

III WHY INVEST IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT?

Believers and sceptics

The world is filled with believers in the importance of good care and attention for children during their earliest months and years. That widespread belief is embedded in many cultural traditions. The young child may be seen as a little god still in a state of relative perfection, or be pictured as «the butterflies of Paradise» (Sharif, UNICEF, 1985), or a «little sun.» Belief in the need for proper care is also grounded in the recognition that children are the next generation; they represent the continuity of tradition as well as the hope for, and fear of, change. There is a need to believe that the children of today can be both a rallying point for social action and the constructors of a better world.

Personal experience also creates believers in the value of early childhood care and development. Parents, professionals, and others who are simply close observers of how the neighbor's children grow up, recognize a healthy effect of good care and attention to infants and young children. They do not need an elaborate rationale or cold scientific evidence to justify their personal feeling that rudimentary health precautions and a good diet, combined with smiles and cuddling, talk and play will enhance a child's development. Such actions are not only seen as right and just, but also as a good investment of time and money.

But if there are so many believers in the world, why is it that programmes of early childhood care and development have received so little support? Why do governments and other organizations not respond more generously in their budgets to the obvious developmental needs of those twelve of every thirteen children born in the world, who manage to survive to age one. Why are there not more programmes designed to improve care and enhance development?

Unfortunately for children, when it comes to investing in programmes intended to improve early childhood development, there are sceptics as well as believers. Control over purse strings and planning processes often falls to sceptics whose way of viewing the world is conditioned by their job. These sceptics need more to go on than someone else's belief that investing in programmes of child care and development is good. They want to be shown that early childhood is a better investment than roads, dams, primary schools or even bombers. They want visible and hard evidence that the proposed programmes will work. In order to justify action, they demand a rationale, a set of convincing arguments based on something other than unsubstantiated beliefs, combining both scientific and political arguments.

Sources of scepticism

In setting out a rationale, it is important to respond to sceptics' concerns. These sources of scepticism are as varied (and sometimes as irrational) as are the arguments used in favour of investing in early childhood development. For instance, sceptics might enunciate any of the following statements:

«But I don't understand!». Lack of understanding is often a source of scepticism. Child development sometimes appears to the uninitiated to be either too vague and simple, or too complicated and mysterious to be dealt with in programmes of any scale and significance. «How can you programme hugging your child?» «What do you mean by 'inadequate interaction adversely affecting the maturation of neural pathways?'»

Lack of understanding arises also from the fact that «early childhood development» crosses disciplinary lines and seems to mean different things to different people, blurring the basis for action. As outlined in Chapter II, where we attempted to clarify concepts, there is much imprecision in the general understanding of early childhood development. Understanding the notion is not as easy as understanding a road or a dam. Roads and dams can be seen once they are completed and their function is relatively easy to grasp. Building them may be complicated, but the techniques are known, and there is little hesitation in turning the task over to experts. Sceptics would like to have a similar feeling about child development. That can be helped by establishing evidence that programmes work, by setting out clear and concrete guidelines and by showing examples of various kinds of programmes that are working.

The rationale that follows will provide several bases and kinds of evidence for investment. In Chapter IV, we will suggest guidelines and a set of complementary programme approaches that can help that process of physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development during the early years. We will also provide some concrete examples that should help increase understanding.

«It's already taken care of!» Ironically, many individuals who view programmes of early childhood care and development with a sceptical eye have grown up in advantaged conditions, in a loving home, with food on the table and good health care, and with parents who provide a stimulating environment for growing and learning. As a result of their own experience, they feel that families can and do provide the attention needed for healthy growth and development. They may agree that the early years of a child's life are important but they see no need for special programmes to assist children and families during that period. Sometimes, they see child development primarily as a matter of loving a child and they argue, with good reason, that love is not something to be programmed. In brief, some sceptics believe that families are doing a good job, for the most part, of bringing up their children. And sometimes they are right. So why interfere? Perhaps the most convincing argument in these cases would be made by arranging to follow a young, poverty-stricken single mother through her daily routine as she struggles to survive in an unsupportive urban environment and tries to provide the love, health, care and attention to her child that she would like to provide, but often cannot.

«It's a mother's job.» In some cases, the above view about what families should be and do is related closely to another source of scepticism: the belief that a mother's place is in the home. Early childhood programmes, particularly if they are outside the home, are sometimes seen as eroding the traditional role of the mother. Scepticism rooted in this view of the maternal role persists even though mothers, traditionally, have seldom been the only person providing care to their young children. It persists in spite of the fact that many women must work outside the home, and that studies show provision of alternate care in these cases can be good for both mother and child. It persists even though programmes to enhance early care and development can reach into the home and can respect the primary role of mothers and families in the process.

«Give me evidence.» Some sceptics are open to the idea that early development is important and should be fostered, but they lack hard evidence that early interventions produce results, particularly over the longer term. Sometimes, this scepticism simply reflects a lack of information. In other cases, the evidence at hand may show that programme results do not occur, or if they occur, do not last. Sceptics may, for instance, point to findings of studies carried out in the early 1970s, suggesting that the effects of early childhood programmes «wash out» when children reach age seven or eight. They are not aware, however, that over the last ten to fifteen years, these findings have been superseded by new research information.

«What is the rate of return?» Still other sceptics seek, and do not find, an economic justification for investment in child care or early childhood programmes. They would like to be able to compare an economic rate of return to programmes of early childhood development with other possible investments in order to choose the one carrying the highest rate. At a minimum, they would like to know that proposed programmes will effectively produce results justifying the cost of the programme. Reasonably, they would like to feel that money is not being wasted.

Any rationale for investment in programmes of early childhood care and development should include responses to the different sources of scepticism sketched above. Doing so should, at a minimum, bolster the position of those who would like to support programmes of care and development but are under pressure to support other programmes instead.

Lines of argument

The rationale that follows draws upon eight complementary lines of argument for increased support to programmes of early child care and development. These are:

1. A human rights argument: children have a right to live and to develop to their full potential.
2. A moral and social values argument: through children humanity transmits its values. That transmission begins with infants. To preserve desirable moral and social values in the future, one must begin with children.
3. An economic argument: society can benefit economically from investing in child development, through increased production and cost savings.
4. A programme efficacy argument: the efficacy of other programmes (c .g., health, nutrition, education, women ' s programmes) can be improved through their combination with programmes of child development.
5. A social equity argument: by providing a «fair start,» it is possible to modify distressing socio-economic and gender-related inequities.
6. A political argument: children provide a rallying point for social and political actions that build consensus and solidarity.
7. A scientific argument: the research evidence demonstrates forcefully that the early years are critical in the development of intelligence, personality, and social behaviour, and that there are longterm effects associated with a variety of early intervention programmes.
8. Changing social and demographic circumstances: the increasing survival of vulnerable children, changing family structures, country to city migration, women in the labour force, and other changes require increased attention to early care and development.

Some of these lines of argument will be more relevant to one situation than to another. Different individuals will find appeal in different arguments, reflecting their particular concerns about the rights of children, about economic benefits, about social equity, about adjusting to changing circumstances affecting families and work, etc. Let us look briefly at each argument in turn.

1. Children have a human right to develop to their full potential.

For many people, the obligation to protect a child's human rights is the most fundamental and convincing reason to invest in programmes to enhance early childhood development. The Declaration of

the Rights of the Child, adopted unanimously in 1959 by the United Nations General Assembly, recognized among its 10 principles:

«The child will enjoy special protection and will have at its disposal opportunities and services, dispensed under the law and through other means, allowing physical, mental, moral, spiritual, and social development in a healthy and normal way, with liberty and dignity.»

Allowing disability and arrested development to occur each year in millions of young children, when it could be prevented, is a violation of basic human rights. The fact that children are dependent on others for satisfaction of their rights creates an even greater obligation to help and protect them.

Thirty years after approval of the 1959 Declaration, a Convention on the Rights of the Child has been adopted, in 1989, by the United Nations Assembly that urges signatories to:

«... ensure to the maximum extent possible child survival and development.» (Article 6)

Moreover, while placing primary responsibility for a child's upbringing with parents and families, States must:

«...render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall insure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.» (Article 18.2)

Further:

«...children of working parents have the right to benefit from child care services and facilities for which they are eligible.» (Article 18.3)

The Declaration of Children's Rights and the Convention suggest that the right for children to develop to their full potential is widely accepted internationally, providing the cornerstone for an early childhood programme rationale. However, the rhetoric of human rights needs to be translated into action. Children are not able to make that translation for themselves. They are dependent on the actions of others for their rights.

2. Through children, humanity transmits its values.

We are continually reminded that «children are our future.» The transmission of social and moral values that will guide that future begins in the earliest months and years of life. In societies where there is a concern that crucial values are being eroded, there is a strong incentive to find ways in which those values can be strengthened. Early childhood programmes can assist in that effort, both by strengthening the resolve of parents and by providing environments for children to play and learn that include specific attention to desired values. Attending to the development of basic values in children must be a high priority in a world racked by violence but seeking peace, in a world facing environmental degradation but seeking co-operative and sane solutions, and in a world where consumerism, competition, and egotism seem to be winning out over altruism, cooperation and solidarity as core values.

If children are our future, they are the agents of change as well as the custodians of continuity. For many, that is frightening. But for revolutionary governments early childhood has represented an

opportunity. They have consistently recognized the importance of inculcating values at an early age. The idea that the «New Man» begins with the «New Child» has provided a basic and adequate rationale for massive early childhood programmes following revolutions. Although the centralized, proselytizing nature of many such programmes is not always palatable to outsiders (any more than the proselytizing of missionaries is to many revolutionaries), what the post-revolutionary spread of child care centres and pre-schools shows clearly is that the decision whether or not to invest in early childhood programmes is fundamentally a political decision.

3. Society benefits through increased productivity and cost savings associated with enhanced early childhood development

Without recurring to a scientific literature, common sense suggests that a person who is well developed physically, mentally, socially and emotionally will be in a better position to contribute economically to family, community and country than a person who has not. And in most countries of the world, that economic contribution begins at a very early age.

Increased productivity. Early childhood programmes have the potential to improve both physical and mental capacity. They also can affect enrolment, progress and performance of children in schooling which is, in turn, associated with important changes in skills and outlooks affecting adult behaviour. Schooling helps build such skills as the ability to organize knowledge into meaningful categories, to transfer knowledge from one situation to another, and to be more selective in the use of information (Rogoff, 1980; Triandis, 1980). Schooling also facilitates greater technological adaptiveness (Grawe, 1979). It relates directly to both increased farmer productivity (Lockheed, Lau and Jamison, 1980) and productivity in the informal market sector (Colclough, 1980).

Productivity increases may also occur through changes in employment. Child care and development programmes not only affect positively the future productivity of children, they also offer the possibility of increased labour force participation by women and can free older siblings to learn and earn as well. Furthermore, they can provide employment for local individuals, both as caregivers and as suppliers of materials and services needed to make the programme function.

Cost savings. One way in which investments in health, nutrition, and psychosocial development during the early years can bring an economic return is through cost savings - by reducing work losses, by cutting the later need for social welfare programmes, by improving the efficiency of educational systems through reductions in dropout, repetition, and remedial programmes, and by reducing health costs. In a review of 17 longitudinal studies examining the effect of early interventions on school progress and performance in primary school (Myers, 1992), 12 studies contained information about effects on repetition. Of these, 8 pointed to lower repetition among primary school children who participated in early childhood programmes, as compared with similar children who had not participated. Of the 4 studies in which no difference was found, one involved a system following an automatic promotion procedure.

More specifically, an evaluation from Brazil shows that by reducing the extra primary school costs associated with repetition, a programme of integrated attention to preschool children more than paid for itself (Ministerio da Saude, 1983). Another often-quoted example of an economic payoff to an investment in early development comes from the United States where a longitudinal study of the effects of participation by children from low-income families in a preschool programme produced benefits estimated at seven times the original cost of the programme (Berruta-Clement, et. al, 1984).

The rate of return. It is difficult to calculate a ratio of programme costs to programme benefit or an economic «rate of return» for social investments of any kind, including programmes of early childhood care and development. But when such estimates have been made, they suggest a high return on an investment in early childhood is possible. For instance, Selowsky, using Latin American data, concluded that:

«Yearly investments per child in programmes that can induce a change in ability equal to one standard deviation can be 'justified' if they cost between 0.37 and 0.51 the yearly wage of an illiterate worker.» (Selowsky, 1981, p. 342)

Both the desired increase in what Selowsky calls «ability» and the costs cited are well within the realm of possibility to achieve. In brief, there are several compelling reasons why economic benefits can be expected from investment in programmes of early childhood care and development.

4. The efficacy of other programmes can be improved through joint investment in early childhood development. Because investments in early childhood care and development can help to make other programmes more efficient and effective, it is not appropriate to look at them as a direct «trade-off» against, for instance, primary schooling or primary health care. They should be considered as part of the same package, with increased benefits at marginal, or even no additional cost. Combining programmes takes advantage of the interactive effect among health, nutrition and early stimulation. In addition, child care and development programmes are potentially useful as vehicles for extending primary health care (Evans, 1985). For instance, parental education programmes will not only help parents to help their children at home; such programmes can also improve the ways in which health care services are drawn upon.

If children arrive at primary school better prepared, they can make better use of the school. Not only will dropout and repetition decrease, affecting costs, but the quality of education will rise because one of the most important «inputs» into the school system is the child. When children are better prepared, teachers are stimulated more, facilities and materials are used better, and children learn more from each other. In the aforementioned review of longitudinal studies, the academic performance of children who had been part of early intervention programmes was found to be superior in 8 of 13 studies. In three others, no significant differences were found between the intervened children and others, and in one, effects were found in a rural, but not an urban context (Myers, 1992).

In a different vein, income-generating programmes for women that respond to child care and development needs are likely to be more successful than programmes that do not. If proper care for their children is assured, women will lose less work time as a result of child-related concerns (Galinsky, 1986). They will also be able to seek steadier and better-paid employment.

5. Programmes can help to modify distressing inequalities. Investments in early childhood development can help to modify inequalities rooted in poverty and discrimination (social, religious, gender), by giving children from so-called «disadvantaged» backgrounds a «fair start.» Poverty and/or discrimination produce stressful conditions and unequal treatment that can inhibit healthy and comprehensive development in the early years. For instance, children from poor families often fall quickly and progressively behind their more advantaged peers in their readiness for school, and that gap is never closed.

Boys, traditionally, have been better prepared for schooling than girls and have had more opportunities to enter and continue in school. The differences begin with gender-linked disparities in the patterns and practices of early development that need to be changed if the discrimination is to be overcome. These are often deeply rooted in culture, but there is evidence that integrated attention to early development can produce changes in ways families perceive the abilities and future of a girl child.

By not intervening to foster early childhood development where it is needed, governments have tacitly endorsed and strengthened inequalities. Ironically, one argument used against early education programmes is that they are discriminatory — favouring the upper class. That is certainly true if no special effort is made to assist the poor and if programmes of early education are left to those who can pay for them. But evidence shows that early childhood programmes can moderate rather than reinforce these social differences. As an example, one evaluation of the huge Integrated Child Development Service of India shows clearly that benefits are greatest for lower castes and for girls (Lal and Wati, 1986). Several Latin American studies have also shown results favouring children from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or children from rural areas (e.g., Filp, et.al., 1983).

6. Children provide a rallying point for social and political actions that build consensus and solidarity. Mozambique, Peru, Sri Lanka, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Iran and a significant number of other countries are victims of violent actions that place the problem of living together in peace high on the list of social goals. In many locations, lesser political and social tensions make it extremely difficult to mobilise people for actions that will be to their own benefit. In such circumstance, it has been shown that placing «Children First» can be an effective political strategy.

Perhaps the most dramatic, but short-lived examples of mobilization around programmes to benefit young children are those in which ceasefires have been obtained between warring groups in order to carry out national immunization campaigns. Children have constituted a «zone of peace.»

Less spectacular are the many community-based programmes that take children as a point of common interest, as an «entry point» for common action. The welfare of children is less politically charged than most issues. Moreover, community improvements in health, sanitation and nutrition that benefit children are likely also to benefit the community at large. Innumerable examples are available of such improvements, e.g. the evaluation of the PROMESA project in Colombia (CINDE, 1990).

7. Scientific evidence demonstrates lasting effects of early attention to child development. Evidence from the fields of physiology, nutrition and psychology continues to accumulate to indicate that the early years are critical in the formation of intelligence, personality and social behaviour. This evidence begins with the not-so-new discovery that brain cells are formed during the first two years of life. But recent research has strengthened the argument for early attention by showing that sensory stimulation from the environment affects the structure and organization of the neural pathways in the brain during the formative period (Dobbing, 1987). Thus, opportunities for complex perceptual and motor experiences at an early age favourably affect various learning abilities in later life and are able to compensate, at least partly, for the deficit associated with early malnutrition. And, research also demonstrates that children whose mothers interact with them in consistent, caring ways will be better nourished and less apt to be sick than children not so attended (Zeitlin, Ghassemi and Mansour, 1990). In the 1970s, evaluations of some early intervention programmes in the United States indicated that the effect of these programmes on the Intelligence Quotient of children seemed to «wash out» by the time they were in the second or third grade of primary school. More recently, longitudinal data clearly demonstrates major long-term effects associated with a variety of early intervention programmes.

These effects include: improved school attendance and performance, increased employment and reduced delinquency during the teenage years, and reduced teenage pregnancy (Berruta-Clement, et.al., 1984).

8. Changing social and economic conditions require new responses.

Over the last decade, the effects of a world recession have been felt increasingly both by individual families and by governments seeking to adjust their behaviours and programmes to the new realities (Cornia, et. al., 1987). But even prior to the recession, and in some settings, independently of it, major social changes have been occurring that call for new approaches to early childhood care and development.

a) Increasing labour force participation by women. The increased pressure for women to work for wages and the need to take over men's farming chores as they have migrated to cities or sought work in mines has brought additional burdens affecting child care and creating a need for alternative forms of care. The trend toward increasing labour force participation pre-dates, but has been strengthened by the world recession of the 1980s. These trends are likely to continue, and even to increase in the coming years.

The mother in these or other settings who works so that she and her family can survive may love her child and believe that she should devote time and energy to her baby, but she may not be able to do so; she needs help.

b) Modification of traditional family patterns. Extended families are no longer as common as they once were. As migration and progressive urbanization occurs, members of an extended family are not as available for child care as in the past. Grandmothers are no longer as easily available, either because they remain in rural areas or because they too are working outside the home in wage-earning jobs. The number of women-headed households has increased. In some developing countries the percentage is high (over 40 percent in rural Kenya, Botswana, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Lesotho, according to Youssef and Hertler, 1984). In these households, women must work, creating a major need for complementary child care. If care is available, the earnings of these women are more likely than would be the earnings of men to go toward improving the welfare of the children in the household.

Associated with these changes in families are increases in the numbers of abused children and of street children. These growing problems are often dealt with after the fact rather than seeking solutions in the earliest years by helping distressed families with very young children.

c) Increased primary school attendance has decreased the availability of older siblings to act as supplementary caretakers. Or, siblings have been forced to drop out of school to provide such care, in which case there is a strong argument for child care initiatives that will help siblings continue their education, at least to the point of literacy.

d) Changes in mortality and survival rates. Over the last 30 years, the infant mortality rate has been more than cut in half. More children are surviving who in the past would have died an early death. As survival to age one has increased from 5 of 6 in 1960 to 14 of 15 in 1992, the pressure increases to establish programmes for those who survive.

Summary

The rationale developed here brings together several lines of argument supporting the value of investing in early childhood development. Each argument stands on its own, but when combined, they are particularly compelling. Whatever the differences in individual predilections and local circumstances, it is clear that the set of arguments provides a strong base from which to seek increased investment in programmes of early childhood care and development whether organized by individuals, families and communities, or by governments, non-governmental organizations or international funders. When early childhood is made a priority, the financial support is forthcoming, even in situations of relative poverty. Financing for early childhood programmes is not the basic problem. The problem is to recognize the value of such programmes and build the personal and political resolve necessary to find the resources necessary to carry them out.

References

- Berruta-Clement, et.al., *Changed Lives: The Effects of the Perry Preschool Program on Youths Through Age 19*. Ypsilanti, Mich., High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, Monograph No. 8, 1984.
- CINDE (International Center for Education and Human Development). «Highlights of an Evaluation of Project PROMESA,» Fort Lauderdale, Florida, CINDE-USA, February, 1990.
- Colclough, C. «Primary Schooling and Economic Development: A Review of the Evidence,» Washington, D.C., World Bank Staff Working Paper No. 399.
- Dobbing, J. (Ed.). *Early Nutrition and Later Achievement*. London: Academic Press, Inc., 1987.
- Evans, J. «The Utilization of Early Childhood Care and Education Programmes for Delivery of Maternal and Child Health Components of Primary Health Care: A Framework for Decision-Making,» A paper prepared for a meeting organized by the World Health Organization on «Day Care as an Entry Point for Maternal and Child Health Components of Primary Health Care,» Paris, 26-29 May, 1986 (Mimeograph).
- Filp, J., et.al. «Relationship between Pre-primary and Grade One Primary Education in State Schools in Chile,» in K. King and R. Myers (Eds.), *Preventing School Failure: The Relationship Between Preschool and Primary Education*. Ottawa, The International Development Research Centre, 1983.
- Galinsky, E. *Investing in Quality Child Care: A Report for AT & T*. New York, Bank Street College of Education, 1986.
- Grawe, R. «Ability in Preschoolers, Earnings, and Home Environment.» Washington, D. C.: World Bank Staff Working Paper No. 319.
- Lal, S. and Wati R. «Non-Formal Preschool Education: An Effort to Enhance School Enrollment,» Paper presented to the National Conference on Research on ICDS, February 25-29, 1986. New Delhi, National Institute for Public Cooperation in Child Development (NIPCCD) (Mimeograph).
- Lockheed, M.D., Jamison, D. and Lau, L. «Farmer Education and Farm Efficiency: A Survey,» *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 29 (October 1980), pp. 37-76.

Ministerio da Saude, y Instituto Nacional de Alimentacao e Nutricao, Avalifao do PROAPE/Alagoas com Enfoque na Area Economica, Brasilia, MS/INAN, 1983. (Mimeo.;

Myers, R. The Twelve Who Survive, London, Routledge, 1992.

Rogoff, B. «Schooling and the Development of Cognitive Skills,» in H. Triandis & A. Heron (Eds.), Handbook of Cross-cultural Psychology, Vol. 4. Boston: Allyn-Bacon, 1980.

Selowsky, Marcelo. «Nutrition, Health, and Education: The Economic Significance of Complementarities at Early Age,» Journal of Development Economics, Vol. 9 (1981), pp. 331-346.

Sharif, Hadith, in: Child Care in Islam. Cairo: UNICEF, 1985. (This volume collects sayings from the Holy Koran and from major Muslim writers regarding attention to children.)

Triandis, H. «Reflections on Trends in Cross-Cultural Research», Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, Vol. 11, No. 1 (1980), pp. 35-58.

United Nations Secretariat, «The Draft Convention on the Rights of the Child, Third Version» New York, The United Nations, May, 1989.

Youssef, N. and Hertler C.B. «Rural Households Headed by Women: A Priority Concern for Development,» Rural Employment Programme Research Working Paper, Geneva, International Labour Organization, 1984.

Zeitlin, M., Ghassemi, H. and Mansour M. Positive Deviance in Child Nutrition, Tokyo, The United Nations University, 1990.