

Social Work Intervention and Child Development in India

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Abstract

At every stage of growth and individual is supposed to perform certain developmental tasks or achieve certain competencies. These tasks are determined by biological, physiological, social and cultural factors. Present article focuses on stages of child development, their need and corresponding problem issues which hinder their overall development. Present article also analyses various programmes and schemes for child development initiated by the government in India and intervention of social work to tackle the significant issue of child development.

Key Words: *Child, Development, stages, need, social work, strategies*

INTRODUCTION

Children are considered to be the blessing for a nation. Higher child population shows the potential of a nation to be able to contribute higher proportions towards economic growth and development.

Development in children is focused on changes in their behaviors as they grow. It deals with qualitative changes which might be positive or deteriorating leading ultimately to providing quality of life. The concept of child development begins from the time a child is conceived in the womb until 18 years of age which is the legal age for children in India. Before 18 years of age, children are considered dependents and are restricted to vote, drive vehicles, get married, drink alcohol, etc. to protect them from the potential hazards as they are deemed to be unfit for taking independent decisions.

‘Care’ is one of the widely used terms in the arena of child development because young children require care as their minds have not become mature enough to differentiate between right and wrong even if they are provided with basic education. We are aware of how the children develop from infancy to adolescence but these are only known to us from our own experience and maturity. We do not have a clear understanding of concepts such as the role of formal education and society in growth, evolution of abilities among children, etc.

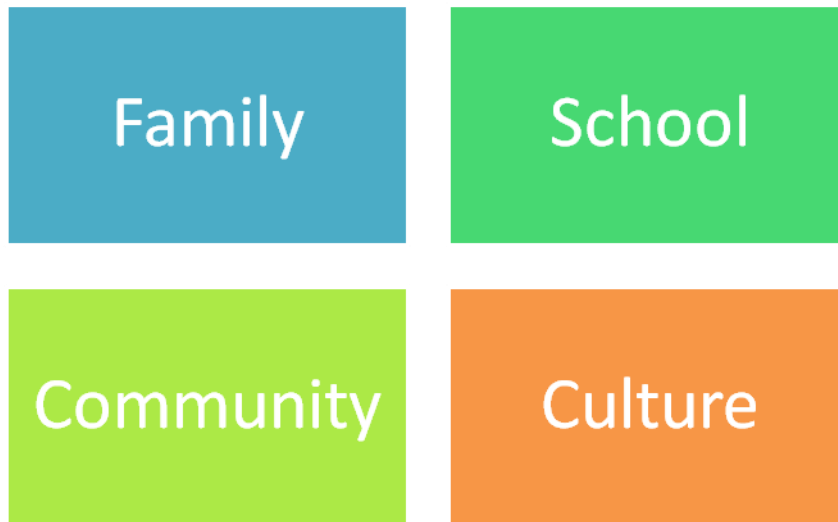
The growth of children encompasses the entire spectrum of abilities that a child masters across their lifespan which includes development of -

- Physical skills - gross and fine motor skills
- Sensory, perceptual and cognitive skills - problem solving and learning ability
- Language - speaking, listening and understanding language for effective communication
- Creativity - curiosity, taking initiative and developing imagination

- Socio-emotional regulation - social relationships, interpersonal skills, emotional well-being and proficiency in self-control

CONTEXTS OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Though children, in many ways, are similar to each other throughout the world, their development is largely influenced by the contexts in which they have been brought up. Different settings which impact the development process are covered under the broad term of 'context'. Development of children takes place in different contexts including schools, families, communities and cultures.



Family

- In most of the cases, family is the first and foremost source of influence on the child as children spend the majority of their time with their caregivers.
- These days, the composition of families has changed as single parents' families, nuclear families, adoptive families or step families.
- No matter what the composition is, the major role of family is to promote socialization among their children. They instill attitudes, values, norms and beliefs of the culture for positive growth of children in order to prepare them for contributing to society in future.

School

- School is also an imperative context of development. Around 6 to 7 hours of the day is spent in schools by children of school-age, leveraging the school to have significant influence on the behavior and attitude of children.
- When children are in schools they learn skills like writing, reading and solving arithmetic problems while adolescents are encouraged for higher education or entering into the labor market.
- Schools, nowadays, not only strive to impart education but also provide good quality of healthcare, nutritious meals and encourage social service activities for their students.
- Schools play an important role in shaping the attitude and behavior of children as this is the place where they make friends but sometimes also face bullies.

Community

- The attributes of a community where children live impact various facets of development. Quality and range of support available to children will be affected by the economic adversity the community faces.
- The quality of schools in the neighborhood affects the educational as well as outdoor opportunities available to children.
- The safety issue around the neighborhood affects the play time of the children which also disrupts the quality of play in the limited time.
- Also the level of noise in the surrounding might hamper their hearing or hinder social interaction and learning ability.

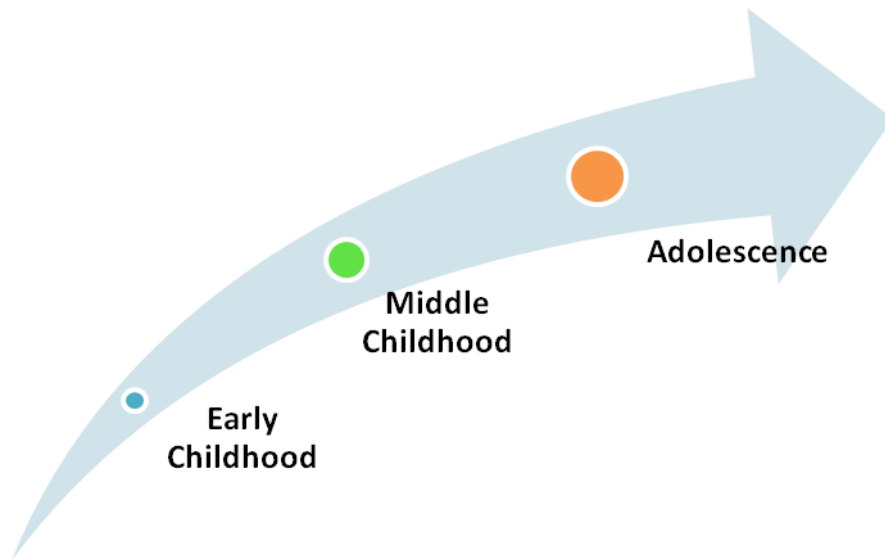
Culture

- In addition to differences among individuals, it has been found that group differences can also have significant impact on the research on development.
- Authoritarian parenting would have varied effects on children raised in different cultures. For example, children rose in cultures where strictness is viewed as a sign of care and love, strict parenting won't be any issue there whereas in other cultures it is considered unacceptable.
- As per Matsumoto and Juan (2004), culture distinguishes between groups and sets out similarities in people belonging to one group. These analogies in a group might be language, values, customs and various other attributes which distinguishes groups from one another.
- There was an experiment done by Robert LeVine and his colleagues (2004) in which they showed videos of the Gusii mothers of Kenya on their parenting styles to the mothers of the US. When US mothers saw the video they were shocked to see young children of or 6 years of age taking care of their infant kins and that the concept of praising the child was totally missing. Similarly when the Gusii mothers were shown videos of US mothers, they were appalled to see the interactions between babies and mothers as they believed babies could not understand at such a young age. Apart from this they could not understand why US mothers did not practice nursing their babies when they cried. These are the few examples which show the different practices in different cultures for raising the children which affect their growth and development significantly.

STAGES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Child development has always been a point of discussion among various psychologists, academicians and sociologists regarding varied stages of evolution among children, understanding those stages, role of society and parenting in general for carving their lives. Children achieve developmental milestones while growing up enabling their caregivers to understand their transformation and range of behaviors through age which speak volumes about the child's personalities and faculties. The stages of child development are influenced by laws, customs, social norms and mores.

Broadly there are three stages of child development –



1. Early Childhood (Birth to Eight years)

In the early years of life, children experience rapid growth of their bodies as well as their brains. Growth is obvious when a newborn develops dramatically into a crawling, cooing individual. This period begins from the birth of a child and passes through the preschool stage ending when the child is in the age group of primary school. Majority of the brain development takes place by the time a child reaches the age of 2 years. These are the foundation years which need major attention and responsive care by the caregivers around children.

- Children develop socio-emotional skills in the first year when the attachment with their caregivers becomes critical. A person's personality, relationships and functioning of life are modeled by the quality of relationship children experience in the early years of life.
- By the time the child becomes 3 years of age, she is able to walk, talk, eat, scribble, has hand-eye coordination and is toilet trained. She has the capacity to remember 300 to 1000 words. Her height doubles whereas her weight quadruples.
- During the preschool age of 3-6 years children begin developing fine and gross motor skills. By this time, physical growth slows down whereas motor skills and body proportions become refined. By the age of 5, children become able to speak and understand about 1500 words along with a small sentence of 4-5 words.

During these years, providing a supportive, playful and learning environment to the children can have extremely positive results on their academic as well as general performances when they grow up. Imitation is their favorite art during this age hence proper care needs to be taken while doing any activity around the children.

2. Middle Childhood (Eight to Twelve Years)

Children learn some fundamental abstract concepts of time and money by the time they reach 8 years of age. Their interpersonal, cognitive, personality and motivation skills experience refinement. Their social circle grows with children of their own age as well as some younger/ elder friends too. Integration is the primary task of development during middle childhood as it experiences

development within and in the context of society. This age group doesn't undergo much physical changes and the growth is fairly steady until puberty.

3. Adolescence (Twelve to Eighteen Years)

Due to substantial physical, cognitive and emotional development, adolescence marks as a period of confusing and even frightening hormonal changes among teenagers. Adolescents experience recurrent mood-swings and different psychological changes. Children in this age group like to spend more time with friends rather than the family, have increased interest in dating and sexuality and show increased need of privacy.

The ability of thinking logically improves among adolescents and they become equipped to explain their positions and choices. Different points of views than the parents began developing in adolescents which often lead to clashes between them and the parents. They undergo physiological changes due to puberty with development of secondary sex characteristics like voice changes and growth of armpit hair. Changes in height and weight are seen which slow down gradually.

Even though adolescents develop and grow rapidly, they need responsible caregivers to set boundaries and promote healthy behaviors.

IMPORTANCE OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

- Child development is an inevitable process which happens with every child. Every child will grow and develop but this development process can either be positive or negative depending on the influence shadowed by the caregivers and the environment around the child.
- Throughout the process children learn and master the skills of walking, sitting talking, tying shoes and skipping. Many children learn the skills in a sequential manner as these are developmental milestones leading to changes as the child grows. This can be understood with the help of a simple example that before a child can fully develop the skills of walking, s/he needs to crawl first. Each milestone is built on the last one achieved by the child.
- While digital transformation has increased the knowledge and abilities of children, it shouldn't be a substitute to the exposure needed by children to achieve developmental milestones.
- Developmental milestones are unique for each child to achieve, some may achieve earlier while others may develop them late than their peers. Though some milestones will be met by children at the same time and same age, these milestones are not just limited to the age of 6 or 7 but they continue to evolve for some children up to 21 years of age.
- While language and physical development have reached their saturation, social and cognitive development continues to snowball.
- Early childhood is the age of most rapid development with 80% brain development of a child in just the first 2 years. Cognitive, physical and emotional development among children begins right from conception and is generally complete by the time a child reaches eight years of age.
- Childhood is the foundation of life which has the potential to enhance the quality of life in future. The more enriched the childhood would be, the better will be the quality of life of the person.
- The learning process is acknowledged to be influential in moulding a person's personality and how she/he deals with different situations in life. A flood of change has been witnessed with a significant shift in the thought process of educating through knowledge of life rather than bookish knowledge.

- People have begun believing that for all round development education is the most important tool. It is not simply a means to get certificates or acquire a degree for monetary successes but it facilitates grooming of our cognitive skills and an enriched thought process. Education and supportive environment are of utmost importance after food, shelter and clothes for optimum development of children at various stages of their lives.

ISSUES AFFECTING CHILDREN: THE NEED

A child needs to experience ongoing and consistent care by caregivers around in a loving and nurturing manner by parents or other caregivers. The child feels self-confidence and resilience for coping with the stress if s/he receives support from the adult who also helps the child in realizing the sense of security around that individual.

For better maturity of social and emotional skills, children must be encouraged to interact with friends, close relatives, people at schools, child care centres or any other activities. Conflicts and minor stresses are inherent in the interactions of children with people outside the home but they will slowly learn the skills to tackle more notable stressors. Children learn to react by imitating the elders and follow what they see in elders.

1. Poverty

- More than 50% of the world's population is living in poverty whereas around 1.4 billion people are extremely poor with earnings less than \$1.25 in a day. Poverty results in poor living conditions, starvation, limited or no access to medical and education, poor quality of water and sanitation, high crime rates and gender inequality.
- Children are the worst sufferers of these issues. Due to poverty related issues, every day 22000 children die as per UNICEF.
- Incidences of stunted growth or underweight children are almost 30% in developing countries. Poverty perpetuates a vicious cycle which traps the children in its grip making almost impossible for the families to break the chains. The children trapped in poverty are most likely to get into child labor which hinders their education which further reduces their chances of getting a proper job to support their families.

2. Child exploitation and abuse

- Exploitation of children happens when they are denied their basic rights of education, survival, participation and protection. This can be in the form of forcing the children into labor, child marriage, sexual assaults, beggary, trafficking and not allowing them to access education. Every 11th child in the age group of 5-18 years is working in India as per the estimates of CRY.
- Exploitation, neglect or abuse in early childhood negatively affects cognitive and brain development of the child which is likely to have long lasting effects. Socio-emotional development in children is also affected due to neglect and abuse leading to multiple problems with long term consequences. According to the National Crime Record Bureau, 109 children are sexually assaulted every day in India.

3. Safe and clean Water

- Clean water is taken for granted in most parts of the world which makes it surprising to know that more than 700 million people do not have access to water fit for drinking and other household usage whereas 2.5 million do not have toilets.
- Contaminated water causes respiratory and diarrheal infections which claim lives of more than 5000 children before they attain 5 years of age. Water is collected from wells or tube wells which are done by either children or women in developing nations which means healthy adults are not doing wage labor and children are not going to school.
- It has been estimated by the World Health Organization that \$11.3 billion per year is required to tackle the issue of clean water and sanitation which is normally spent by American in celebrating Christmas each year.

4. Girl's Education

- Education of girls is a major drawback in developing countries affecting optimum development of children. Low quality or no education among girls affects the quality of life of the whole family as it has been rightly said that by educating a boy, we educate a man but by educating a girl, we educate a whole family. Although enrollment of girls in primary school has improved in India, there is still a long way to go to encourage families to let the girls complete their education.
- According to a report by Right to Education Forum and Centre for Budget Policy Studies with support of UNICEF and World Bank, 40% of girls aged 15-18 years are out of school. It also found out that 30% of the girls from the poorest families never accessed schools. As per UNICEF estimates around 300,000 prostitutes are girls below 18 years. Girls with little or no education are at higher risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking and hence are more prone to contracting HIV/AIDS. While if girls are educated they are more likely to find better job prospects and support their families in breaking the cycle of poverty.

5. Infant Mortality

- Giving birth is a joyful moment which becomes manifold by watching a small, delicate creature taking its first breath. In order to make sure that everything goes well, most of the new mothers have the assistance of skilled medical assistants. In underdeveloped and developing countries almost half of all newborns and their mothers do not have access to medical care.
- Every year around 3 million infants die in the first month of their birth from the diseases which are easily preventable yet due to lack of proper facilities and accessibility, nations have to suffer huge number of losses of potential contributors to the economy in the long run. 721,000 infants died in 2018 across India as per the child mortality estimates of United Nations which means every day, on average, 1975 infants died in 2018.

6. Gender Inequality

- Each boy and girl deserve to live a life free of discrimination and inequality. Gender inequality begins from the tender age of childhood which robs children of their entire childhood not enabling them to achieve their full potential. Mostly girls are denied their rights, subjected to violence, forced to marry and kept away from school and education.

- Gender equality is a human right which is fundamental to every person no matter which caste, creed, ethnicity, ability, etc. they belong from. Right from the childhood, girls as young as 6 years are given the responsibility of taking care of their younger siblings, they are not allowed to go to school, are married off without their consent, are engaged in domestic work and also face sexual and physical violence.

MAJOR GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS AND SCHEMES FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

- **Anganwadi services scheme**
Under this scheme of the Department of Women and Child Development, the main beneficiaries are pregnant women, lactating mothers, children aged 0-6 years and adolescent girls aged 10-19 years. It provides health, nutrition and education related services for the holistic development of children.
- **National Creche Scheme**
This scheme is a relief for the children with working mothers. Under the scheme, day care services are provided for children from 6 months to 6 years of age. The services aim to enhance holistic development of children by also focusing on the health and nutritional status of the children.
- **POSHAN Abhiyan**
Another very important and ambitious scheme by the government of India is Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nutrition (POSHAN Abhiyan) whose main objective is improving outcomes of nutrition for children, pregnant and lactating mothers. Under the scheme activities are majorly focused on social behavioral change and communication (SBCC).
- **Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act, 2019**
This act is focused on protecting children from offences of sexual harassment, pornography and sexual assault. It provides for establishing Special Courts for hearing of the aforementioned offences.
- **Commission for Protection of Child Rights Act, 2005**
Under this act, the constitution of national and state level commissions has been mandated for speedy trials of offences conducted against the rights and protection of children.
- **Juvenile Justice Care and Protection of Children (Amendment) Act, 2015**
JJ Act, as it is commonly referred, is largely rehabilitative and reformatory in nature for children in need of care and protection and children in conflict with law. All the children below 18 years of age who are in conflict with law must be treated as juveniles and sent to correction homes except children in the age group of 16-18 years committing heinous crimes to be treated as adults. The amended act also includes foster care under which families can sign up for adoption of orphaned, abandoned and children in conflict with law.
- **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006**
This is an amended act which was first passed in 1929 to eradicate the evil practice of child marriage from our nation by punishing the families involved, priest solemnizing the marriage, promoters/supporters of marriage like caterers, marriage band companies, etc. According to the act, a marriage cannot be solemnized if either of the parties is a child i.e. girl below 18 years of age and boy below 21 years of age. If such a marriage takes place, it is punishable with strict imprisonment and/or fine to the court.

- **The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1986**

This act is often referred to as PITA which discusses trafficking in relation to prostitution and not taking into purview other causes such as child labor, domestic work, organ transplantation, etc. Apart from the direct perpetrators like pimps and brothel owners, the act also punishes the chain of people involved in trafficking like recruiters, transporters, harbourers, etc.

- **Sukanya Samriddhi Yojna, 2015**

As part of 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' campaign, this is a small deposit scheme launched for the girl child. The scheme allows opening a bank account in the name of the girl child any time before the girl turns 10 with a minimum deposit of Rs250. Once opened, caregivers can submit Rs250 to 1.5 lakhs in one financial year until 21 years from the date of opening of the account or till the marriage of the girl after 18 years of age.

- **Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram**

This is aimed at promoting participation and leadership among adolescents targeting their reproductive health, substance abuse, nutritional status, etc.

- **Rajshree Yojna, 2016**

This is Rajasthan Government's scheme which focuses on improving child sex ratio and educational status of girls especially in rural areas. Under the scheme, girl child is entitled to benefits upto Rs50,000 till she passes 12th class. The money deposited in the bank account can be utilized for studies, proper health and caregiving purposes.

- **National Scheme of Incentives to Girls for Secondary Education**

It is a scheme sponsored by the central government for promoting enrolment of girl children who are 14-18-yearolds in secondary grades, especially those who passed VIIIth standard.

SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Social workers support individuals, groups and families through diversified intervention to assist with their issues and needs. These interventions are planned in a way to help people mitigate the issues faced by them. 'Social work intervention' can apply to all types of social work, including short-term engagement with people, such as community-based grief therapy after a traumatic event. Levels of social work intervention are influenced by the governmental structure under which a social worker works.

Social work intervention with children is required to be as per the framework of the provisions of constitution, policies, schemes, national laws and programs that acknowledge the issues which concern the children. The main objective of social work for children is to ensure rights and protection of every child so that no one is left behind in the society. The basic principles of child rights are based on right to survival, non-discrimination, best interests and right to participation of the child. "Best interest of the child" is defined as "the basis for any decision taken regarding the child, to ensure fulfillment of his basic rights and needs, identity, social well-being and physical, emotional and intellectual development" in the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015.

Preventing children from exploitation, violence, neglect and abuse and addressing the rights of children are the things which are covered under child protection. Rights of children are to be fulfilled by the adults as it is their critical responsibility due to their role as duty bearers. The State, community and the family must work towards protection of the rights of children.

Social work can be approached for different purposes and through different levels for supporting children. Intervention with children can be outlined for therapeutic, preventive and developmental purposes.

1. Direct intervention with the Children

- There are a huge number of children who require protection and care which leaves enormous scope in engaging directly with the children. Many of the social work practitioners are inclined to work with children directly wither through working with groups of individuals.
- Direct intervention in various settings can be undertaken with children such as in residential care units, communities, schools, shelter homes, hospitals, vocational training centres, etc.
- The first and foremost step is to assess the situation of the child, scope of intervention and the impact it would bear on the child. Assessment is a reciprocal, periodic and an ongoing process which includes a child's optimal participation. With the help of an assessment, a child's needs can be understood and an intervention plan can be developed accordingly. Following are few of the possible interventions in cases of direct social work with children –
 - Working on children's social, emotional, physical and psychological needs
 - Intervention in crisis situation where children have been survivors or victims of exploitation or abuse
 - Pinpointing areas of risk and vulnerability
 - Intervention with family and other caregivers in the life of child
 - Assisting in rehabilitation process to children who are under the extent of juvenile justice system

2. Working with families and other associated adults

- In the formative years of a child, s/he interacts closely with the adults or caregivers around. They look up to the adults for the fulfillment of fundamental needs of children.
- Therefore, along with children it is also imperative that adults should be engaged in the social work intervention for the welfare of children.
- A child, at micro level, interacts with immediate family (parents), teachers, relatives, neighborhood, community people and doctor. Other people indirectly influence the life of children like government officials, police and others who impact the legislative and policy frameworks.
- Child development is also affected by implementation of laws, access to quality education, vigilant police for protective mechanisms and adequate budget allocation.
- Hence, along with families, there is a huge scope of working with other associated adults at macro and micro level. In order to create a child friendly society, following interventions can be undertaken
 - Sensitization events on existing legal and policy framework, issues concerning young children, etc. with family, parents, health officials, teachers, social workers, etc.
 - Skill and capacity building workshops on parenting, domestic violence, exploitation, etc.
 - Vocational training with teachers
 - Awareness among adults for mitigating the issues and improving practices for protection of child rights
 - Developing child rights framework

3. Macro work

- Macro work is also similarly important as micro work with children in need as they too impact the life of children.
- In order to engage in macro level work, one can engage with departments concerned with children's issues at State level for policy formulation, its implementation and various processes of consultations, human and child rights committees at state and central level, NGOs, etc.
- Following are a few interventions at macro level for child development -
 - Engaging in evidence-based research
 - Engaging stakeholders working with children in their training and skill enhancement
 - Raising funds for child development
 - Participating in collaboration, campaigns, networking and advocacy
 - Writing about issues related to children for generating awareness and enhancing sensitivity towards the issues of children
 - Engaging in interventions requiring working in law related fields by improving legal awareness and literacy or as lawyer in direct practice
 - Supporting institutions and organizations working directly or indirectly with children to develop and follow child safeguarding policies to prevent harm, in any form, to the children

CONCLUSION

“All Children are different, and we need to know the reasons for, and significance of, those differences”

- Illingworth (1989)

Children evolve in many different ways as they grow old. Child development covers cognitive, social, emotional and physical changes. Maturity and growth among children happens at different paces which makes it difficult to gauge what normal is. Huge differences in build, weight and height is seen among children who are considered healthy which are influenced by factors such as genes, exercise and diet. Puberty hits some of the children even before they enter teenage years.

Children prefer more privacy as they grow and begin to demand more independence from their families, especially parents and hence become rebels. They look towards their friends and their approval becomes more significant. During this time, children try to become part of ‘the group’ which leads to many new behaviors. This is also the time when parents/ teachers begin to notice any behavioral issues or learning disabilities in children.

In order to provide a better shape to the development process of children nourish them with a healthy diet, improved education, nurtured parenting style and good values.

As has been discussed in the article too, it is very important to engage with children from the formative years through the eighteen years to ensure their holistic and enriched development. ‘It is not easy to get fruits from a grown up tree without nourishing it with proper nutrients when it was young.’

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