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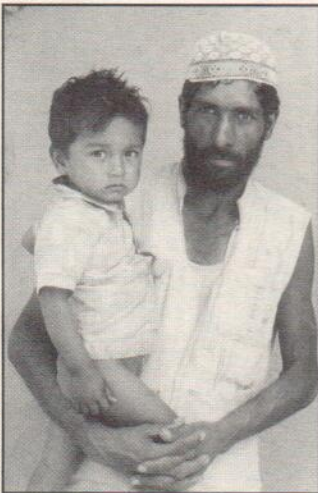
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# CHILDREARING PRACTICES:

## Creating Programs Where Traditions and Modern Practices Meet

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UNICEF/5872/Vilas

*Children are more than the object of their parents' attention and love; they are also a biological and social necessity. The human species perpetuates itself through children; cultural, religious and national groups transmit their values and traditions through children; families maintain their lineage through children; and individuals pass on their genetic and social heritage through children. The ultimate value of children is the continuity of humanity.*

*Arnold, et al., 1975, pg. 1*

**F**or years anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists have been providing descriptions of how children are raised within cultures around the world, including the beliefs and practices surrounding pregnancy, child birth and treatment of young children. We have information on what children are being fed and how often. We know how children are socialized to pass on the culture. We know where parents turn when a child is sick and what they do to restore their children's health. Yet we don't use that information when creating programs for young children and their families.

Despite the extremely rich data that exist on traditional childrearing practices, patterns and beliefs, it is

only relatively recently that those involved in creating interventions have thought to use these data as the basis for program development. Early Childhood programs have been based primarily or exclusively on what is thought to be *scientifically* appropriate for young children, without taking into account the traditional childrearing contexts within which the programs are being developed. This often creates a gap between what the program providers think should happen for young children and what parents are used to doing. One of the challenges faced by those developing policies and programs to support young children and their families is how to maximize what can be provided for the child by interweaving practices





UNICEF/5810/Jeremy Hartley





UNICEF/94-0023/Francene Keery

**A woman and man gather with 11 of their 13 children in their courtyard in the village of San Juan Bautista in Paraguay.**

that "scientific" evidence would suggest a child needs with effective traditional childrearing practices and beliefs.

During the past three years the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, with support from UNICEF, has organized a series of workshops on childrearing practices and beliefs. The first set occurred during 1991 and 1992 and was focussed on Latin America. More recently, in 1993, the Consultative Group conducted a comparable workshop in Sub-Saharan Africa. Within the workshops there was an expressed need to have a better understanding of how to assess childrearing. There was also a desire to share information and develop strategies on how to use this information to develop appropriate programs for young children and families. In this article we will discuss what was learned about ways in which scientific information can be brought together with an understanding of traditional and evolving practices to develop programs that serve young children and families. In the two articles that follow there is a presentation of the specific childrearing practices and beliefs uncovered in the Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America Workshops, drawn from the reports on the workshops. (Myers, 1992; Evans, 1994)

### **Why is Knowledge of Childrearing Practices, Patterns and Beliefs Important?**

Today we have considerable knowledge about what makes programs for young children and their families successful. We have understood the importance of community involvement in all steps of the process, building on what exists already within a community, and creating partnerships to help sustain efforts. However, even with this knowledge we sometimes miss the mark when creating programs. We develop program activities that never seem to catch on, our messages are misinterpreted, we find that people have no way of connecting what we are offering to their daily lives, we find 'technologies' misapplied. Why is this so? One of the most basic reasons is that frequently programs are designed without a clear understanding of the culture within which they are being offered. Even programs based on a community-defined need may not be designed in response to the community context. Unfortunately, ideas about practices to be promoted in a program frequently come from individuals who are not part of the culture or

*Facing page* **A mother stays with her sick child in the pediatric ward of the regional hospital, in the capital city of Ashkhabad in Turkmenistan.**



group that the program is intended to serve. A clearer understanding of childrearing practices, patterns and beliefs would help us do our job better. More specifically, knowledge of childrearing practices, patterns and beliefs is important:

■ **to understand, support and improve the childrearing process**

The fields of health and developmental psychology suggest that there are actions taken by caregivers that are supportive of children's growth and development. There are also some actions that are detrimental. By detecting and understanding the effects of childrearing practices on children's development it is possible to identify those practices which should be supported and those which ought to be discouraged.

■ **to respond to diversity**

Children grow up in a wide variety of different physical, social and cultural circumstances. Even within cultures there is diversity. There is no "right way" to bring up children. Nonetheless many programs intended to help young children are conceived of as if all children and circumstances were the same. Too often there is a search for the one model that will serve everyone. Understanding practices and patterns and incorporating that knowledge into programs is crucial if programs of early childhood development are to serve the variety of children and families and circumstances that any program is bound to encompass.

■ **to respect cultural values**

Practices, patterns and beliefs define the ways in which children are socialized. The rhetoric of most programs includes a plea to respect cultural differences. Indeed, the Convention on the Rights of the Child indicates that children have a right to their cultural identity. If this is to occur, a much greater effort must be made to define, describe and understand the reasons for cultural differences in the upbringing of children.

■ **to provide continuity during times of rapid change**

Environments and practices are changing as a result of economic, social and political changes. Sometimes these changes are very rapid and they can have a significant impact on children's development. In the process, some practices are being lost that continue to have both cultural and scientific value. Other practices, which appear to be "deviant", represent novel adaptations to particular settings, and may be followed for good reasons and with good results. An attempt should be made to understand rather than suppress them. Conversely, old practices are being applied in new settings or new practices are being adopted that may not be appropriate to the changing

settings in which a child is growing up. Unless these changes in circumstances and in forms of childrearing are identified and understood, policy and programs may take a misguided view.

*Traditional practices and beliefs have a particularly important role to play when children's lives have been radically changed as a result of war, migration and other difficult circumstances, as described in the article by Claudia Black on page 16.*

## **What is Meant by Childrearing Practices, Patterns and Beliefs?**

Childrearing practices are embedded in the culture and determine, to a large extent, the behaviors and expectations surrounding a child's birth and infancy. They also influence childhood, adolescence and the way these children parent as adults. Childrearing consists of practices which are grounded in cultural patterns and beliefs. Put in the simplest terms, caregivers have a set of practices/activities available to them. These have been derived from cultural patterns, ideas of what *should* be done, and constitute the accepted practices or norms. These, in turn, are based on beliefs about *why* one or another practice is better than another. The practices, patterns and beliefs affect the style and quality of caregiving. For instance, the practice of constantly carrying a child has a different effect on the development of that child than the practice of placing the child in a cradle or playpen. Further, a social and parental belief that children are given by God, and therefore should be treated in a particular way, has effects that are different from the belief that children are human creations.

### **Practices: What and How.**

Practices include activities which:

- *guarantee the child's physical well-being*—keeping the child safe and free from harm, providing shelter and clothing, preventing and attending to illness.
- *promote the child's psycho-social well-being*—providing emotional security, socialization, nurturing and giving affection.
- *support the child's physical development*—feeding, bathing, providing safe places to play and explore.
- *promote the child's mental development*—interaction, stimulation and play.
- *facilitate the child's interaction with others outside the home*—within the community, at health clinics, at school, etc.

At a very general level all of these behaviors can be found in most societies.

At a more specific level, *what* is done to help a child

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*Childrearing practices, patterns and beliefs are based on a culturally-bound understanding of what children need and what they are expected to become.*

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survive, grow and develop merges with *how* it is done to define and distinguish practices that vary widely from place to place. For instance, in responding to the need for food, the practice of breastfeeding contrasts with the practice of bottle feeding. Feeding on demand contrasts with scheduled feeding. The practice of constant carrying differs dramatically from the practice of placing a child in a crib, cradle, hammock or playpen for prolonged periods. The practice of talking to a child about appropriate behavior contrasts with an emphasis on non-verbal forms of communication in the socialization process.

**Patterns: What should be done?** The childrearing patterns of a culture are the childrearing norms. They include the generally-accepted styles and types of care expected of caregivers in responding to the needs of children in their early months and years. The patterns define childrearing in a way that assures the survival, maintenance and development of the group or culture as well as of the child. There are patterns of behavior surrounding specific times in a child's life. For example, there are expectations in terms of parental and community behavior in relation to a child's birth. There are norms in relation to how a child is named. There are expectations in terms of how an infant's death is handled. There are expectations in terms of how the child will learn to become a responsible member of the society.

While the patterns govern the culture as a whole,

these patterns may or may not be followed by individuals; there are variations in the particular circumstances in which a child is raised and individual caregivers differ in their beliefs and knowledge. Sometimes within a culture there is considerable latitude in terms of adherence to cultural patterns. In other instances, deviation leads to ostracism.

**Beliefs: Why should things be done that way?**

The explanation for why particular childrearing practices are used comes from the traditions, myths and the religious systems that underlie the culture. The beliefs are a response to the demands of the culture as well as the needs of individuals. The family and community implement specific childrearing practices which they believe will:

- Ensure the survival and health of the child, including the development of the child's reproductive capacity to continue the lineage and society.
- Develop the child's capacity for economic self-maintenance at maturity, to provide security for the elders and younger members of the society.
- Ensure the survival of the social group by assuring that children assimilate, embody and transmit appropriate social and cultural values to their children.

In some instances beliefs evolve as the needs of the people change. In other instances beliefs restrict people's ability to respond to changing conditions.

**Neighbors eat from a common tray, sitting in the living room of one of their houses, in the village of Shimstar, in the Bekaa region of northern Lebanon.**



UNICEF/93-BOU1056/Nicole Toutounji



In most societies, the family, however defined, is the primary unit given responsibility for raising children. There is considerable individual variation in practice from family to family, depending on the psychological make-up of the parents, including their own personality, the experiences they had as children, and the conditions under which they are living. The role other members of the society play in the raising of children differs depending on the specific cultural group. In some settings community members play a significant role and in others they take on a more distant role.



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When societies are more or less isolated from one another and there are few outside influences, what one generation passes on is similar to the way the next generation raises its children and there is a relative stability of values, practices and beliefs.

While some cultures have remained relatively isolated and intact, there are other cultures which have been more vulnerable to change. This vulnerability is the result of increased exposure to other ideas, sometimes through formal education, and increasingly through mass media. For some societies the introduction of different ideas has resulted in a relatively easy incorporation of the new, with maintenance of the traditional. For others, the juxtaposition of the traditional and the new, along with economic changes which have threatened people's survival, have left cultures disorganized and groups of people at a loss in terms of their values and beliefs. In the jargon of present-day psychology, these cultures could be classified as 'dysfunctional'. They no longer provide children with the grounding, stability, and vision that was found within traditional belief systems.

In the struggle for identity and in the desire to be "modern", some have completely cast off their traditions, or think they have. Yet the modern does not always work for them. As a result, people are seeking to identify and recapture traditional values. There is an increasing awareness that much of what existed within traditional cultures was positive and supportive

of growth and development, for the individual and for the society. Likewise there were practices that today we recognize as harmful to a person's health and well-being. It is this search to define and understand the traditional in relation to what is known today that is the basis of current research and programs in many parts of the world.

### **The Interface Between Childrearing Practices and Scientific Knowledge**

While childrearing practices may be different across cultures, scientific knowledge would suggest that there are basic needs that all children have and a predictable pattern of development during the early years that is universal. Studies from different parts of the world reveal that all young children need adequate nutrition, health and care from birth onwards. The lack of these supports during the early years has permanent negative effects on later development. Not only are there consequences for the child's physical well-being; in addition, these variables interact with and have an impact on the child's social and cognitive development. While these factors are influenced by the economic and political context within which the child lives, they are mediated through the family's childrearing practices, patterns and beliefs.

The type of childrearing practices required at a given point in time depends to a large degree on the child's developmental age and the health and nutritional risks the child is facing. For example, influences on the child during the prenatal period and into the first few months of life include the mother's pre-pregnancy health and how much weight she gains during pregnancy, her dietary intake, how much energy she expends, and her emotional state. (Engle, 1992) There are traditional beliefs and practices that impact on the mother's health and preparedness to give birth to a healthy infant. For example, in many cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa the practice is for pregnant women to observe food taboos that restrict their consumption of foods that are in fact important to their nutrition and the growth of the foetus. In some instances these taboos compound women's undernourishment and lead to high maternal and infant mortality rates.

*At birth and during the first year of life* the child is at the greatest risk of mortality. That may be why there are so many beliefs and practices within traditional cultures that surround the birth of a child. It is recognized as a critical time for both the child and the mother. Where a period of confinement is a part of the tradition it allows the mother time to recover physically and to bond with the child before she is required to assume her tasks. The negative side of this practice is that it may keep the mother from getting medical care that she requires.

During the *post-partum and early infancy stages* the



child is completely dependent on others for care. Generally the mother is the primary caregiver, sometimes with considerable support from others and sometime alone. She is responsible for providing all the things an infant needs: protection from physical danger; adequate nutrition and health care; an adult who can understand and respond to signals; things to look at, touch, hear, smell, and taste; opportunities to explore the world; appropriate language stimulation; and an adult with whom to form an attachment. (Donohue-Colletta, 1992, pg. 65) The level of support the mother receives from others in the family and from society plays an important role in the kind of care she is able to provide during this time. Thus the cultural patterns surrounding the role of the father, other family members and the community during this period is important for the child's survival and development.

During *late infancy* (or when complementary foods are introduced), the child is at greatest risk of growth faltering. While growth faltering may be the result of inadequate nutrition, there is clear evidence to suggest

that the feeding process itself is important in determining a child's later development. (Evans, 1994) Thus, not only is it important to know what kinds of foods are available to children, it is also important to understand the context within which food is provided.

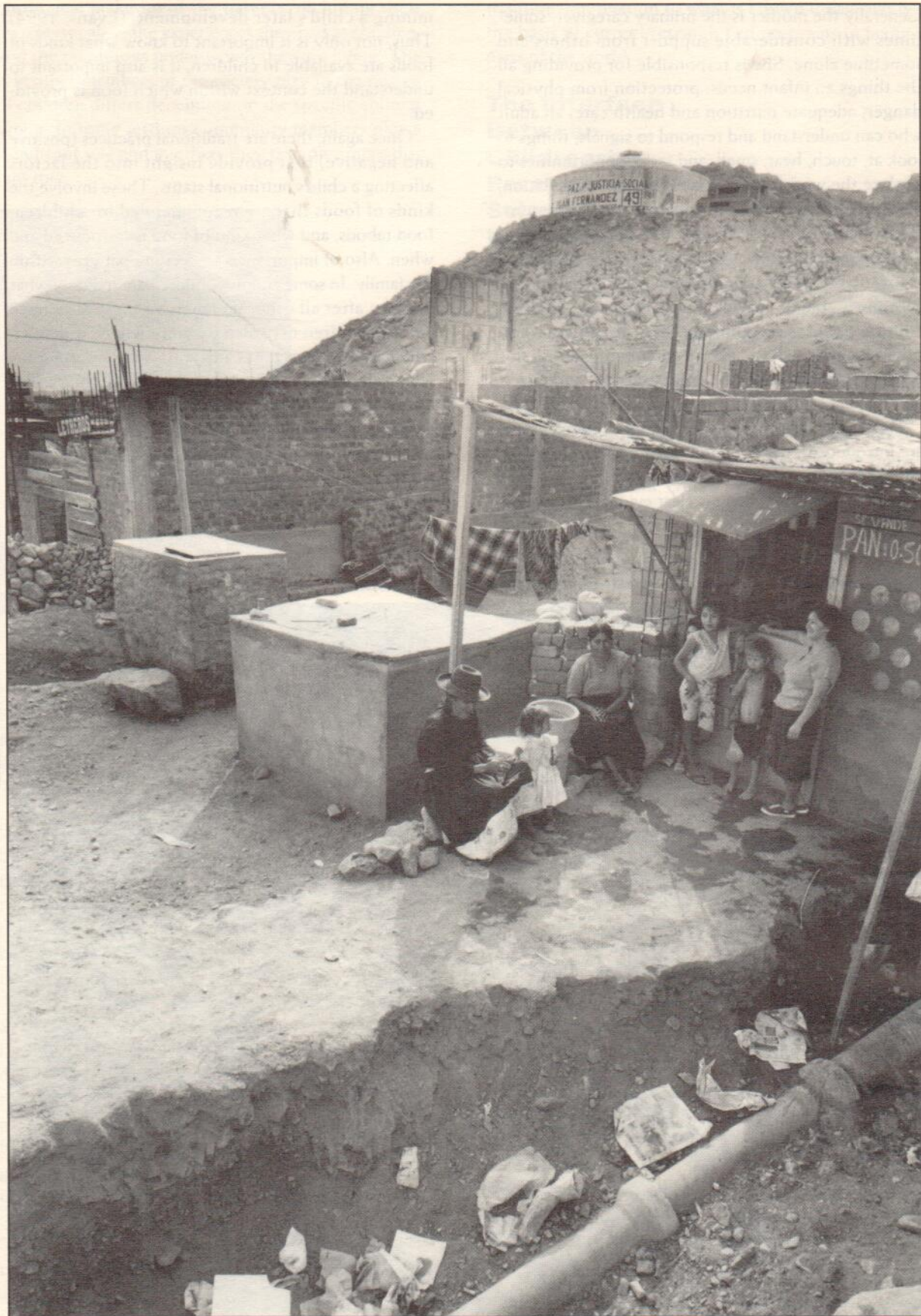
Once again, there are traditional practices (positive and negative) that provide insight into the factors affecting a child's nutritional status. These involve the kinds of foods that are recommended for children, food taboos, and what kind of food is introduced and when. Also of importance are feeding patterns within the family. In some cultures children are fed only what remains after all other members of the family have eaten. Children may also eat only when adults eat, which may be two times a day. Also of importance is who is doing the feeding? Is it only the mother? Is her attention given to the task or is she involved in other activities at the same time? Are older siblings the ones responsible for feeding the younger child? Are they paying attention to how much the child is eating? Are they paying attention to the child during the process?

**In Phnom Penh, a woman gives oral rehydration salts (ORS) solution to her sick child.**



UNICEF/5884/Roger Lemoyne





UNICEF/93-B0U0722/Jeremy Horner

Women and children sit outside a small shop, in the squatter neighborhood of 27th of March, on the outskirts of Lima, Peru.



Answers to all these questions would provide important information related to the child's nutritional status.

As children become *toddlers* and begin to move around on their own, environmental cleanliness and vigilance in terms of the child's safety are of utmost importance. In addition to the kinds of supports the children required as infants, when they become toddlers (1-3 years of age) they need: support in acquiring new motor, language and thinking skills; a chance to develop some independence; help in learning how to control their own behavior; opportunities to begin to learn to care for themselves; daily opportunities to play with a variety of objects. (Donohue-Colletta, 1992 pg. 65) There is wide variation across cultures in terms of the extent to which parents understand children's need for stimulation and their beliefs about what children are and are not able to do. For example, in Thailand parents believed that infants could not see and therefore could not respond to adults. Placing children in closed cradles seemed a reasonable thing to do. Through videos and home visits parents saw infants responding to things in the environment. They then began to see the importance of opening the cradles and interacting more with the infant. (Kotchabhakdi, 1987) In this instance, introducing the practice of playing games with your infant without changing the belief system would have been futile.

While the mother remains the primary person responsible for the safety, care and feeding of the child, it is during the toddler period that the child moves out from the mother. Over time others in the family and community play an increasingly important role in the care of the child, particularly in terms of socializing and teaching the child through direct instruction and modelling. In some cultures "over time" means a few weeks after the child is born. In other cultures this can mean several months or years later. The most common time for *moving out* is when the child is weaned completely from the breast.

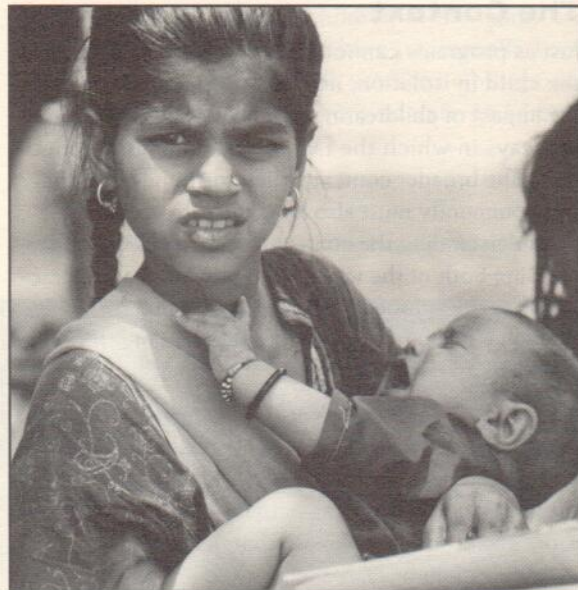
The *preschool child* (3-6 years of age) is more self-reliant. During this age children are socialized into the culture. In some cultures they become quite independent and are required to take on considerable responsibility, even to the extent of being responsible for the care of younger siblings. In other cultures children are not encouraged to develop independence until much later. They remain totally dependant on adults for their care and feeding. Again, the culture the child is raised in determines the timing and the kinds of skills

acquired in relation to self-care, independence and the development of responsibility.

While in many cultures in the Majority World (the developing countries) children may be given the role of caretaker for younger siblings, children ages 3-6 also have needs of their own. They need: opportunities to develop fine motor skills; encouragement of language through talking, reading, singing; activities that will develop a positive sense of mastery; opportunities to learn cooperation, helping, sharing; and experimentation with pre-writing and pre-reading skills. (Donohue-Colletta 1992, pg. 65)

While there is continuity in children's develop-

**A girl cares for her baby sister while attending a nonformal class for working children in New Delhi.**



UNICEF/5860/Vitas

ment, both traditional belief systems and scientific knowledge recognize that there are transition points that represent a real shift in children's experience. For example, when the child is weaned from the breast, when new foods are introduced, when the primary caregiver role expands to include others besides the mother, and when the child takes on adult responsibilities, are but a few of the significant transitions. These developmental shifts require adjustments by the child. Within traditional cultures there are frequently practices and/or rituals which help mark these times, acknowledging the transition.

In sum, traditional societies have evolved ways to support the growth and development of children in response to contextual needs. Many of these childrearing practices, patterns and beliefs are consistent with current scientific understanding of children's growth and development. But, as the cultures are undergoing change, some of the childrearing practices and beliefs are falling by the wayside. Parents are unclear about their goals and expectations for their children and



they are questioning the appropriateness of traditional practices. New demands and the absence of traditional supports are forcing families to do things differently. Some parents are aware that they are raising their children differently from the way they were raised. Other parents are implementing alternative childrearing strategies in response to changing conditions without being particularly conscious of what is being lost or retained from traditional practice. In both instances, what the parents do has an impact on how the child grows and develops. But families do not live in isolation. They are part of a community and a larger socio-political system that defines the context that shapes childrearing practices and beliefs. Thus any attempt to work with families to support their childrearing practices needs to be done within the wider socio-political context.

### The Context

Just as programs cannot be developed by looking at the child in isolation, neither is it possible to define the impact of childrearing practices only in relation to the ways in which the family and community function. The broader context which surrounds the family and community must also be taken into account.

Understanding the context helps provide an understanding both of the ways in which childrearing practices have developed and the ways in which they are evolving. The context is composed of many things. It includes:

- the physical environment—the climate/geography of the area that determines the need for shelter from the heat or cold, and the relative ease of raising food crops to sustain the family;
- the socio-political climate that determines whether families have security or a life dominated by fear;
- the economic climate that determines a family's ability to survive and thrive;
- the philosophical and religious systems that provide a base for the values and beliefs of the society and a cultural identity for the family;
- the past, which is presented to the child through legends, myths, proverbs, riddles and songs that justify the existing social order and reinforce customs;
- the family and community who act as models of expected behavior;
- the village, which presents a variety of situations calling for prescribed behavior.

The configuration of these dimensions determines the kinds of supports (or detractors) present as families and communities raise children. One way to analyze possible configurations is along a continuum. In 1990, Negussie completed an analysis of childrearing practices in Sub-Saharan Africa (1990). She chose to represent these childrearing practices along a continuum related to degree of modernization. At one end of the continuum are **traditional** cultures. These are defined as cultures within which childrearing practices

and beliefs are based on inherited and orally transmitted knowledge. The context is more or less stable and there are adequate resources to support the traditional way of life. Negussie notes that, in general, traditional cultures are more characteristic of rural than urban areas.

Societies that would be placed along the continuum between the two ends are characterized as **transitional**. For these societies there is a shift away from traditional practices as they are exposed to new ideas and/or there are changes in the environment which threaten their survival, forcing them to make changes. Negussie suggests that those migrating from rural to urban areas and/or living in marginal communities can be characterized as in transition. Within societies that are in transition, childrearing practices and beliefs include a mix of the traditional and modern, and the mix is different depending on what is required of families.

The other end of the continuum can be defined as **modern**. Cultures located at this point on the continuum have access to and are using non-traditional (Western) health care and education in place of traditional systems. Negussie found that those living in peri-urban and urban areas are most likely to be placed at this point on the continuum.

This way of defining contexts is elaborated on below.

#### ■ Traditional: reliance on inherited and orally transmitted knowledge

Many of the studies of childrearing beliefs and practices in Sub-Saharan Africa conducted earlier in this century captured the childrearing practices found within traditional societies.<sup>1</sup> In some sub-Saharan African countries there are pockets where these cultures continue to exist, but these are few and far between. In most countries, traditional childrearing practices, both positive and negative, are changing as families are exposed to other beliefs and practices. Where traditional practices have been interrupted the society may be classified as in *transition*.

#### ■ Transitional: as a society that relied primarily on traditional wisdom begins to adopt alternative beliefs and practices

*If the goals set by the 'modern society' [are] different from those earlier set by the indigenous society, the individual follows the former. The result is the disintegration of the earlier set of goals and values. Nigerian society and culture is one undergoing such disintegration. The generally set goals seem to be western, materialistic and individualistic. In the rural area though, there still seems to exist traditional values, but these too are rocked by the waves of principles of democratization and modernization, the vehicle of which is education—western education. (Akinware & Ojomo, 1993, pg 40)*

<sup>1</sup> However, it must be recognized that many of these 'studies' may well be telling us more about the biases of the observer than they do about the etiology and value of the practices being observed. (Evans, 1970)



Many African and Latin American cultures can be characterized as in a time of *transition* as a result of changes which impact family life. These changes indirectly affect childrearing beliefs and practices and the growth and development of children. Families and communities are in transition as a result of:

**Changes in the traditional functions of the family.** One particularly important support to parents has been the community and the extended family system. In the past, close family ties provided a built-in measure of economic, emotional and social security to children and families, but this traditional support for families has been disrupted as families are moving from the rural to urban areas, as families are migrating in search of work, and as individual family members leave the village in search of educational and economic opportunities. Many of the previous roles of the community are being taken on by society or falling by the wayside.

**Changes in the structure of the family.** The size of families is declining. This is due partly to the fact that people are having fewer children, but more significantly the decline in family size is due to a move from multi-generational family groupings to the nuclear family, which, by virtue of its limited number of adults, often fails to provide the care and support required by children. It is also important to note that these smaller families are frequently not very stable units. There is fluctuation in the numbers and members in a household as a result of seasonal and work-related in- and out-migration.

**Changes for the girl child.** Women and girls have become the focus of international attention. Childrearing practices which relied on the older girl child to care for younger children in the family are being challenged. Girls who have traditionally been responsible for the care of younger siblings are attending school at an increased rate and being

**Almost half of Uzbekistan's population of 20.5 million lives in poverty, a context which greatly affects a family's ability to cope and thrive.**



UNICEF/5834/Jeremy Hartley





UNICEF/93-1161/Francene Keery

**In the city of San Ignacio Misiones, Paraguay, a woman farmer, accompanied by her daughter, attends a training seminar.**

encouraged to complete their education. This has an impact on arrangements for child care within the family.

**Changes in the nature of women's work.** Women have always played multiple roles that compete for their time and physical and emotional energy. Regardless of the context within which children are raised, care of children, particularly young children, is still the woman's responsibility. In addition, the woman is responsible for household management and operations, and economic/productive activity. New economic pressures on and possibilities presented to women mean that increasingly they work outside the home, often for long hours and following schedules that limit their availability and thus the time they can devote to child care.

In rural areas women often work in the fields. While in many cultures women have historically constituted a majority of the agricultural work force, in other settings the out-migration of men who are seeking employment has increased women's agricultural role. In addition, in some agricultural settings plantation economies and cash crop production have meant that women are increasingly being exposed to the

demands of rigid time and work schedules similar to those common in urban environments.

In both urban and rural environments there is an increase in the number of women-headed households. This necessarily affects the woman's work load.

**Changes in men's roles.** Traditionally in many cultures men have been given a limited, but usually clear, role in the upbringing of children during their early years. They are disciplinarians. They are models for the young boys. But they are usually little involved in day to day upbringing. In some cultures (the sierra of Peru and Bolivia, for instance) men are directly involved in rituals related to the birth of the child. But, as societies change, men's role has been changing. In many societies it is no longer defined by tradition. More and more it is being defined by changes in the economic situation and configuration of the family.

Within the cultures reported on at the workshop on childrearing beliefs and practices in Sub-Saharan Africa, the movement of families from rural to urban areas has impacted both positively and negatively on the role of the father. For example, in Nigeria it was found that as families move to urban areas they lose



the support of the extended family. Because the majority of the families cannot afford to hire caregivers, the men became more involved in providing care for the children. Quite the opposite was found in Malawi. There when families move to urban areas, even the little interaction men have with their children is generally decreased.

**Changes in migration patterns.** Until recently men were the most likely to migrate in search of paid employment. In recent years, however, with the creation of free market zones, more and more women are migrating to these zones to obtain work. The potentially negative impact of this migration on families and young children is of concern to many.

Within traditional societies the norms, beliefs and practices were relatively stable. Expectations in terms of parental behavior were clear. For families in transition childrearing practices are not clear. These families may lack the skills to live in the state of flux represented by transitional cultures. In this situation parents may have a sense of powerlessness and be less self-confident in terms of their parenting skills. This can lead to childrearing practices that are inconsistent and/or overly restrictive (Werner, 1979). For those families who have been living in urban areas for a generation or two, they may well have incorporated more "modern" childrearing beliefs and practices.

**■ Modernity: when non-traditional health, education, and social supports are available and relied upon more than the traditional**

Technology has made a wide variety of supports available to families that are not available within traditional cultures. While there are pros and cons on just about every technology that has been introduced, the availability of these technologies has radically changed people's lives. For example, bottle feeding has made it easier for women to enter the labor market. But the introduction of bottle feeding and the decrease in breastfeeding has resulted in high infant mortality and morbidity rates due to improper use of bottles and infant formula. Another example is the introduction of a local primary school, facilitating the attendance of girls in school. This may mean that infants are cared for by siblings older than the infant but too young to go to school, putting both at risk.

In sum, in societies with limited exposure to outside influences, the context is relatively constant and as a result childrearing practices remain more or less the same across generations. In societies in rapid flux, there are dramatic changes from one generation to the next in the context within which children are raised. These lead to differences in the type of care that is provided to children. Families living under traditional beliefs will raise children in one way; families in transition, or who consider themselves modern, will have quite a different set of beliefs and patterns that deter-

mine their practice. Knowing this about families assists in the process of creating appropriate programs.

**Strategies for Developing Appropriate Programming**

*The challenge lies in changing the negative things without changing the positive ones. Unfortunately experience has shown that new changes bring new problems...It is therefore important to fully understand the implications of any action before embarking on it. (Kalembe, 1993, pg. 17)*

The primary reason for looking at the ways in which traditional beliefs and practices coincide with more recent thinking is for the purpose of creating programs which support the positive and provide alternatives for the negative practices and beliefs. The following principles of programming generated as a result of the workshops coincide with what is known as a result of considerable programming experience and an accumulated knowledge about the kinds of approaches that are most effective.

**■ Gather information to gain an overall view of the practices and beliefs within a given culture**

In order to build a program based on an understanding of childrearing practices, patterns and beliefs, it is important to have a good understanding of what is already known. The question then becomes: Where is knowledge on childrearing practices and beliefs located and how can it be tapped? There are two main sources of data: the scientific literature and experience.

**Science.** The accumulated "scientific"<sup>2</sup> literature available today includes basic research on child development. These studies are often directed toward identifying universal principles of development. However, that literature also includes psychological, medical, anthropological, and sociological studies of how people in particular cultural and geographic settings care for their young children.

Unfortunately, the literature dealing with traditional childrearing practices and patterns has many limitations. First, access is a problem since the information cuts across many disciplines and thus one must seek data from a variety of sources. Second, the information is often presented in academic language and requires 'translation' into a form that is useful to program and policy people. Third, for the most part, the existing literature is derived from a Western or Northern conceptual base that can distort some of the findings. Fourth, some of the literature is outdated.

<sup>2</sup>"Scientific" is in quotation marks because it is recognized that today's scientific knowledge may well be tomorrow's quaint beliefs of yesterday.



Nevertheless, this literature, placed in perspective, provides an important starting point.

It should be noted that literature searches should be extended to include information found outside the scientific literature — in such sources as novels, biographies, traditional stories and myths.

**Experience.** Another source of knowledge about childrearing is experience. This experience is of two types. One is based on immediate, personal experience, reflecting the circumstances of individuals in particular families and communities. A second type is accumulated experience, which adds up to a "traditional wisdom." Usually, experience is not brought together in a systematic way or written up. A major challenge is to capture current experience and to describe "traditional wisdom" without making a prior judgement about its values.

■ **Identify where there are significant gaps in knowledge about childrearing practices, patterns and beliefs**

In developing programs for young children and their families it is important to have an understanding of the ways in which current practices and beliefs affect the child's overall development. Many of the studies which have been conducted on childrearing practices and beliefs have focussed primarily on health and nutrition issues. There is generally less information available on practices that are related to psychosocial and/or cognitive development. For policy-makers and planners interested in supporting children's overall development, this may well represent a significant gap in information available. If so, then a specific focussed study should be designed to gather the relevant information.

From the workshops there were several examples of focussed studies. In-depth studies were conducted in Mexico, Mali and Namibia. In Mexico the focus was on the role of change agents. In Mali, the focus was on understanding how traditional child care systems work. In Namibia the researchers were asked to look specifically at childrearing practices that supported children's cognitive and socio-emotional development. While these studies were focussed on providing an in-depth look at a particular aspect of a culture, additional data were gathered that provided a picture of the overall context within which children are being raised.

■ **Select a methodology that will yield the kind of data required**

One of the tasks of current researchers is to explore questions such as: What practices have fallen by the wayside over time? Why? (Because they were practices that no longer served the culture? Because they could not be maintained due to changes in caregivers? Because of the introduction of "scientific" knowledge? As a result of changes in childrearing practices have some good practices been lost? What practices have been maintained? How do they serve the culture of today? Why are some practices that we know to be

harmful still being maintained, such as the circumcision of girls?)

To get answers to these questions requires a flexible methodology. Those who attended the workshops agreed that questionnaires and interview schedules should not be used rigidly because this inhibits responses and limits conversation. Rigid adherence to a format with a particular order and categories does not allow important issues and practices to emerge that might not have been included in the original instrument. It also increases the chances that respondents will say what they think the interviewer wants to hear.

One strategy is to work with community "agents" (including, for example, community educators and health workers, animators (discussion facilitators) of grassroots organizations, religious leaders, educators) who have long experience in communities and who have presumably acquired a deep knowledge of practices and patterns in the specific communities in which they have worked. (It should not be assumed, however, that because agents are part of or work closely with a community, they are necessarily knowledgeable about childrearing practices.)

Another suggestion is to turn more directly to parents and other community members in a process of

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*In Ecuador, local health people were incorporated into the process of collecting childrearing information. Along the way, they not only acted as collectors, but also as observers and as processors of the information, internalizing it and discussing it in an inter-disciplinary team. This led to some immediate changes in the form in which local health centers operated. In this case, the information-gathering process had a direct effect because the researchers were also the potential users. (Roloff, et al., 1992)*

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discovering and describing local practices. More specifically, in the Latin American context, it was suggested that attention be given to the utility of a participatory method used by the Roman Catholic Church in its planning, termed "The Study of Reality." This method, which is similar to popular education approaches, involves community members in a process of 1) seeing (collecting information), 2) judging (analyzing), and 3) acting (using the information



to play and carry out activities). It was felt that the method, with which the Church has had wide experience, could be focussed on examining the condition of children, ages 0 to 6, and the childrearing practices in a particular community. Doing so would not only provide knowledge about childrearing but would also, presumably, provide a basis for action by the practitioners and caregivers participating in the process.

#### ■ Check on the validity of the data

The suggested interview and questionnaires techniques rely on a verbal response. The validity of such responses is sometimes questionable. What people say they do or believe is not necessarily what they actually do or believe. While none of the studies in Latin America relied on systematic observation, observations were used in the majority of studies conducted in Africa and were used both to validate the verbal information as well as to complete the picture.

If observation is not possible, another way to validate the results is to compare what is obtained with what is found in the literature, with opinions of local informants, and with opinions of specialists in the field. Another good strategy is to discuss the results directly with the people from whom the information was originally obtained.

In addition to helping identify incorrect interpretations and to look for explanations, this process is intended to promote reflection and change. For example, results of a Jamaican study of the role of fathers in

childrearing were fed back to the same fathers from whom information was gathered. The process of discussion of these results led to the formation of men's parenting groups. Moreover, the research information has been converted into a discussion guide for use by groups in church, school, community and other settings. The guide is titled "Men and their Families" and is currently being used to train facilitators who will each use the information to work with groups of Caribbean men. (Brown et al., 1993)

In addition to discussing the results with those who helped generate the data, a number of useful techniques that can be drawn upon include:

- Asking adults to reflect on their own childhood. Remembering childhood helps to establish key themes, can identify continuity and change in practices, contributes to the empathy of the parents with the child, and can provide an easy way of including men in the conversation. This exercise seems particularly important because of the marked tendency for parents to repeat practices applied to them when they were children, even if they do not think those practices were appropriate or just.
- Comparing practices and beliefs across generations by seeking out older and younger parents. This technique also helps to identify continuities or discontinuities in practices across generations—the "generational matrix".

**In Lima, Peru, a mother discusses her infant's development with a nurse.**



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