

Programming for Improved Early Childhood
Development and Learning

PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES

Results of a Discussion

by

The Consultative Group on
Early Childhood Care and Development

as reported by

The Secretariat of
The Consultative Group

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This report has been prepared by the Secretariat of the Consultative Group. Although the revised document has been circulated for comment among participants in the meeting, final responsibility for the wording rests with the Secretariat, not with individual participants in the Consultative Group or with their organisations.

INTRODUCTION

What are the basic principles of child development and learning that should guide programming intended to improve the welfare of children in their early years? What are the operational principles that should be respected when establishing such programmes?

These questions were the subject of discussion and debate during a meeting of the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, held on March 31 and April 1, 1993. The main purpose of the discussion by the Group was to clarify thinking among members of the Group, each of whom is involved in their own programming exercises. A secondary purpose was to seek, to the extent possible, a common position that might be drawn upon by members of the Group in various fora such as the 1993 Education for All Forum, to provide needed bases for advocacy and action.

The Consultative Group discussion took as its starting point statements drawn from a variety of sources, but principally from the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Declaration and Plan of Action of the World Conference on Education for All and a Policy Review paper from UNICEF. These documents included statements referring to: 1) social principles, 2) basic principles of child development and learning that should be reflected in the organisation and content of programme actions and 3) programming principles that should guide operational decisions.

With respect to statements of social principle, the Consultative Group took the position that it was useful for each organisation to take into account positions presented in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Declaration of the World Conference, the Summit on Children, and others, but that these positions must be viewed critically. It is not the business of the Group to endorse or enforce provisions of international conventions or declarations. However, the Group did agree upon several statements, by way of preamble to the discussion of principles and guidelines, that have their roots in affirmations found in the outcomes of recent world conferences and conventions. These are:

- Children, by reason of their physical and mental immaturity, need special safeguards and care. Children living in especially difficult circumstances need special consideration.
- All children, without distinction of gender, race, language, religion or of any other kind, should have the opportunity to develop to their full potential.
- Parent's and families (however defined) -- men as well as women' -- have the primary responsibility for the upbringing, development and education of their children.

- Governments should establish a policy environment which enables families and communities to fulfil their responsibilities of child rearing and protection.

PRINCIPLES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

This section is directed toward answering two questions. What are basic principles of development and learning? What are the implications of these basic principles for programming?

Definition of Terms

Development is a process of change in which the child (or human being) comes to master more and more complex levels of moving, thinking, feeling and interacting with people and objects in the environment. (Development, which involves changes in complexity and function, is different from growth which refers to changes in size.)

Learning is a process of acquiring knowledge, skills, habits and values through experience and experimentation, observation, reflection, and/or study and instruction.

Learning and development. Learning is a crucial part of development. General development involves both 1) a gradual unfolding of biologically determined characteristics and 2) a process of learning. Developmental progress facilitates or inhibits continued learning which, in turn, helps to define the progress of future development.

Principles

- **Development** begins prenatally and learning is occurring at birth.

Therefore: Attention to the developmental and learning needs of children begins with pre- and post-natal interventions.

- **Development and learning occur continuously as a changing child interacts with a changing environment.**

Therefore: Interventions can focus on changing the child and/or on changing the environment (which includes the immediate family, the community, social institutions and cultural beliefs).

- **Development has several inter-related dimensions and learning occurs in each of these areas.**

These include physical, cognitive, social and emotional dimensions, (each of which affects the other).

Therefore: Development and learning must be seen holistically and interventions should provide integrated attention to the child, including attention to needs for protection, food, health care, affection, interaction and stimulation, security provided through consistency and predictability, and play allowing exploration.

- **Development, although not always linear, proceeds in predictable steps and learning occurs in recognized sequences.**

Therefore: Interventions should follow an appropriate sequence. Activities should not be introduced before a child is developmentally ready for them.

- **There is a great deal of individual and social variability in children's rates and styles of development and of learning.**

Therefore: Interventions should be able to identify and adjust to varying individual and social needs of children.

- **Children are active participants in their own development and learning.**

Learning and related development involves the child's construction of knowledge. The skills which are the basis for constructing knowledge improve with practice.

Therefore: Interventions should include opportunities for children to learn by doing.

- **Children learn in many ways: by playing and exploring, by using all their senses, by imagining, by imitating, by interacting socially with others.**

Therefore: Integrated interventions promoting social and emotional as well as cognitive learning can take advantage of varied forms of learning, consistent with cultural ways even while taking into account that there are recognised sequences and activities that facilitate learning.

- **It helps a child to develop and learn when adults:**

- are emotionally responsive and involved
- talk to children
- provide appropriate and varied play materials
- are supportive of the child's learning

Therefore: Interventions should include attention to adults as well as to children.

PROGRAMMING PRINCIPLES

Some of the following operational principles are directly related to the principles of development and learning set out previously. Others are general principles of programming that apply to programmes of child development as well as to other kinds of programmes. Behind all of the principles is the desire to mount effective and sustainable programmes.

- **Seek programme integration in conceptualising, planning, delivering services, establishing content and promoting use.**

This principle derives in part from the holistic nature of child development in which physical, mental, social and emotional dimensions of development affect each other. Hence, effectiveness requires integrated attention to children. The principle also derives from expected efficiencies in programming that can be achieved through multi-dimensional approaches that combine health, nutrition, educational and social actions.

- **Foster participation by the individuals, families and communities who are to be the primary beneficiaries.**

A principle of active participation is consistent with the basic principles of learning and development described above. Sustained human and social development and the sustainability of programmes all depend on enhancing people's capacities to improve their own lives and to take greater control over their own destinies.

- **Build child-focussed partnerships by expanding existing collaboration and bringing together new partners supportive of development.**

Neither governments nor communities nor a wide range of non-governmental organisations can easily maintain an effective programme without help. The principle of working in partnership arises from social as well as financial needs.

- **Build on inherent strengths and local childrearing that are beneficial to child and social development.**

Knowledge about solutions to child development problems can be found in experience and traditional wisdom as well as in academic wisdom or new technologies.

- **Take an inter-generational view involving children, youth and adults.**

Programmes of early childhood development can and should benefit caregivers and communities as well as children. Child care, for instance, should take into account the needs of women as well as the needs of children.

- **Be open to diversity and to complementary approaches.**

This principle derives in part from the social and individual variation in children's needs and in part from the fact that development and learning are affected by several levels of environment with which the child interacts. These include the home, the community, social institutions and legal frameworks, and a cultural ethos. A comprehensive programme to improve child development should function simultaneously at these different levels, focussing respectively on the child, caregivers, national institutions and policies, and the knowledge base of the society.

- **Seek quality.**

Low quality programmes are ineffective, depriving children of benefits, and represent a waste of resources. In seeking quality, recognise that it is affected by the motivation and training of programme personnel, the physical environment, the materials used, and the form of the curriculum. A quality programme is appropriate to the stage of development of the children involved and respects individual differences in development. Setting norms does not guarantee quality. Quality is not defined by expenditure level.

- **Aim at universal attention to children, but with special recognition of children living in conditions that put them at increased risk of delayed or debilitated development.**

This principle recognises the need by all children for support while stressing the urgency of attending to children in special circumstances. Universal attention can be sought through a series of different programmes responding to distinct needs and need not involve extension of one programme or model to all children or parents or communities.

- **Seek cost-effectiveness.**

This principle recognises the importance of using scarce resources efficiently and effectively. It is not equivalent to recommending "low-cost" programmes which may not be effective and may represent a waste of resources. In general, strategies that stress prevention are more cost-effective than compensatory strategies.

- **Incorporate monitoring and evaluation into programmes from the outset.**

This principle recognises that many programmes are not effective or are not sustained because they do not include a capacity to analyse strengths and weaknesses and to adjust accordingly.