehabilitation projects; and
- strengthening children's own internal protection skills – building their confidence and capacity to have a say in their futures, so they are more able to assess situations, question, come up with alternatives, and so on.

### Strengthening ECD programming for children's rights

To be effective, the unusually holistic nature of ECD programmes has to be protected from tendencies to play down the very aspects which have the most significance for a long-term shift in social norms for ensuring children's rights. Clearly children's health and nutrition are central concerns but so are the psycho-social aspects and these must not be neglected. This is because it is the psycho-social aspects of children's development that have the most significance for long-term social change and for the sustained realisation of children's rights. That means that ECD is inevitably dealing with the sort of people we want our children to become and the sort of society we work towards – something that is central to all of our work in education as a whole. In practical terms, the great strength of quality ECD programmes is their emphasis on developing children's understanding of their world, and supporting the confidence, communication skills and flexibility they need to interact effectively with that world. These are the capacities that have the greatest significance in

enabling children, as they grow up, to deal with real life challenges; be better able to obtain their rights; and be active, contributing members of society – all of which are essential if we expect children to grow up able to contribute to major change in society.

The statements above obviously apply to the best of what we do to support children's development whatever age they are. But they have a special importance for young children: it is during the earliest years that our basic sense of ourselves and our relationship

the other. This synergism between different aspects of children's development means that holistic approaches are vital – even where programmes are not concerned with the 'whole child' but, instead, have specific educational or physical goals. Of great importance here in ECD terms is the fact that the younger the child, the more difficult it is to differentiate between the relative importance of physiological and psychological factors.

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to the world is established. Patterns are established at this time that have far-reaching implications.

In addition, we have recently begun to understand the importance of the two-way, interactive relationship between nutritional status and health on the one hand, and psycho-social well-being on

than a more holistic rights-based approach. Experience in almost every agency confirms that educationalists always include a concern for children's health and nutrition when planning interventions for young children. On the other hand, health personnel do not always reciprocate, favouring a medical worldview rather than a human

development/social justice framework. An over-emphasis on physical status can also happen because, by its very nature, progress in the area of children's psycho-social development is more complex to assess, whereas weight or completion of immunisation schedules are easy to measure. This issue of measuring achievements in supporting young children's overall development using a broader rights-based framework and giving due attention to all aspects of both children's development and how adults are meeting their obligations is an area where promising work is being undertaken under the auspices of the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development.

Other difficulties in holding a holistic approach to ECD programming centre on an over-concern with school. This has two sides. The first is that learning begins at birth and that we learn faster during the earliest years than at any other time, and that most learning during the earliest years occurs in homes and should continue to do so. Early education is not expected to be delivered primarily in formal settings, nor is that necessary. Instead the emphasis has to be on approaches

which recognise, respect and build on families' achievements. The need then is to recognise that families face very real constraints, and to ensure that they get the support that they and their communities need to strengthen their abilities to aid their children's overall development and ensure their rights.

The second side to an over-concern with school in ECD programmes is to do with what is perceived to be the right kind of preparation for achievement in the formal school system. Here there is often a tendency to take a mechanistic approach that relates to future academic success, and this is coupled with the erroneous idea that children are more or less passive recipients of knowledge. At its worst, it can mean that formal school approaches trickle down into and replace developmentally rich ECD approaches. Taking this line is to deny that young children are creative, proactive agents in their own learning who acquire, develop and use new skills readily and use them naturally in ways that enrich their own development. The need is to build on such attributes so that the child can develop fully, rather than crush the children or reduce them to mere tools in the

realisation of inappropriately restricted objectives.

### Conclusion

Until relatively recently, much of the discussion around children's rights tended to focus on legal frameworks, policy decisions and so on. This remains centrally important: the CRC is legally binding for States and it has ensured that appropriate attention has been paid to government policies and initiatives. However, we are increasingly aware of the necessity, within a rights perspective, to concern ourselves within all the contexts in which children live. Quite simply, there are moral obligations to children that extend throughout societies that long preceded any treaty: children's rights are about the obligations of all adults to protect the best interests of children, and to create the conditions under which they can develop and thrive.

The best of children's programmes worldwide are essentially an integrated set of actions for making a reality of children's rights. They are concerned with the whole child and support children's physical, intellectual, social

and emotional development whether they are four months or fourteen years old. An interconnecting thread in the best of ECD programmes across different agencies is an emphasis on enhancing children's sense of self-worth and initiative, their opportunities for learning, their compassion, and their communication and problem-solving skills.

The CRC is not a rigid set of universal solutions. One of the great challenges for the ECD community is to enable families, teachers and peers to equip children for a rapidly changing world while retaining a sense of values and cultural identity. But, they also have to simultaneously help children to grow up healthy and able to deal with the challenges of their lives. A second challenge is to ensure that duty bearers at all levels (from family members to international policy-makers) meet their obligations. To do this, it will be vital to give far more attention to developing effective participatory methods for initiating discussion and dialogue on key children's issues, and on the interpretation and negotiation necessary for the internalisation of the Convention's core principles. ○