

Early childhood development as an international policy issue

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This article has been prepared from Early Childhood Development as an International Policy Issue: Summary Report¹ produced by Cassie Landers for Ready to Learn: The International Center on Care and Education of Children at the Academy for Educational Development (AED).² The report is about an informal information exchange that AED organised in November 1998 for United States and international experts on the care and development of young children. Among those attending were representatives from multilateral donors, and implementing and technical agencies.

This article consists of a selection of presentations from the day. It shows the priorities and strategies of some of the agencies, and the sorts of issues that are significant to them as they focus on being effective decision and policy makers.

International donor priorities and strategies for impact

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and early childhood development (ECD). *Presented by Sandra Huffiman for Joseph Hunt.*

The ECD efforts at ADB focus on children from birth through eight years old with a particular emphasis on the interaction between nutrition, health, and school attendance and performance. For each of the age periods from prenatal to age eight, a specific outcome has been identified. The pre-pregnancy period is concerned with improved nutrition and pregnancy. In the newborn period the goal is to decrease low birth weight while increasing breastfeeding. For children in the first two years of life, the goal is to increase nutrition and health in order to decrease stunting, anaemia, vitamin deficiency and infections. The first three years should also focus on increased environmental stimulation

through play and feeding. Children between the ages of four and six should have access to preschool development programmes while children entering the first two years of primary school should have an enriched curriculum at school.

The World Bank and early childhood development (ECD).

Presented by Mary Young.

The World Bank has placed increasing importance on ECD over the past five years. It began with a set of arguments, designed to convince policy makers and field directors of the importance of investing in early childhood programmes. The series of arguments, based on the work of Robert Myers, Cassie Landers and David Weikart, and supported by scientific findings, addressed the effect of ECD on socio-economic development, social equity, and the interacting needs of women and children. In collaboration with other donors, a range of programmes and strategies are currently being supported

including integrated child development programmes, service delivery, caregiver education, and the creation of awareness and demand for ECD. Other initiatives have included the development of an economic model on the benefits of ECD programmes as well as a website on the design, implementation, and evaluation of field-based ECD initiatives. In 1996, the World Bank organised a conference focused on the first three years of life and a follow-up conference is planned for April, 2000.

Over the next two years, emphasis will be placed on broadening and strengthening the knowledge base about ECD. The World Bank intends to: (A) broaden clients' awareness and understanding of ECD and educate bank staff and partner agencies about ECD initiatives, (B) expand the content and increase the utilisation of the ECD computerised knowledge base, and (C) improve programme quality. In achieving the goal of improved

programme quality, attention is placed on the development of programme monitoring and evaluation instruments as well as those designed to measure children's cognitive performance.

The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and early child care and development (ECCD).

Presented by Ricardo Moran.

The IDB is in the process of creating a framework for policies and strategies to support ECCD initiatives. The IDB recognises that the future of a child, as both a producer and consumer, is dependent on the socio-economic status of the family. Since 1985, the IDB has supported 85 programmes in which attention to the developmental needs of young children has been either the primary focus or an integrated component of a health or education initiative. These programmes are intended to break the cycle of poverty by improving opportunities for children of poor families.

The inter-generational transmission of poverty is fuelled by the following cycle. Poor parents with little schooling have children early without fundamental means or skills. Children raised in these environments enter school with impaired learning capacity which ultimately results in school failure and functional illiteracy. This in turn leads to children who drop out of school and, therefore, have few skills or knowledge and generate little income. For these youth, parenting begins early and the cycle of poverty begins anew.

IDB goals include: (A) more effective use of existing resources, (B) increased social demand for ECCD and (C) increased programme coverage. The strategies proposed to achieve these goals are to use existing resources more effectively by increasing monitoring and evaluation, encouraging public-private partnerships, using inter-sectoral approaches to strengthen synergies, carefully designing and implementing

programmes, and using incentives more creatively and intensively. The strategies for increasing the demand for ECCD activities include social marketing campaigns, dissemination of hard data and increased parenting skills training. Finally, in an effort to increase ECCD coverage, additional support will be mobilised by shifting fiscal resources, tapping non-traditional funding sources, fund-raising efforts, and raising awareness of benefits through media campaign workshops and seminars.

In order to monitor the achievement of the above goals and strategies, emphasis is placed on the development of short and long term impact indicators including improved health and nutrition, emotional and social development, motor skills development, academic performance and mother's earnings. Long term impact will be measured by educational attainment as a proxy for life-time earnings.

Social sector initiative strategies

High/Scope Foundation.

Presented by David Weikart.

All children develop according to a series of sequential stages. In the first three years, the sensory motor period, the critical needs are in the areas of health, nutrition, and attachment. In the pre-operational period, the basic foundations are laid down, and include such behaviours as initiative, independence, responsibility, and social preparedness. Although the capacity for colour, shape, form, numbers, and vocabulary are all developing, the real issues are behavioural. If foundations are not instilled during this pre-operational period, it is too late. The next stage (the academic stage) is when children begin formal academic preparation.

Early childhood development (ECD) interventions work and provide an opportunity to break the cycle of

poverty. According to the findings of the *High/Scope Perry Study*, children who were exposed to high quality ECD programmes, when interviewed at 27 years old, were more successful and stable than those who did not attend good ECD programmes. High/Scope Perry found that children exposed to good ECD programmes committed significantly less crime, graduated high school at a higher rate, owned more homes, earned higher salaries and used welfare less than those that did not receive high-quality early childhood care. This impact is most striking when shown in terms of the return on investment and the sources of public costs and benefits per participant. These programmes, when properly implemented, will pay for themselves.

There is also a considerable amount of research confirming the benefit of specific approaches and organisation techniques for the education of young children, particularly those between

four to six years of age. For example, young children need to practise taking control, and learn how to plan, conceptualise, make decisions, and talk about what they did. This kind of information must be disseminated in order to promote and provide high-quality ECD programming since it has also been shown that not all preschool programmes are beneficial. The work of High/Scope Foundation has shown that preschool programmes based on child planning and social reasoning are the most effective in the long term. But scripted, directive teaching and/or programmes inappropriately matched to the developmental stages of children, can actually have a negative impact on them. ECD is a social and political issue. Within this climate, one must be careful not to lose sight of the knowledge base about programmes and what makes them effective or harmful.

Zero to Three.

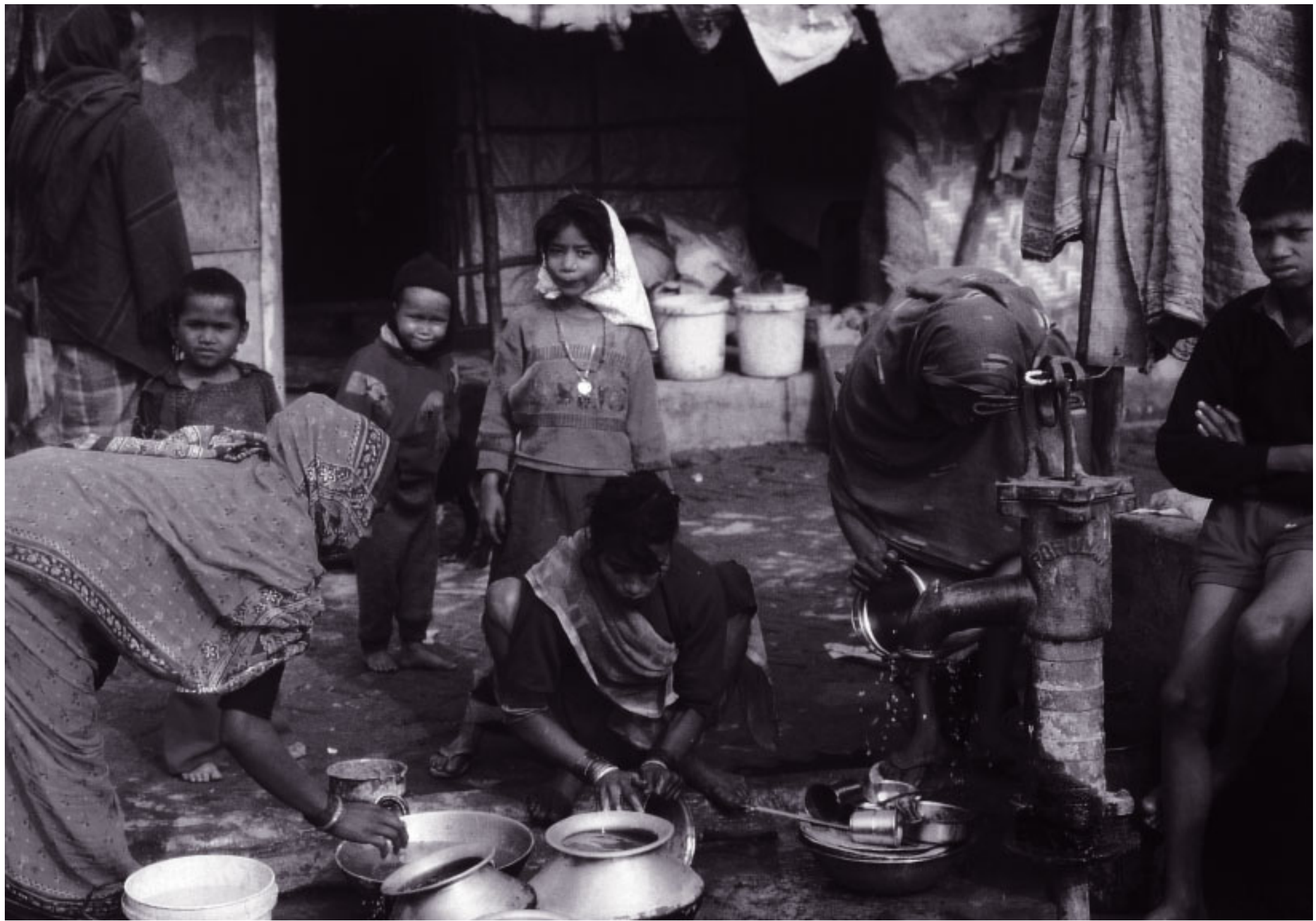
Presented by Abby Griffin.

Zero to Three is a national, non-profit organisation located in Washington DC, dedicated solely to advancing the healthy development of babies and young children. Founded in 1977, Zero to Three disseminates information on key developments, trains providers, promotes model approaches and standards of practice, and works to increase public awareness about the significance of the first three years of life. Zero to Three emphasises that by combining the talents of professionals from the fields of medicine, mental health, research, science, and child development, the diverse needs of the 'whole baby' can be met in the context of the family and community.

The acronym 'ACT' helps to define what Zero to Three is trying to accomplish. 'A' refers to Advancing

Zimbabwe: *Community Kitchen*
Centre for Development Information & Education
photo: Paula Nimpuno-Parente





the state of knowledge through a range of conferences, workshops, and discussion groups. ‘c’ stands for Communication and the need to translate the former into messages available to all. Two interactive websites help to facilitate this communication. ‘t’ stands for Training and Technical assistance. In addition to training professionals, Zero to Three’s aim is to identify emerging leaders within communities and provide them with the skills needed to transfer information directly to their communities.

One of Zero to Three’s programmes, Heartstart, is concerned with the emotional foundation for school-readiness. It addresses questions like: What does it mean to be a learner? What does it mean to sustain it over time? What makes a life-long learner? In answering these questions, Heartstart found that the following characteristics are shaped in the first three years.

- Confidence and trust in yourself and others combined with the belief that you will succeed and that there are people there to help you. This is learned by 6 months.
- Curiosity and the freedom to explore and not be afraid of new tasks.
- Intentionality and the capacity to be persistent in achieving set goals.
- Self-control and the ability to take action when needed.
- Attachment, knowledge that the family is safe.
- Communication and the ability to express oneself through words, gestures and behaviours.
- Cooperation and the ability to share.

Zero to Three tries to integrate the basic needs of children into programmes, approaches and policies. These needs cut across cultures and include good physical health, safe supportive environments, unhurried time with primary caregivers, and responsive care giving.

The new research on the brain provides a strong foundation for the promotion of human capital development. Research suggests a need to support strong, consistent, caring relationships, and hire high quality staff. Programmes should be child-focused but include parent-focused activities utilising child, family and community-based approaches. Programmes should also focus on young children because the greater change occurs in them.

Effective communicating

The Benton Foundation: Effective Language for Discussing Early Childhood Education and Policy.

Presented by Paula Antonovich. Bridging the distance between scholars and advocates to advance public understanding of, and support for, children’s issues has been a major area of interest for the Benton Foundation. The Foundation hopes to provide child advocates with a body of work from

which they can pick and choose new ideas, new sound bites, new frames, and a new language. Hopefully, this will help advance policy solutions for children. There is no one answer that fits all. Rather, what is offered is a palette of responses for child advocates to experiment with and match to each particular media and political environment.

Together with the Human Services Policy Center at the University of Washington, the Benton Foundation sought to identify a different set of conceptual frames and metaphors that might guide the interaction with the media in an effort to ‘reframe’ ECD. For example, the simple change in terminology from daycare and childcare to early childhood education or early learning can make a significant difference in support level for ECD. Together with scholars, the Benton Foundation seeks: to identify, explore, and explain the various options

available to children's advocates in furthering public understanding of the importance of investing in early childhood education; to explain the dominant metaphorical streams associated with the issue; to suggest the pros and cons of these options; and to suggest the best ways to re-frame the issue to support progressive reform.

One major finding showed the importance of moving the debate towards issues of quality of child development as a collective responsibility and need. Advocates need to reposition their campaigns for quality childcare to draw energy from the increased public concern for education. Thus early education becomes a solution to a problem already of concern and interest to the public.

Another finding suggests ways to avoid parent versus provider confrontations and instead, enlist parents as partners without shifting the responsibility back on their shoulders. Advocates and policy makers must be clear in indicating what they want to do, and communicate

active, positive solutions because people are overwhelmed by big problems that don't seem to have any solutions.

The Academy for Education Development.

Presented by Bill Smith.

There appear to be three problems impeding clear and effective communication about policies and programmes for young children.

- *Science:* What works? (Especially for very young children, from birth to three years old)

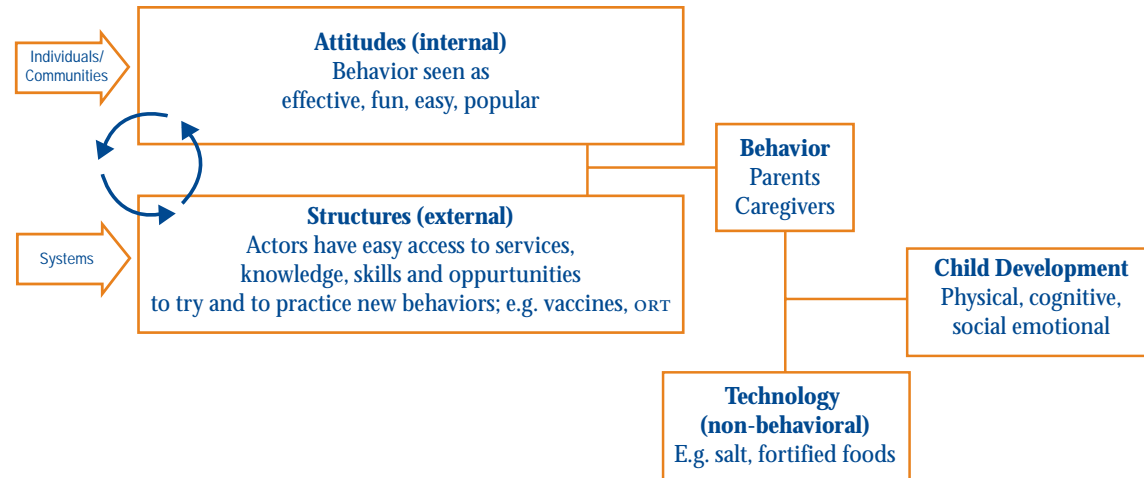
- *Scale:* How can we do enough of 'what works' to make a population-based difference?
- *Funding:* Given competing priorities, who will pay for it and why will they pay for it?

It is instructive to consider several experiences from the health sector which shed light on how effective communication strategies contribute to positive impact.

Bring parents and caregivers to the table. In the final analysis, it is they who

have the greatest impact on the lives of children. Parents and caregivers have their own priorities and strategies, and they can translate your messages into terms meaningful for them. In the campaign against AIDS, the inclusion and leadership of HIV positive people transformed the agenda and the strategy for public education and behaviour change.

Research should not interfere with the work of programmes. The need for clarity, indicators and measurement is a legitimate concern in the field of early



childhood as it is in health and education. However, debates over details and specifics must not confuse messages and weaken the impetus for change. If known benefits outweigh potential drawbacks, strategic communication with one voice may be called for. One example: oral rehydration packets were distributed while experts were still engaged in intense room debates over the best way to rehydrate during diarrhoea. Although the packet strategy may have been sub-optimal, the packets saved many children's lives.

The figure on the previous page presents a partial model of the flow of communication for behaviour change, using examples from the health field. The complexity of changing attitudes and structure contrasts with the relative simplicity of introducing a technology as the focal point for change.

This model suggests there are three basic paths to child development:

1. improved non-behavioural technologies;
2. structural changes to make behaviour change easily; and
3. changes in attitudes towards behaviour to overcome internal barriers to change.

The introduction of non-behavioural technologies is generally a faster approach than mounting campaigns to persuade people to adopt a new behaviour. Savvy efforts to promote specific models and tools for cognitive and social development – even if they are imperfect – may be a route to more effective communication about ECD. However, when non-behavioural opportunities are exhausted, a great deal can be accomplished through structural and attitudinal change. ○

notes

1. Copies of the summary and full reports can be obtained from Ready to Learn: The International Center on Care and Education of Children, The Academy for Educational Development, 1875 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington DC 20009-1202, USA; tel: +1 202 884 8261; fax: +1 202 884 8405; email: ready@aed.org.
2. Full details of Ready to Learn can be found on Internet at www.aed.org.

Peru: Ready for anything
photo: Gerry Salole



