

**The Early Years Revolution -
Learning to know, to do, to be, to live together
and to transform society begins at birth.**

Bernard P.Y. Combes
Early Childhood and
Family Education Unit, UNESCO
Paris, France

Introduction

The learning capacity and value orientations of children are largely determined by the time the child reaches the age of formal schooling. The early childhood years provide the basis for learning life-long skills and attitudes. Well conceived early childhood programmes help meet the diverse needs of young children during the crucial early years of life and enhance their readiness for schooling. Early childhood care and education is an integral part of basic education and represents the first and essential step in achieving the goals of Education-for-All¹. The Jomtien World Conference on Education for All in 1990 was a major boost to the field of early childhood. During the conference the vision of "basic education" was expanded to include meeting basic learning needs in the earliest years. This expanded definition reflected a recognition that early development provides the foundation for learning in primary school and for productive social contributions in later life. It also highlighted the need for learning to be personally empowering and enriching. This basic idea was further developed and supported by the Delors Report², which highlighted four 'pillars' or fundamental types of learning: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together. To these four pillars, a fifth³ can be added: learning to transform oneself and society. It is during the early years that children develop their first concepts, values and attitudes, principles and skills to become lifelong learners.

It is a tremendous revolution that is only just beginning. A revolution in knowledge about the early years, from before birth and up to the first few years of life. Decisive years, in themselves constituting a revolution in the development of the human being as no other period of life will ever do so

¹ See Paragraph 20 of the Jomtien Framework for Action which states that *the pre-conditions for educational quality, equity and efficiency are set in the early childhood years, making attention to early childhood care and development essential to the achievement of basic educational goals.*

² For more details, see Delors J. et al. (1996). *Learning: The Treasure Within*, Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

³ The addition of this fifth pillar was suggested by UNICEF during its own analytical process of the recommendations of the Delors Report. (*Black, 1999: 9*)

again. Years that see the acquisition of the major stages of learning and the formation of each personality. Years that are still too often neglected and underestimated with regard to what is individually and collectively at stake. (Editorial, Label France 2001:1)

Today, research in every field, from psychology to neurology through neonatology, forces us to accept the fact that "*the baby is a person*"⁴, a sensitive being, highly receptive to its environment, able to form relationships and communicate, to learn from the time of its gestation. This is a challenge to a long past of medical, social and parenting practices based on the adult's power over the child, and a revolution in mindsets, a move to recognising the child as a subject to be respected from its earliest years, and as an active and creative lifelong learner. Learning begins at birth⁵ and sets the stage for further learning. Thus, from the very beginning of their lives, young children learn to know, to do, to be, to live together and they learn to transform themselves and others. Young children learn to know using every senses available to them; they also learn how to learn about the world around them. They learn to do, to smile, to eat, to drink, to kick their legs and wave their arms around. Young children also learn to 'feel' what others do to them and to each other. They learn to be, to be a child, unique and an individual. They thus learn about their identity – to be who they are and valued for who they are. They learn about living together, about belonging to a family, about living with others and the world around them. They learn also about respecting the environment, the need for solidarity and for non-discrimination. In summary, as soon as they are born young children learn that they are a child, an individual, a citizen in a world of many people and many cultures.

Learning begins at birth or even before

The beginning is the most important part of the work. (Plato)

The very early foundations of learning are formed during the prenatal period. Scientists say that about three weeks after conception, the brain forms into a large mass of neurons. How the parents, in particular the mother, arranges the prenatal environments during this period therefore affects the course of development of the foetus. It has been shown that unsafe use of drugs, smoking and drinking alcohol can cause birth defects and have other long-term harmful effects.

A baby's five senses - sight, smell, hearing, taste, touch - are all working from birth. And from birth, a child begins learning about the world. From birth, one of the greatest needs of all children is to be talked to, touched, cuddled, hugged, to see familiar faces and expressions and to hear familiar voices, and to see that others will respond to them. Children also need new and interesting things to look at,

⁴ This phrase is a summary of Françoise Dolto's thoughts, and also the title of a documentary that marked a turning point for the general public in France in recognising the importance of early childhood.

⁵ refers to Article 5 of the Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All

Asociación Mundial de Educadores Infantiles – World Association of Early Childhood Educators
<http://www.waece.com> - info@waece.com

listen to, watch, hold and play with. This is the beginning of learning, as learning is an interplay between the child learner and his/her learning environments.

Learning begins at birth, as the young child starts:

- **Learning to know**, so as to acquire a taste for learning throughout life and for understanding the world.
- **Learning to do**, so as to be able to deal with many situations, and be an actor as well as a thinker.
- **Learning to be**, so as to better develop one's personality and be able to act with greater autonomy, judgement and personal responsibility.
- **Learning to live together**, so as to develop an understanding of other people and their history, traditions and spirituality, in order to participate and co-operate with others in all human activities.
- **Learning to transform oneself and society**, so as to develop respect for the environment, for social solidarity and for a non-discriminatory, gender-sensitive world.

Learning to know

*The infant is equipped with sensory capacities which enable him or her to explore and learn about his or her social and physical surroundings.
(Durkin, 1995: 57)*

A baby is born with the reflex actions he needs to survive (such as sucking and the ability to find his mother's nipple when he lets go) and with the capacity to develop his knowledge and skills.

A baby can see.

A two-day old new-born can distinguish between his mother's face and any other face. The vision of colours will only be perfect at four months. He essentially sees the world in grey. The colour perceived at birth is blue. At two months come green and bright red. At six months he sees pastel shades.

A baby can hear.

Sounds already reach him in utero, particularly his mother's voice. At birth, he reacts more to high pitched sounds than to low ones. At four days he can distinguish his mother tongue from another language.

A baby can recognize the voice of his mother.

He can recognize at birth familiar sounds heard during pregnancy. He is more responsive to his mother's voice than to that of others.

A baby can differentiate between savoury and sweet.

He can differentiate sweet from other tastes. However, he cannot well differentiate between savoury and others. Sweet and bitter tastes seem to be better perceived.

A baby can smell.

He can recognize smells. He will thus show his appreciation of sweet smells, and his dislike of unpleasant smells. He prefers his mother's odour to that of other women, and the smell of the breast of a breastfeeding woman to that of a woman who is not breastfeeding.

A baby can have a first sense of touch.

It is the most important sense in the life of a newborn, in particular focussed on the mouth. A new-born can strongly grasp any object put in his hand. It is the grasping reflex. The eye-hand coordination will only appear around four and a half months.

A baby can walk.

He can walk if he is held by the armpits, the sole of his feet touching a flat surface. It is a so-called primary or archaic reflex.

A baby can understand the relationship between cause and effect.

He has a notion of permanence that allows him to know that an object disappearing from his field of vision continues to exist. It is the beginning of the concept of cause and effect.

A baby can remember events.

He has a memory of recognition of things seen, heard or touched, but it is a fragile memory a bit like the random access memory of a computer. He also has a memory of events. You stick your tongue out to a six week old baby, he responds by sticking his tongue out. The next day he will spontaneously stick his tongue out to you.

And from then on, a young child's practical knowledge constantly increases. The child's learning, growth and development go on continuously. There are no set periods for learning; nor are there set places. There are no set topics or actions for the child's learning; everything can be part of his/her curriculum.

Learning to do

*The child must be the protagonist of his education and of his protection⁶.
(Ségolène Royal, French Minister of State for Family and Childhood)*

⁶ translated from French: *L'enfant doit être acteur de son éducation et de sa protection.*

Child development and growth are complementary but they are not the same. Growth is characterized by progress in size, height or weight, etc. Development is a process of change in which the baby learns to master increasingly complex levels of movement, thinking, feeling and socialization. Development is a journey of discovery through the senses, in which the child takes in and thereby creates, establishes and confirms connections and paths in the brain. The dimensions of this development process are all related one to the other, the emotional affecting the cognitive and the physical and vice versa. It is a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional process involving aspects of health, nutrition, hygiene, emotion and intellect.

By the time children reach the age of two, their brains contain as many synapses and use up as much energy as the brain of the average adult. Development in the child is a complex process and it lies at the very heart of every human being and his or her learning process, beginning at birth and even before, *in utero*. The implications of this on society, and the way children are taught, are enormous and necessarily mean that the importance of the first few years of life is increasingly being stressed by educators. Scientists now know that experiences after birth rather than innate elements are actually responsible for wiring the brain together. Brain development before the age of one, researchers say, is, in fact, much more rapid and extensive than was previously imagined. For example, the amount of connections between nerve cells in an infant's brain grow more than 20-fold in the first months of life. Cell formation might be practically complete before a child is born but the actual maturation of the brain continues after birth. Over the course of childhood, the synapses in the brain proliferate, rewire and are cut away and this whole process is governed by experience.

It is evident that it is within the crucial first early years, when experience is moulding the brain, that the foundations for learning are also set. A person's ability to learn and his or her attitudes towards learning stem from their early years. A stimulating and receptive context can set a young child on the path of discovery, openness to the outside world and the capacity to integrate information. The brain is never as elastic again as it is in childhood, in terms of receptivity and vulnerability. Early childhood experiences are the building blocks of this development and the child is architect of his or her own brain, piecing together the puzzle and reacting to the outside world. It is the sensory experiences of the child which play on the brain, creating and setting out a functioning mind. Unfortunately, experience is not necessarily limited to positive events. It can come in many and varied forms. It can mean intense joy and interaction in a mother's arms but also sickness, malnutrition or neglect. The type of experience, then, is decisive in mapping out the attitude towards learning that will develop in the child.

Early stress can influence brain function, learning, and memory negatively and permanently. Studies of chronic stress in children have shown that development of the limbic system, frontal lobes and hippocampus is hampered when stress occurs, leaving these parts of the brain, used for attention focusing, vigilance and

memory, particularly vulnerable. But stress does not have to be chronic to have a detrimental effect. Less extreme forms of emotional stress, such as arguing amongst parents or parental depression can also lead to children being a greater risk from depression and learning difficulties. A child deprived of experience and use of the senses will undoubtedly suffer. Researchers have proved that children who do not play a lot or who are rarely cuddled and touched by parents or caregivers develop smaller brains. On the one hand, a wealth of experience can produce a powerful brain and, on the other, traumatic experience can lead to a greater risk of a variety of later cognitive, behavioural and emotional difficulties.

One of the basic motors for learning is curiosity and babies and young children are extremely inquisitive. If their thirst for knowledge is not satisfied, it will shrink away. The simple example of the baby's visual system speaks for itself: unless a baby's eyes are stimulated, exercised and constantly used they will not develop to their full capacity. So it is with the brain and, by extension, the learning process.

If a child's environment is conducive to discovery, new emotions and communication, then the process of learning is naturally enhanced. There are key stages in this development, as one new discovery leads to another, and the willingness to learn is fed by the power of an experience and a hunger for more. The skills for building knowledge are reinforced through practice and lead, in turn, to a search for new skills. If one is to try and identify what it is in the development process that stimulates learning then it is important to have a vision of how children learn. Toddlers, for example, are not ready to assimilate abstract signs such as letters or numbers but learn through concrete, tangible ways such as discovering or touching an object. Learning methods should build on these natural desires and processes. A child, for example, will naturally pile up bits of wood and then separate them but will not spontaneously enjoy reciting the alphabet or counting objects.

One of the guiding principles of holistic childhood development is that it is the unfolding and progress of learning that is important rather than the product. That means that it is the approach to, and process of, learning that stimulates a willingness to learn rather than the simple ingesting of facts and figures. Pushing children to absorb facts and knowledge will not increase their desire to learn. It will, in fact, be to the detriment of the child's later development and ability to learn effectively from the facts of life. Learning by doing and the very basic need to know seem to be the main motors in stimulating children.

Learning to be

The 21st century baby is no longer really a baby. It is no longer even an infans - he who does not speak - he is a person endowed with a thousand abilities, a real scholar, a being of desires and words, who only asks to be treated with care, respect and love, in its true sense. (Patrick Ben Soussan, Label France 2001:15)

Children have a natural need and desire to experiment and will do so independently of adults. Leaving children to discover for themselves is one of the best ways to open up their minds to the joys of learning and knowledge. Just simply reaching for an object helps the child's brain develop hand-eye co-ordination. Without encouragement by parents or caregivers, children will want to experiment, will naturally learn through their mistakes, interact with other children and come to understand conflict, sharing and how to deal with feelings. Play, for instance, stimulates imagination and creativity and helps children work out the adult world with its contradictions and rules. As said before, the complexity of the development process and the discovery in the child of the pleasures of learning call for a total or integrated approach to early childhood. What happens at one moment or age of development influences the next and so on, so forth, both positively and negatively. This process might begin with awareness, move to discovery, exploration, testing, inquiry and finally use. The cycle can be observed in the simple movements of the body which allow the child to understand cause and effect and then allow him/her to move on to more complex ideas through mastering the body.

Here, it is important to mention children with special needs. Research shows that early childhood interventions can mean greater stimulation for children with special needs and give parents space to reflect and create better support to overcome their difficulties and limited knowledge of their children's possibilities. Furthermore, early childhood provides a perfect entry point for acting with children with difficulties. It is the period in children's lives when caregivers and parents have the greatest possibilities to channel energy into the individual needs of the child and when the emphasis on the all-round holistic development of the child can be the most effective in surmounting learning difficulties. Intervention at an early age is also a chance for many families to become more involved in developing their child's potential by reaching a better comprehension of their role in helping to realize it.

Once the ball of learning is rolling, the child's discovery of life will flourish if the environment is responsive and supportive without being imposing. Language skills will graft onto previous skills through interactions with adults and children will become aware of themselves within a wider social environment, coming to display emotion and understanding its effect on the community or family. Child development is, therefore, multi-faceted, physical, emotional, mental, social and, even, spiritual with an in-built domino effect, in which change creates change. The skills that are at the foundation of knowledge construction are reinforced and improved through practice. It is the child who constructs his or her own knowledge.

Learning to live together

Everyone is born egocentric. But from early childhood, each human being gradually realizes that he or she has to live together with others in order to survive. The constraints arising from the egocentric nature of human beings give rise to many difficulties, conflicts, frustrations and even hatred against others, including family members, but the fact remains: everyone has to learn to live with others. (Myong Won Suhr, Delors Report: 235)

Young children are born with the innate ability to interact with others. Through this process, which begins soon after birth, the child's personality develops. Social and personal development go together. By interacting with the environment in general, and other people in particular, the child becomes aware of his/herself as a person, and also learns to adjust his/herself to others and become an accepted member of a social group.

Research has shown that young children have many different capacities for attachment, as well as an innate skill at socialising, and socialising encourages acquisition. The younger a child is, the more its capacity for perception, reasoning and learning depends on the quality of the relationships the child establishes with its environment. Thus community life extended beyond the family to attentive and affectionate professionals is an important factor in intellectual and emotional enrichment.

It is during the early years that children build their own value-systems and self-esteem. They develop the ability to relate with others, to express themselves, to communicate, to listen, to settle conflicts and quarrels amicably, to be reconciled and to forgive. Self-esteem is necessary for anyone to care for others. A young child cannot be compassionate towards others unless he/she is secure about his/her own self-worth. Self-esteem is needed to be able to deal with others, to be tolerant of other's opinions and differences, whether racial, physical religious, social, economic or political. Self-esteem begins with the development of trust in oneself, and in significant others, acceptance of one's feelings and inadequacies, learning to deal with emotions of fear, anger and jealousy positively, communicating in verbal and non verbal language, listening patiently and actively, acquiring autonomy and responsibility. (Quisumbing, 2000)

Young children understand each other; they play and make spontaneous contact, hardly conscious of cultural, religious or ethnic differences. That changes as they grow up, particularly if educators, parents, or even older children emphasize the differences. Only then do young children become aware of these and learn to connect them with the concepts of "better than" or "worse than", of "us" and "them". If a young child experiences discrimination of any kind (based on race, colour, sex, religion or anything else) it makes it hard for them to grow up in a way that helps them achieve all that they could achieve. It also sets them apart

from everyone else. Thus, where children of varied social and ethnic backgrounds are brought together, as they are in many early childhood settings and learning environments, mutual tolerance and understanding can be cultivated.

A child's first experience of cooperation or rivalry, jealousy or sharing, takes place in the home. Families provide the greatest learning environment of all and have a tremendous impact on young children's daily experiences. It is through the family that the child first learns about values, rights and obligations, and about sharing, solidarity and responsibility. Unfortunately, in too many cases, it is in the family that children also learn and suffer isolation, violence, pain, poverty and discrimination. Many families live under tremendous economic stress, and more and more young children are growing up in poverty both in developing and industrialized countries. Many children suffer from family social disintegration, family instability (separation, divorce, or unwanted pregnancies), and adverse parental behavior (depression, alcoholism or violence). In such situations, the provision of a caring environment quickly disappears.

Learning to transform oneself and society

It is by methodically and unflinchingly educating for freedom and liberty that you will bring up free individuals.⁷ (Pauline Kermogard)

Children can help build a better future for everyone but we must respect their rights to express themselves and we need to listen to them. Young children's voices must be heard. As they grow and develop, children must be encouraged and supported to get involved in decisions that affect them. We need to help them make the best use of their energy and creativity and to gain knowledge and learn skills to deal with the demands of life. What children need is the ability to cope with a rapidly changing environment, and reach an understanding of others.

Young children learn about the world by actively exploring, experimenting, discovering and creating. They need the possibility to make their own choices and decisions, they need to be empowered and feel part of a democratic society. Democracy in education results in a sense of empowerment by the children. The freedom to make meaningful choices regarding their daily lives and future helps to improve children's self-esteem by naturally fostering a feeling of competence and independence (Erwin, 1994). In addition to learning about themselves through a democratic approach, children learn first-hand about social and group dynamics.

Young children have no conception of international problems. They know no racism, no nationalism and no exploitation of others. We are challenged to allow the natural openness of the young child towards his/her environment to become

⁷ translated from French: *C'est en faisant méthodiquement et sans défaillance l'éducation de la liberté que vous élèverez des êtres libres.*

transformed into conscious commitment to the world and others. In this perspective, early childhood needs to be viewed as a true and real necessity for the viable future of the next generations. Indeed, many of the world's hopes for overcoming conflict, environmental degradation, illiteracy, poverty, exclusion and inequality could well remain vain unless we invest adequately in programmes for the early development of children, in holistic interventions for all children and families, and in actively engaging and encouraging young children to participate.

Research confirms the importance of the early years to positively influence children in a long-lasting way; and to help empower them, by enabling them to initiate and carry out their own learning activities and make independent decisions. The value orientations of children are largely determined by the time they reach the age of formal schooling. The first steps towards a lifetime of peaceful, non-violent activities, of respect for one-self and others, of non-discrimination, and of appreciation of diversity may be taken during early childhood, as children begin to mature and put into place their cognitive and affective frameworks. Discussions about potential values education for young children have centered around several themes, for example:

- respect for self and others, fostering co-operation and conflict resolution skills;
- appreciation of diversity, global awareness and multicultural education;
- practical implementation of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, as a set of values universally accepted as essential for children to be able to fulfill their potential;
- stimulation of the child's imagination through creativity;
- establishing multi-cultural programmes that help young children integrate spiritual / religious with secular learning, or bridge the gaps of experience often faced by multiple language or multiple cultural groups.

Making a difference: What can we do?

*To consider every child as a unique individual, to establish a relationship with it based on mutual trust and to allow the children to discover, to unfold and to rightly enhance their capacities and potentials: this is the way which will prepare our children to live in the world of tomorrow.
(Federico Mayor, Göbel, 1996: message of greetings)*

The current early childhood context

The majority of the world's young children are at risk of failing to thrive and failing to achieve their potential⁸. This is true, despite the fact that within the past 30 years many interesting and well-conceived programs for children have come and gone all over the world. There is still a lack of true commitment to early childhood in many countries. Expansion of services and programmes has been hindered by an absence of leadership and/or vision, and by what are considered as more

⁸ for more details, see the State of the World's Children 2001 report on early childhood development at <<http://www.unicef.org>>

urgent social and economic issues. The *EFA 2000 Assessment* shows that of the more than 800 million children under 6 years of age in the world, fewer than a third benefit from any form of early childhood programmes⁹. The challenge is thus enormous, made more difficult by the demographic pressures and increased urbanisation, increased social exclusion and poverty, great numbers of out-of-school children, the alarming progress of AIDS and the impact of globalization that most countries experience. Yet, efficient and low-cost options for early childhood exist, and are adapted to the needs of children, the life conditions of families, the different cultures, values and resources of countries. Their implementation depends more on creating adequate political and social will than on any other factor.

Attention to early childhood is not a luxury or speciality topic - it should be the first step in any effort to invest in children. Research has shown that for children, the greatest represent *windows of opportunity*¹⁰ to develop basic physical, mental, social and emotional capacities are found within the first eight years of life. During this time, not only are crucial brain structures and cognitive patterns established, forming a basis for all future ability to learn, but also children and families learn social, linguistic and behavioural patterns which can determine their social participation or failure. Early childhood is thus the time to explore, experiment and master change but also the crucial period when children may develop positive attitudes towards learning and a desire to participate in the world. The wealth of current experiences provides an effective choice of models and the hope of results at relatively low-cost in terms of human resources and infrastructure. Thus for social planners, parents, community developers, governments and professionals, early childhood programming offers a significant window of opportunity to make a difference in the lives of children and their families, to build the foundations for sustainable human development and to provide entry points to respond to the challenges of our world.

Responding to the irreducible needs of young children

In their new book *"The Irreducible Needs of Children"*, Doctors T. Berry Brazelton and Stanley Greenspan argue that all young children have seven irreducible needs. Taking these into account, we can make a difference and help create a "world fit for children"¹¹.

1. *Ongoing nurturing relationships*: Every baby needs a warm, intimate relationship with a primary caregiver over a period of years, not months or weeks. This is far more important to emotional and intellectual development than early cognitive training or educational games. If this relationship is absent or interrupted, a child can develop disorders of reasoning, motivation and

⁹ for more details, see the Early Childhood Care and Development Thematic Study and other documents on the Education for All Dakar Forum website at <<http://www.education.unesco.org/efa>>

¹⁰ A window of opportunity is a time when the conditions are right for action, for realizing potential, for making an effort, for achieving a plan or goal.

¹¹ Title of the Outcome Document for the upcoming UN Special Session on Children, for more information consult <<http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/documentation/index.html>>

attachment. Infants, toddlers and preschoolers need these nurturing interactions most of their waking hours.

2. *Physical protection, safety and regulation:* Both in the womb and in infancy, children need an environment that provides protection from physical and psychological harm, chemical toxins and exposure to violence.
3. *Experiences tailored to individual differences:* Every child has a unique temperament. Tailoring early experience to nurture a child's individual nature prevents learning and behavioral problems and enables a child to develop his or her full potential.
4. *Developmentally appropriate experiences:* Children of different ages need care tailored to their stage of development. Unrealistic expectations can hinder a child's development.
5. *Limit-setting, structure and expectations:* Children need structure and discipline. They need discipline that leads to internal limit-setting, channelling of aggression and peaceful problem-solving. To reach this goal, they need adults who empathize as well as set limits. They need expectations rather than labels, and adults who believe in their potential but understand their weaknesses. They need incentive systems, not failure models.
6. *Stable, supportive communities and culture:* To feel whole and integrated, children need to grow up in a stable community. This means a continuity of values in family, peer groups, religion and culture, as well as an exposure to diversity.
7. *Protecting the future:* Meeting all these needs should be our highest priority. If we fail, we will jeopardize our children's future.

The role of parents and caregivers

Every child is born with a great potential to grow and develop but this potential can go in any direction either negative and positive. The choice is, basically, up to parents. Conditions and expectations of parents, however, are changing rapidly. The hands-on training that many parents used to receive from the extended family or from the community is largely unavailable to contemporary parents. For this reason, many parents are more hesitant about employing their instincts and tend to have more faith in professional caregivers and programmes. Parents are the child's first educators, companions and playmates. Children need to interact with them and other adults to take on the structure of the world around them, and to observe behaviour. It is this interaction that is fundamental to the effectiveness of learning. Support to parents in this respect is important in enhancing a young child's learning as it is strongly believed that attachment to a caring adult is a prerequisite for balanced development. Caring is the key in the creation of a supportive environment, and is the integrated set of actions that ensure for children the synergy of health, protection, nutrition, psycho-social and cognitive aspects of development.

Some measure of predictability in the adult environment is necessary to support the child adequately. Swings in adult receptiveness can offset the child and deter him or her from the path of learning which relies so much on parental support. It

requires considerable work to set up learning situations in which each child can progress at his or her pace and it is not realistic to expect parents or even child-care staff to be able to do this without some form of adapted training. It is obvious that a child's well-being is inseparable from the state of the family, which may include a mother, father, sister or brother, and siblings or those who fulfill the care-giving role.

Not all parents are sensitive to their young children's needs. It is important that they are made to be aware of the different stages of a child's development and the appropriate responses at each stage of growth. Sensitivity in parents is a key factor in a child's learning process. If they can correctly perceive and interpret children's signals, and respond appropriately, then the child will develop in confidence. The most effective adults are those who refuse to stereotype their children, believe in their freedom to learn and do all they can to avoid inequality between their different children. Parents should be able to see a child's increasing needs and assist the child in its advances. Domestic events such as washing, cooking or cleaning can be used to introduce children to the use of objects and a sense of the environment. Daily occurrences can become exploratory activities, moments to play and find out new things. Learning materials are all around. There is no need for sophisticated toys. Not all parents realize, for example, that the very basis of learning is the act of exploring and discovering on one's own. The role of parents or caregivers is to comprehend the natural process of learning which the child is undergoing and to work with it, not against it.

It is not only parents who look after and nurture young children. In many countries, the wider community, the extended family and outside caregivers also play a crucial role. Beyond the attachment to parents or a single caregiver, support in the wider community also helps the child discover and accept society's patterns and rules and see the importance of strong and healthy social relations. All types of caregivers can stimulate and observe the children's development. All are responsible for paving the way for learning in a child's mind. But whether it is a caregiver or a parent, and whether it is in Africa, Asia or Europe, one of the most important skills to nurture as a caregiver, educator or parent is the ability to recognize and capitalize on "teachable moments" in everyday life. A teachable moment can happen almost anywhere - in the supermarket, when picking your child up from school, when walking through a store or setting the table for dinner. Chances are that many of the valuable moral lessons that you learned from your parents as a child were not consciously taught at all. They were rather learned in the midst of casual moments of real life, just as our children's real lessons come from being, living and interacting with us in a hundred different ways we could never predict in advance. (Carr Reuben, 1997).

Six keys to recognizing teachable moments

1. Recognize that children often learn moral lessons unconsciously, in casual moments.
2. Be aware of situations that represent moral choices.
3. Talk with children about the ethical challenges represented in everyday situations, the media and popular culture.
4. Praise children for their ethical choices.
5. Point out ethical behavior in others.
6. Let children see your own thought processes regarding ethical decisions.

Towards child friendly learning environments

The *International Initiative on Early Childhood and Values Education*¹², launched in early 2000, lead to the elaboration of a harmonized and common framework to integrate values in early childhood programmes and services by involving policy makers, community leaders, trainers, caregivers, families, parents, children and calling for increased awareness of:

- the need for a "flexible, creative, communicative and supportive" learning environment for a young child,
- the impact of a value-based child-friendly learning environment where each child can express its creative and communicative skills,
- the importance of surrounding the child with human core-values from an early age,
- the ways of implementing values-based early childhood approaches for a better social, emotional, academic and spiritual development of the young child.

As a result of discussions that took place since the initiative was launched, some conclusions have appeared which may constitute a challenge for parents, educators, and countries:

- Education is about relationships, life (action), memory (experiences), imagination (creativity), and most important the quality of listening (or intuition). Listening is needed from every "agent" of education, i.e : educators, parents and every adult surrounding the child, and from children themselves. This kind of listening (to the needs/wishes of the child) is especially crucial in early childhood.

¹² This initiative was launched by UNESCO's Early Childhood and Family Education Unit jointly with the Living Values Educational Program (a network of educators in some 66 countries) in response to requests from countries on the issue of values education for young children at the UNESCO 1999 General Conference.

- Everyone learns from everyone. The educator is the child's student and the parents have to be ready to switch role with their child, etc. Adults and children discover values together. Human values go beyond notions of space, time, age, social and cultural contexts.
- Values-based education in early childhood is there already. It just needs to be looked at from a different angle. For instance: in rural areas, parents tend to call their children back from school at the time of harvest because they need extra hands to help do the work. Harvest may not necessarily be hard and boring. It is up to the adults to make it a values-based educative activity. Thus values-based education becomes an adapted way to share education in day-to-day life and in a specific socio-cultural context.
- The whole idea of values-based education is about adults looking at themselves first. You cannot teach values, you have to "live" and experience them. Educators and parents need new "reflexes", new ways of doing things, new ways of thinking, new ways of looking at what they do and its purpose.
- The most difficult thing for countries to accept will be the simplicity of values-based education. It is not about a new programme or a new methodology per se. Countries, educators and parents already "have" everything to give a better quality of education to their young children. Everything is there, it is only a matter of approaching it in a different way.

Early childhood and family education programmes can assist in that effort by strengthening parenting skills and by providing environments within which children can grow, play, learn and give attention to culturally desirable values.

Conclusion

*To reach real peace in the world, we will have to begin with the children.
(Gandhi)*

A child's mental and physical development are most rapid in the early years. It is at that time that a child learns to move, coordinate, communicate, interpret and cope with its environment. A young child's development does not occur in isolation. It is strongly affected by family and community factors, which continue to influence the child's later learning achievement in terms of enrolment, progress and performance in school. The care and education (including health, nutrition, attention and stimulation) a young child receives from birth depends very much upon parents, family and community. This depends not only on availability and on parents' and caregivers' abilities, but also on access to services that can help the child and support parents in their role and function of parenting.

The first steps towards children learning to be themselves, to know themselves, to make sense of their own world, to make sense of the world around them, to serve others and be stewards of their environment¹³ must be taken during early childhood, as children begin to mature and put into place their cognitive and affective frameworks. Thus, in the framework of UN resolutions and of the *International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World (2001 - 2010)*, we should take into account the following 8 criteria in our actions to help young children "learn" (UN General Assembly, A/55/377) :

- *Respect for all life*: respect the rights and dignity of each human being;
- *Non-violence*: reject violence, obtain justice by convincing and understanding;
- *Sharing*: develop attitudes and skills for living together in harmony, ending exclusion and oppression;
- *Listening to understand*: give everyone a chance to learn and share through the free flow of information;
- *Preserving the planet*: make sure that progress and development are good for everyone and for the environment;
- *Tolerance and solidarity* appreciate that people are different and that everyone has something to contribute to the community;
- *The equality of women and men*: ensure an equal place for women and men in building society;
- *Democracy*: everyone participates in making decisions.

All this is necessary for professionals in their work, for educators in their interactions with children, and for parents in their job of parents, to enable them to help young children benefit from good starting conditions in life and become active and responsible citizens. All children are born with the capacity to learn and that is the most solid base on which any society can build. All too often, children are cast away from their potential discoveries and lose their motivation for learning. We can no longer afford to ignore the needs of young children, and, by extension, what research is telling us. We need to provide young children with the ability to enjoy respect, protection, health and learning opportunities in their early years, to cope with a rapidly changing world, and the tools to tackle life and be able to carry the world into the current millennium.

¹³ for more details, see Williams P. (2000). *Child Friendly Learning Environments for All? First thoughts*. Kuwait American School.

References

Alderson, P. (2000) *Young Children's Rights: Exploring Beliefs, Principles and Practice*. Children in Charge series n°10 London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Ben Soussan, P. (2001) 'Of Books and Babies', *Label France*. Issue 43, April 2001
Paris: French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Black M. (ed). (1999) *Basic Education: A Vision for the 21st Century*, Summary Report of the ninth Innocenti Global Seminar, UNICEF International Child Development Centre 25 October-3 November 1998. Florence: UNICEF.

Brodkin M. (1993). *Every Kid Counts - 31 Ways to Save our Children*. Coleman Advocates for Children & Youth, San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers.

Brougère, G. & Rayna S. (eds). (1999) *Culture, Childhood and Preschool Education*, Report of the Seminar organized by the Université Paris-Nord and INRP, Paris 1-3 October 1998. Paris: UNESCO.

BvLF (2001) *The Convention on the Rights of the Child and Young Children*. Early Childhood Matters n°98, June 2001. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

BvLF (1999) *Effectiveness for Children*. Early Childhood Matters n°91, February 1999. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

BvLF (2000) *Listening to Children*. Early Childhood Matters n°94, February 2000. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Carr Reuben S. (1997). *Children of Character: Leading Your Children to Ethical Choices in Everyday Life*. Santa Monica, CA: Canter & Associates.

Clinton, H.R. 1996. *It Takes a Village and Other Lessons Children Teach Us*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Cutright M. (1992). *Growing Up Confident - How to Make Your Child's Early Years Learning Years*. New York: Doubleday.

Del Carmen M. et al. (1995) *Programa de educación en valores para la etapa infantil*. Archidona (Malaga): Ediciones Aljibe.

DeLoache, J. & Gottlieb A. (eds). (2000) *A World of Babies: Imagined Childcare Guides for Seven Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Delors J. et al. (1996). *Learning: The Treasure Within*, Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century. Paris: UNESCO Publishing. See also <<http://www.unesco.org/delors/>> for more information.

Durkin K. (1995) *Developmental Social Psychology: From Infancy to Old Age*. Cambridge USA: Blackwell Publishers.

EFA Forum Secretariat (2000) *Education for All 2000 Assessment - Thematic Studies: Executive Summaries*. Paris: UNESCO.

Erwin E. (1994) 'Promoting Democracy in Early Childhood Education', *The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps Newsletter*. 4 (20), pp 19-21. April 1994.

Evans, J. L. with Myers R.G. & Ilfeld E.M. (2000) *Early Childhood Counts: A Programming Guide on Early Childhood Care for Development*. WBI learning resources series. Washington DC: World Bank.

Göbel N. (1996) *Waldorf Education*. Exhibition Catalogue on the occasion of the 44th Session of the International Conference on Education of UNESCO in Geneva. Stuttgart: Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners e.V.

History of Education site. (<http://www.socsci.kun.nl/ped/whp/histeduc/>) Provides an international archive of links and source materials about the history of education and history of childhood in various parts of the world. It contains some 1200 categorized and commented links in this field.

ICPQL (1996). *Caring for the Future - Making the Next Decades Provide a Life Worth Living*, Report of the Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Johansson E. (2000). *Ethics in Small Children's Worlds - Values and Norms among the Youngest Children in Preschool*. Gothenburg: Department of Education and Educational Research, University of Gothenburg.

Kramer, S. (2000) 'The Social Role of Preschool Education', *Education for Human and Social Development in Brazil*. Texts from Brazil N°7 - 2000 Brazil: Ministry of Foreign Relations.

Kroll, C. K. & Rivest M. (2000) *Sharing the Stories: Lessons Learned from 5 Years of Smart Start*. Early Childhood Initiatives in North Carolina Durham: CK Kroll & Associates.

Landsdown G. (2001) *Promoting Children's Participation in Democratic Decision-Making*. UNICEF Innocenti Insight. Florence: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.

Medel-Añonuevo C., Ohsako T. & Mauch W. (2001) *Revisiting Lifelong Learning for the 21st Century*. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Education.

Ministère des Affaires étrangères. (2001) 'Feature on the Early Years', *Label France*. Issue 43, April 2001 Paris: French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Monteggia N. (ed) (2001) *Le livre des droits de l'enfant en Seine-Saint-Denis et partout sur la planète*. France: Conseil général de la Seine-Saint-Denis.

QCA (2000) *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*. London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

Quisumbing L. R. (2000) *Educating Young Children for a Peaceful World*. Keynote Address at the Second World Forum on Early Care and Education, Singapore 16-19 May 2000.

Save the Children (March 2001) *Child Friendly Version of the Revised Draft Outcome Document "A World Fit For Children"*. Unofficial document.

Swaminathan M. (1990). *The First Three Years: a Sourcebook on Early Childhood Care and Education*. Child, Family, Community Digests, N°31. Paris: UNESCO-UNICEF Co-operative Programme.

UNESCO (2000) *The Dakar Framework for Action - Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments*. adopted by the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, 26-28 April 2000. Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO (1998) *Early Childhood Development: Laying the Foundations of Learning*. Thematic portfolio, Education for All - Making It Work Series Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO (2001) *Framework for Action on Early Childhood and Values Education*. Paris: UNESCO. (also available at http://livingvalues.net/earlychildhood/framework_for_action.doc)

UNESCO (1985). *Seeds for peace: the role of preschool education in international understanding and education for peace*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO (1999) *UNESCO at the dawn of the 21st Century - 1988-1999*. Paris: UNESCO.

UN General Assembly (2000) *International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World - Report of the Secretary-General*. New York: UN document A/55/377.

UNICEF/WHO/UNESCO. (1993) *Facts for Life*, Benson: P&LA.

UNICEF (1998) *Facts for Life: Lessons from Experience*. New York: UNICEF.

UNICEF (2000) *Global Release of the State of the World's Children 2001 - Statement by the Executive Director*. 12 December 2000, New York: UNICEF Press Centre website, <http://www.unicef.org/exspeeches/00esp20.htm>.

Williams P. (2000). *Child Friendly Learning Environments for All? First thoughts* Kuwait American School.

WCEFA. (1990) *World Declaration on Education for All & Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs*, World Conference on Education for All - Meeting Basic Learning Needs, Jomtien, Thailand March 1990.