

Editorial

Strengthening Early Childhood Development: An Important Component of Future Success

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Early Childhood Development (ECD) is an integral core component of social determinants of health and according to the World Health Organization (WHO) [1] it is 'considered to be the most important developmental phase throughout the lifespan' (para. 1). Furthermore, it was maintained that ECD includes 'the physical, social/emotional, and language/cognitive domains of development, each equally important—strongly influences well-being, obesity/stunting, mental health, heart disease... and economic participation throughout life' (para.1). Events in the early years of children are critical as they shape the development and future occurrences. It is therefore important to provide essential opportunities through services and programs to children and families that will shape lifelong health and improve overall outcomes. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) [2] stressed the importance of ECD by indicating that providing the essential elements during the early years do have 'profound impact on a child's future' (Para. 1). However, 'nearly 43% of children under 5 in low- and middle-income countries are not getting the nutrition, protection and stimulation they need. This diminishes both the child's potential and sustainable growth for society at large' (Para. 2). While early childhood programs are designed to bridge the gaps by providing opportunities to all children and improve development for better outcomes, it is evident [2] that some children and families are still left behind.

According to the Open Society Foundations [3], 'early childhood program promotes the healthy development and well-being of young children through initiatives that emphasize parents and community engagement, professional development, and government accountability' (Para. 1). There are different kinds of early childhood programs and services that target different populations using different approaches but with similar goals of improving the overall well-being of children and families. Some of these programs solely focus on the children, while other programs incorporate parents and families' components by providing the appropriate training needed to parents so as to be successful in child rearing. For example, in Australia, programs that support child and parents are set up on or near public schools to support families as they lay the foundation for their children's development and learning. Such programs are family centered and target the needs of children, families and provide resources to succeed at home, school, and beyond. Some of services provided include: early learning programs, parenting and family

support, referral to other services, parent workshops and groups and many more [4] (para. 1). Similar programs are available in Chicago and Toronto [5,6] using different approaches and have been proven successful in helping improving outcomes of both children and parents.

Enhancement of early childhood programs with parental and community engagement have proven effective because some skills are taught to parents that results in better outcomes and success of children. Due to increasing number of these programs, Zeedyk et al. [7] evaluated the long term effect of parent support programs in the United Kingdom using a qualitative approach and the results according to participants showed that programs do have long lasting effects 'on their ability to manage their children's behaviour and empowered them as adults' (p.99). In order to have positive and effective impact on the future and success of the children by eliminating risk factors such as poverty and social economic status, Connor et al. [8] argued that 'early childhood care and education programs that include strong support for parents and caregivers are among the most effective, with a strong societal return on investment' (p. 4). Early childhood programs that include parental support give children the strong foundation needed to succeed in school and in life. Programs and services should be designed in manner that supports parents and caregivers so as to have effective long lasting positive outcomes.

Factors such as poverty, race/ethnicity, environment, social economic status and level of education are directly and/or indirectly linked to early childhood development. As evident in the literature [5,8], it is important to consider these factors and incorporate them in program development and implementation so that no children are left behind. Additionally, early childhood programs and services should not have to be geared toward parents only or children only because separating the two will not be as effective and impactful as needed. For instance, Connor et al. [8] showed that 'In general, the influence of parenting is greater than is the influence of early childhood programs on children's school success' (p. 3). Further, 'early childhood care and education programs that provide direct child intervention and foster close ties with parents, encourage effective parenting, and parenting behaviours that promote children's language, cognitive...are among the most effective programs with the strongest cost-benefits ratios' [9,10] (p.3). The effectiveness of early childhood programs combined with parent support programs (i.e. child-parent programs/services) cannot be overlook and to continue to strengthen such programs and reach children of different social economic status and provide same level of quality of services, it is important to involve parents, community and grass root organizations to have the upmost desired positive outcomes. Also, constant evaluation of such programs is paramount as it allows making informed decisions and providing useful information for public health researchers on future steps to

be taken regarding early childhood and parenting programs and services.

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