Let Children be Children

What's the Hurry?

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LET KNOWLEDGE SPREAD

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Child Development and Child Rearing

OVERALL, THE development of a child, any child anywhere in the world is a multidimensional process and consists of physical, intellectual, language, emotional, social, moral and sexual development. These form the seven strands of development. These need to occur in an integrated manner for every child. Even a child like Wilma Rudolph or Coy Mathis.

There are various stages (phases) in all the domains of development. For example, from birth of the newborn to three months there is a kind of physical development typical to that age, such as moving limbs, trying to reach out and grab and so on. At six months it is different and may consist of rolling over or crawling. At nine months the child may be sitting or even attempting to stand, at times even walk.

The same wondrous phases of development occur across months and years as well as across domains. Take for example,

how the infant starts with babbling and ends up speaking. From diffused emotional expressions, specific emotions such as joy or anger may emerge. From infancy to about twelve years of age, overall healthy development is very crucial. If there are deficiencies or uneven or deleterious environment, normal development is compromised.

For years it was thought that teaching languages to children as young as three was futile. Research findings indicate quite the opposite. Longitudinal studies by Harvard University confirm that learning additional languages increases critical thinking skills, creativity and flexibility of the mind in young children. The brain, like any other muscle, functions better with exercise. Learning a language involves memorising rules and vocabulary, which helps strengthen that mental muscle. It is now believed worldwide that at pre-school stage, children should be introduced to at least four languages. Understanding this is crucial for India, a multilingual nation. Households and schools especially need to rethink on language studies and change teaching dramatically to be able to reap advantage for a 21st century India. Mental maths is another subject not given sufficient importance, especially in the age of calculators.

Reasons for Healthy and Deficient Development

Some believe that it entirely depends on the environment while others firmly believe that it is determined entirely by heredity.

To paraphrase one of the famous behaviour psychologists, BF Skinner who believed that only the environment matters, he, in fact, famously declared, 'Give me a child, I will shape him into anything'. While there are others who believe that even intelligence is totally determined by heredity. However, both positions are wrong though both are true. Both heredity and environment play equally significant roles in promoting

or hampering development. There is not just black and white, development is a grey area influenced by various and most inputs.

Unfortunately, be it psychologists or politicians, a person tends to support the view that suits him/her.

For example, if intelligence is determined by one's heredity, there is no need for promoting education for the poor, backward or disadvantaged children. In India, education has been the prerogative of the wealthy and people of higher castes, while 'mass education' has been promoted in recent times with no 'political will' to push it. No change would be possible if the claims of those who believe only in heredity were true, while all changes are possible if the predominance of environmental influences happen. But reality is in between the two as both are equally important.

In India, one of our earliest story streams tells us this. Vishnusharma's *Panchatantra* stories are more than two thousand years old. These begin with a king who has three lazy and uneducated sons. When all teachers fail, the king calls Vishnusharma to educate his sons, and thus was born India's most famous story book. If heredity had been a factor, the king's sons would have been born wise and learned.

Everyone believes that he or she is an expert when it comes to bringing up children. The aim of this chapter is to attempt to highlight what is known about children's development. This chapter, therefore, dwells on three time-frames and related thinking on children's development.

1. What was known about child care in India 1,500-2,000 years ago in Ayurveda and such ancient healing systems? What do they tell us about how to bring up children?

2. In the last century, how did Western thinkers examine the way we view our children?

3. In the last 30-50 years, the above ideas have undergone major shifts due to advent of developmental psychology.

We need to know all the popular thinking in all the three eras to understand our children.

There are generally four stages of intellectual development children go through, up to the age of twelve years according to the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. The teenagers and adolescents are similar to adults in their cognitive (intellectual) abilities, of course, with some variations due to specific push and pull of adolescence. I am going to describe four stages with metaphors to signify these four developmental stages in brief, this will be elaborated upon in Part IV.

1. **Abhimanyu** - This stage covers foetal development

2. **Scientist in the Crib** - Birth to three years

3. **Wandering Scholar** - Three to six years

4. **The Victorious Adventurer** - Six to eleven years

In all the above stages there is all-round development. These simultaneously occur in the physical, intellectual, language, emotional, social, moral and sexual domains. For the normal development in all the domains, the care of the child is essential.

First, we should determine at each stage what does the child require and what appropriately needs to be provided by the caretakers in the right kind of environment? This is what we are going to examine now in each of the four stages.

Those familiar with the epic *Mahabharata* would know that Abhimanyu learnt his war strategies while he was in his mother's womb. In contrast, Western thinkers/psychologists have believed that the child is born with his mind 'full of blooming buzzing confusion at birth' to quote the eminent psychologist, William

James. This also puts the onus of teaching the child everything on adults as the child arrives in the world knowing nothing.

The ancient treatises of *Kashyapa Samhita* and *Charaka Samhita* describe the foetal development from the point of conception itself. Not only there is rapid physical development at the foetal stage, awareness of pain and pleasure at three months, consciousness at four months, emergence of mind at fifth month and intellect at sixth month. Eighth month is considered an unstable period where there is imbalance in both, the energy systems of the foetus and the pregnant woman.

Kashyapa Samhita, in view of the above knowledge, recommends excellent regimen of physical and psychological care for the foetus, pregnant woman as well as the nursing mother. This is considered *Kaumarabhratya*—care of the child.

Traditionally, in India, care starts much before the baby is born. Both the parents, especially the mother, is advised about diet, cleanliness, behaviour, rituals to be followed. Her mind should be happy and peaceful. She should entertain good or pious thoughts and see only pleasant people and experience soothing events.

These instructions are given as it is believed, whatever happens to be her physical and mental state—these strongly influence the foetus/infant. Many of the social rituals too are based on the above observation. To provide such emotional, physical and social supports, a special status and some rituals are recommended during pregnancy. In the traditional home, the young woman during much of her pregnancy and during the first year after the child's birth is taken care of in her maternal home. This notion of all-round support for the pregnant woman and nursing mother is desirable scientifically and psychologically as preferred practices in many countries, including in India.