Focussing on the critical years of a child’s life

What the draft National Education Policy omits in its chapter on early childhood care and education

The draft National Education Policy starts its opening sentence with a hitherto little-known fact: “The learning process for a child commences immediately at birth.” Many believe that children start learning only in school. It is true that language and numerical proficiency, and analytical skills, are attained in school, but the foundation for such a learning capacity is laid much earlier, and it happens without our knowledge. Higher cognitive functions attain their peak of growth between the ages of one and three – before school education begins.

However, the next sentence of the draft says, “Evidence from neuroscience shows that over 85% of a child’s cumulative brain development occurs prior to the age of 6”. This is grossly inaccurate because the global focus for optimal brain development is on the first 1,000 days of a person’s life (The Lancet, 2007). Stretching the window of opportunity to six years is a mistake. This wrong understanding leads to misplaced priorities for a nation to boost its human development potential.

Laying the foundation

These 1,000 days are when rapid and dramatic changes take place in the brain and fundamental cognitive and interpersonal skills are developed. The centres for vision and hearing in the cerebrum develop between the second and fifth months of one’s life. In these areas, the formation of nerve connections peaks by the fourth month, and is followed by a gradual retraction or “blooming and pruning” until the end of the preschool period. Similarly, the centres for language and speech proficiency develop maximally between the sixth and tenth month even before the child’s speech and language makes any sense to us. Even as a toddler, a child’s spoken vocabulary increases significantly.

Pregnancy and infancy are important periods for the formation of the brain. This is when the foundation is laid for the development of cognitive, motor and socio-emotional skills. Apart from genetic determinants, environmental determinants play an equally critical role in shaping personality. In essence, an infant is born with the capacity to learn, but how much and what all the infant can learn is influenced by the environment.

The drafting committee of the National Education Policy should have consulted a paediatrician or developmental neurologist on what needs to be done in the first 1,000 days. The policy has rightly categorised early childhood education into two parts. The first focuses on children below the age of three years; the second on children aged three to six years. While Anganwadi centres target children in the second category, the section on Early Childhood Care and Education up to three years is sketchy and inadequate. It only mentions health and nutrition services for both mothers and children. Take-home ration that is provided for children up to three years by the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme only helps physical growth; it does not provide psychosocial stimulation for development. That responsibility is left entirely to the parents or family members.

The section on expansion and strengthening of facilities for early childhood education states that “the care and educational requirements of 0-3-year-olds in the region would continue to be handled by neighbourhood Anganwadis”. That is a tall order. Children below three are not enrolled in the daily services of the ICDS centre. They stay at home.

Filling the gap

This gross design defect in the architecture of the ICDS has existed since its inception in 1975. Policy directions and strategies for “care concept with early stimulation for child development” are lacking in the ICDS.

The solution is to have an additional worker trained in care and stimulation for child development in every Anganwadi. New workers will impart psychosocial stimulation for the development of the brain through five sensory organs of the body, i.e., eye, skin, ear, nose and tongue. The intensity and frequency of flow of these signals during early childhood determines the level of intelligence and mental development attained. The baby’s explorative learning and storage of such inputs into the brain takes place every moment of her early life. Her storage capacity is expandable and enormous. The baby also derives analytical conclusions based on which she develops value systems and character.

Apart from breastfeeding, cleaning the baby, giving oil massages and applying lotion adds to her under-standing of love and care through tactile and pressure stimulation. Carrying the baby and rocking her provides her security.

From two months of age, the baby starts to interact socially. Playing with the baby with toys or by using facial expressions improves her social interaction skills. The baby recognises where sounds originate, the voice of her mother, and her own name by six months of age.

Showing the baby the colours of the sky, flying birds, fluttering butterflies and domestic animals improves visual stimulation. Songs, soft music and sweet talk stimulate the auditory areas of the brain. Making the child feel the softness of flowers, leaves and cheeks adds to her sensory learning. These are all not a waste of time, but good investment for a child’s development.

By the time the child is two or three, she will be asking a volley of questions: who, when, what, why, how. Often the questions and answers are repeated but the child does not get bored. Stories stretch their imagination.

Parents and caregivers do not have sufficient time earmarked for the care of their children. More than money, they must invest time for the development of the child. Working parents offload this responsibility to grandparents or domestic workers or leave their children in care centres or crèches. But these places don’t have qualified or trained staff to provide scientific care.

There is no government system to take care of babies of poor families or of mothers who go to work for a daily wage. The experimental project of Fulwari, or community-managed crèches in Chhattisgarh, is one answer to this gap. Policymakers may have a look at Fulwari for replication.

The 86th Amendment of the Constitution 2002 and Section 11 of the Right to Education Act also mandate public provision of early childhood care and education. Interestingly the policy states: “Universal access to quality Early Childhood Education is perhaps the best investment that India can make for our children’s and our nation’s future”.

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