

# Early Childhood Development programs and Children's Rights

## 1. ECD - an essential component of any overall child rights strategy

Early Child Development (ECD) programs are about influencing the contexts in which children are growing up (family, community, local institutions (e.g. schools, health centers), policy) so that they are supportive of children's' overall development. They are about ensuring children grow up healthy, well nourished, protected from harm, with a sense of self-worth and identity, and enthusiasm and opportunities for learning. They are about children learning to think for themselves, communicate effectively, get on with others, and play an active role in their families (and later their communities). They are about addressing the issues, which slow and damage children's' development. In other words, they are about children's rights and the obligations of the state and of all adults to protect the individual child and create the conditions in which all children can develop their potential.

This is quite different from a widely held perception of early childhood development, or ECD, as simply a piece of basic education (or which sometimes equates ECD only with pre-schools). ECD programmes *are* about opportunities for learning. But they are also about this far broader range of concerns. This holistic view of children's well-being, while by no means new, has been validated and encouraged by the Convention. The basic need for food, healthcare and protection have always been central to child-focused agencies work and have been long instituted in government policies. It is more recently that these have been understood not just as needs but as rights (implying duties and obligations) and that in addition the rights to affection, interaction, security, stimulation and opportunities for learning have been accepted as being just as fundamental.

Within the child rights framework, in other words, ECD programs are called upon to occupy the very position which the best of them have already assumed as a responsibility for many years. With the impetus of the Convention, this interpretation of the role of ECD is increasingly being taken on board by many agencies and governments....but clearly there are still serious gaps in understanding here as evidenced by the endless frustrations many of us have had with the Special Session preparations and documents and the relentless watering down of references to supporting young children's overall development in successive documents. Attention to young children's overall development as healthy, capable, confident and caring people is minimal. The only piece that receives appropriate attention is survival and good health.

This treatment of ECD is inconsistent with the priorities of any child rights agency. The situation makes it all the more imperative for the Consultative Group to perhaps think through how we can make our voice heard even more clearly in support for Early Childhood Development as central to both education and overall child rights strategies.

ECD must be central to our child rights strategies from 2 complementary perspectives :

- i) Time to get the proper level of attention to young children's issues as well as those effecting older children. Too often agencies simply ignore this age group (over one third of children) or give attention only to survival rights. Yet international trends ( migration, nuclear families, girls and women's heavy workloads, increasing school enrolments, globalization and dependence on the cash economy and resulting threats to women's decision-making control, insecurity etc.) affect every aspect of young children's lives
- ii) Essential component of proactive approach in reducing exploitation (rather than just being reactive) through :
  - building families' and communities' sense of engagement with their children's rights from an early age thus increasing the supportiveness of the environments in which children are growing up and reducing the number of children who need protection or rehabilitation projects.
  - Strengthening children's own internal protection skills – building children's confidence and capacity to have a say in their futures (more able to assess situations, question, come up with alternatives etc.)

A wide range of initiatives fall under the ECD umbrella - from working with families to changing systems which marginalize or exclude some children.

## 2. Why is it still important for ECD to have a strong education base ?

What has been happening during the process for developing « A world fit for children » perhaps provides the best answer to this !!

It is important for ECD to be firmly rooted in education because it is the psycho-social aspects of children's development which have the most significance for long-term social change and sustained realization of children's rights.

The great strength of quality ECD programs is their emphasis on

- developing children's understanding of their world
- supporting the confidence, communication skills and flexibility they need to interact effectively with that world

These are the very capacities that have the greatest significance in enabling children, as they grow up, to:

- deal with real life challenges
- be better able to obtain their rights
- be active, contributing members of society

This is essential if we are looking to effect major change in society.

The psycho-social piece of ECD is inevitably dealing with the sort of people we want our children to become and the sort of society we work towards. This is central to all of our work in education as a whole. Indeed the statements above apply to the best of what we do to support children's development whatever age they are. The emphasis here is on ensuring young children enjoy this sort of supportive environment because it is during the earliest years that our basic sense of ourselves and our relationship to the world is established. Patterns are established at this time that have far-reaching implications.

ECD programs have always tended to be unusually holistic in their approach. While from a child rights perspective we applaud this, in practice it carries its own set of risks. There is a danger (as evidenced by the special session documents) of downplaying the very aspects which have the most significance for a long-term shift in social norms for ensuring children's rights. Clearly children's health and nutrition are central concerns. And so are the psycho-social aspects. Our understanding of the two-way, interactive relationship between psycho-social well-being and nutritional status and health has increased enormously in recent years. This synergism between different aspects of children's development means that holistic approaches are vital (addressing children's physical and psycho-social well-being). This applies even where programs are not concerned with the « whole child » and instead have specific educational or physical goals. The younger the child the more difficult to differentiate the physiological and psychological factors. Adequate attention must and certainly will continue to be given to children's health and nutrition. The very real danger is that inadequate attention will be given to children's psycho-social development.

Why? ECD may fall prey to turf battles in agencies where there are strong sectoral divisions rather than a more holistic rights-based approach. Experience in almost every agency confirms that educationists always include a concern for children's health and nutrition when planning interventions for young children. Health personnel do not always reciprocate in the attention they give to the "whole child." and favor a medical worldview rather than a human development/social justice framework. An over-emphasis on physical status can also happen because, by its very nature, progress in the area of children's psycho-social development is more complex to assess, whereas weight or completion of immunization schedules are easier to measure. This issue of measuring achievements in supporting young children's overall development using a broader rights-based framework and giving due attention to all aspects of i) children's development and ii) how adults are meeting their obligations is an area where promising work is being undertaken under the auspices of the Consultative Group.

Another aspect is that many of the points in the Global Movement and Special Session documents which do deal with education and learning opportunities are very clearly school-focused. They don't apply to learning during the earliest years, most of which occurs in homes and should continue to do so. We know that learning begins at birth and we learn faster during the earliest years than at any other time. We don't expect or want early education to be delivered primarily in formal settings. Indeed much of our emphasis in CG discussions is on approaches which recognize, respect and build on families' achievements. But we also recognize that families face very real constraints. We certainly DO want a flexible range of supports to be available to families and communities to strengthen their abilities to support their children's overall development (including their learning) and ensure their rights.

### **3. ECD will help strengthen child rights programming**

Until relatively recently much of the discussion around children's rights tended to focus on legal frameworks, policy decisions etc. This remains a centrally important piece. The CRC is legally binding for state parties and has ensured attention to government policies and initiatives. However, we are increasingly aware of the necessity, within a rights perspective, to concern ourselves with what is happening at all levels. The moral obligations to children extend throughout society and long precede any treaty. Children's rights are about the obligations of all adults to protect the best interests of children, and to create the conditions under which they can develop and thrive. For most children it is the family, in all its permutations, that is most closely involved in the day-to-day management and defense of children's rights - and the younger the child the more this is the case.<sup>1</sup>

During the 1st phase of child rights work much has been done on « awareness raising ». Sometimes inadequate attention has been given to families' goals and concerns for their children. But the CRC is not a rigid set of universal solutions. During this next phase it will be vital to give far more attention to the sort of dialogue, interpretation and negotiation necessary for internalization of the Convention's core principles. This applies to all levels of society. Much of the work integral to ECD programming is concerned with developing effective participatory methods for initiating discussion and dialogue on key children's issues.

### **4. Conclusion**

The best of children's programs worldwide are essentially an integrated set of actions for making a reality of children's rights. They are concerned with the whole child and support children's physical, intellectual, social and emotional development whether they are 4 months or fourteen years old. We are aware that one of our great challenges is to enable families, teachers and peers to equip children for a rapidly changing world while retaining a sense of values and cultural identity. Programs aim to ensure children grow up healthy, able to deal with the challenges of their lives and become active members of society. An interconnecting thread in the best of our work across different agencies is an emphasis on enhancing children's sense of self-worth and initiative, their opportunities for learning, their compassion, and their communication and problem-solving skills. And an emphasis on ensuring that duty-bearers at all levels (from family members to international policy-makers) meet their obligations.

Is there any more we can be doing as the Consultative Group to ensure that we meet our obligations ?.

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<sup>1</sup> « Bringing up children in a changing world. Who's right ? Whose rights ? » highlights families' frontline role in ensuring children's rights and encourages approaches to child rights and child development programming which work in new partnerships and at many different levels.

Caroline Arnold May22nd 2001