

Parents and ECD programmes

There's a view that parents (which here means children's closest caregivers – perhaps members of their extended families) can take on important roles in ECD projects and programmes and fulfil them well. This assumes that they have the time and energy to do so despite the fact that they are overloaded by their struggle to sustain the viability of their families; that their life opportunities and experiences have left them with the necessary vision, confidence and skills; and that the agencies that operate or administer early childhood development (ECD) programmes welcome them as partners. There's also a view that parents just want to pass their children over to programmes; that they lack the interest or expertise to directly support their children's development; and that programmes can only be conceived, directed and operated by trained and experienced personnel.

Examples of both of these views of parents and their involvement in programmes can be readily found. In some cultures or agencies, parent initiated – often informal – childcare programmes are the norm, often as continuations of local practices that have existed for generations. In other agencies or cultures, there is an insistence on maintaining a degree of professionalism that excludes parents from any real control.

In a discussion about parental involvement it is important to keep in mind that children depend on the love, care and security that those in parenting roles most naturally provide. Parents are also children's first educators, with the responsibility for making sure that children have the safe, rich development environments

that they need if they are to flourish. Given these facts, where and to what extent do and should parents fit into ECD programmes? This edition of *Early Childhood Matters* explores this question, reflecting on practice around such topics as: what roles do parents have and why? What helps to determine these roles? How and under what circumstances do parents complement, support – even take over – roles that are often earmarked for trained child development workers? How is their participation viewed by other stakeholders; how is it fostered; how is it constrained?

It is tempting to judge parental involvement in programmes on the basis of the quantity and nature of what parents do. But such an approach is misguided because, as Judith Evans

shows (page 7), there are many different ways in which parents participate in ECD programmes and any one of them could be right in its context. Although she suggests a continuum of involvement that ranges from parents as passive receivers of goods or services through to parents as instigators and sustainers of their own programmes, she points out that many factors determine participation. These factors include parental characteristics, the opportunities and experiences parents have had, the culture within which a project is being developed, the point in time within the project that parent participation is being defined, the attitudes and philosophies of all those involved, and so on. Therefore, if you want a measure of quality, you should look at how well a programme addresses these factors, and how

successful it has been in ensuring that parental participation has developed as fully as is possible in the circumstances. In this respect, her article includes many examples of good practice.

The second article in this edition is by Yvonne de Graaf, Bert Prinsen and Mieke Vergeer (page 18) and deals with parent participation of a very particular kind. Here, the importance of the knowledge and skills of experienced mothers is recognised, and a support programme for new mothers has been built up around this knowledge and those skills. The programme is called *Moeders Informeren Moeders* (MIM – Mothers Inform Mothers) and, as the article shows, is put into practice with the experienced mothers themselves.



Philippines: *child-to-child activities in a family-based setting*
Community of Learners Foundation Project
photo: Feny de los Angeles-Bautista/Lourdes I Aldecoa

Using a variety of approaches, aids and techniques, they explore important areas of child healthcare and development with the new mothers, and also focus on the new mothers' well-being. The success of this kind of parental involvement lies in understanding that people can learn readily and happily from trusted members of their own communities. It also depends on bringing out and valuing what people know, understand and can do, and on finding ways in which all of this can be shared with those who could benefit from it. And, as with so much else in the development field, the MIM approach is not fixed or static: each implementation is geared to specific target groups that include urban communities, rural populations, migrants, refugees and travelling people.

In Winnipeg, Canada, the Oshki-majahitowiin Head Start Programme, discussed by Rachel Lawrenchuk, Carol DH Harvey and Mark Berkowitz (page 24), shows how to bring parents into the heart of a programme that operates in one of the poorest urban constituencies in Canada. Families living in the neighbourhood are at risk due to inadequate health, housing, employment and education provisions; while safety and the quality of personal relationships are also significant factors. Against this background, project staff felt that the only possible approach was to acknowledge the harsh realities of people's lives and respond to them by working alongside parents and caregivers. This implies certain attitudes on the part of the staff: for example, a commitment to the ideas of real partnership between staff and parents, and to the

policy of aboriginal control of aboriginal health and education. To make these attitudes concrete, the programme ensures that the centre, and the nature and content of the programme itself, develops as the parents and children themselves develop. The broad aim is to foster the spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical growth of the young aboriginal children living in the community. As basic strategies, the programme recognises and supports extended families, and focuses on sustaining healthy personal growth and development in parents as well as children, and helps parents to generate success for themselves.

In her article on page 30, Joanna Bouma reflects on the roles of parents in programmes for young children, as she observed them during a recent working visit to the Samburu ECD Project in Northern Kenya. The project supports a number of early childhood development programme, and this article describes a 'typical' programme – actually an amalgamation of different programmes scattered across a very harsh and isolated part of the country. What she saw was impressive:

parents as initiators, controllers and operators of their children's ECD programmes; the project as an enabler and facilitator responding to parents' needs. The project provides technical support but the parents define its roles: nobody tells the parents what to do with their children; and nobody tells them what support they need – they decide for themselves and then seek it when they are ready. This is a first class example of what parents can do: they have taken an old tradition and adapted it to suit modern circumstances. And they keep it going themselves. This is all done in an unpromising environment in which community members are already overtaxed just to survive.

Complementing these articles are a series of extracts from interviews with parents and decision makers in Nicaragua (page 37). Especially interesting are the views of parents about their own roles and how they have experienced them. What emerges is a complex picture of determination overcoming reticence and inexperience; of sympathetic support based on the potential that parents have; of dealing with complexities by

always taking practical approaches; of building a body of success by being realistic; and – now – having aspirations that once would have seemed impossible to them. It is results like these that help to account for the enthusiasm for parental participation that is revealed in the extracts from interviews with decision makers that conclude the article. This enthusiasm is given practical expression in the national plan to enhance parental roles in the development of their children that is outlined by Nicaragua's Director of Preschool Education.

Overall, the articles review the subject extensively, and also offer impressive examples of what parents can and do achieve if their potential is encouraged to blossom. In doing this, the articles invite us to look closely at the reasons why parental participation varies so widely. Specific questions may arise about whether we always listen enough to parents and whether we always understand who we are working with. Do we sometimes miss what they can do? And, if so, is it because it does not suit us, or because we have preconceptions or prejudices? Do we sometimes crush potential, or

undervalue or ignore it? Do we always know how much power we hold, and do we consider how much that fairly reflects what parents could do? Do we know when we should step back into genuinely enabling and supportive roles? It is only when we ask these questions of ourselves and try to answer them honestly, that we can really begin to claim that we are taking parental participation seriously.

The October edition of *Early Childhood Matters* will consist of a collection of articles about the progress of the Effectiveness Initiative. This is a three year investigation into what makes an effective project work, that was launched in January 1999 by the Foundation and partner organisations in the Consultative group on Early Childhood Care and Development. The articles will review progress so far and survey a range of significant topics that are emerging. *Early Childhood Matters'* coverage of the Effectiveness Initiative began in the October 1999 edition. This can be accessed at www.bernardvanleer.org and copies are available on request.

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