

Why India is still fighting for basic survival and nutritional needs of children

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By: **Komal Ganotra** - 31-01-2018 – Daily O

The discussion around the importance of early childhood as a stage of life has evolved significantly in the last two decades. There is a vast body of research to show that the first six years of life form the foundation for our physical, cognitive and psychosocial development. This phase decides not only our trajectory in terms of physical growth, but also contributes to how we think, learn and communicate with others, and how we relate to our surroundings.

Children in this age group thus need simultaneous access to quality health care, nutrition, stimulation and avenues for socialisation - all within an environment that enriches their life experiences and protects them from harm. These requirements are universal, and quality early childhood care, holds the potential to give every child an equal start to life.

One would not be amiss to say that our struggle in the last seven decades has been towards fulfilment of basic survival and nutritional needs of children. And in doing so, the intellectual, emotional and social development of our children has taken a backseat. This fragmented approach has helped children survive but not thrive. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme has existed since 1975 and has nearly 13.5 lakh operational anganwadi centres today. Provision of pre-school education is one of the six key services of this scheme.

However, this scheme covers only 50 per cent of the 164.5 million children (Census 2011) of India. And within this limited coverage, the scheme has mainly focused on immunisation, growth monitoring and distribution of supplementary nutrition. The pre-school education component in anganwadi centres has been largely ignored and hardly monitored. A closer look reveals that the ICDS allocations over the last five years have been on the decline and incongruent with the changing norms. The actual ICDS spend in 2012-13 was higher than allocations in 2017-18 (CRY budget trend analysis 2017-18). As on March 2017,

the ministry for women and child development reported that pre-school education component of the ICDS scheme covers only 34.1 million out of the 99.4 million (Census 2011) children aged three-six years. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy developed as late as 2013, was a positive start towards changing this trend, but sadly we are yet to implement it in full spirit due to inadequate investment.

At present there is very little awareness among the public on the importance of early stimulation and pre-school education. For most people, enrolling a child into formal schooling seems to be the first landmark in his/her life. There are strong linkages between early stimulation and the development of language and communication skills and socialisation among children, much before they begin pre-school. A child will know how to speak and to read, only once she has learnt how to recognise and name the world around her.

She must be given a conducive environment to engage in conversations appropriate to her developmental stage. Besides communication, early stimulation that engages children's senses can enable motor skills and problem solving abilities which get built on over time. Therefore, equipping parents and caregivers on early stimulation is the bedrock for receiving pre-school education. Unfortunately, parents are often unaware of important developmental milestones of children thus being unable to identify delays, which have far-reaching detrimental effects on their child. There is presently no institutional support created either for parents or for other caregivers in crèches on how to engage with children under the age of three years.

The absence of systemic engagement with children continues to the next stage, where we find that the present pre-school education imparted is of varying quality. A standardised framework for pre-school education (for 3-6 year olds) has been developed, but is yet to be rolled out across the country. Equipping pre-school educators, including anganwadi workers, needs to be implemented at the earliest. This is crucial to ensure that children learn and make meaning of their surroundings using different methods of learning (as discussed within the ECCE curriculum framework).

Early stimulation, learning and care go hand-in-hand towards enriching a child's life. While a small proportion of children in India belong to families which have the resources to provide them with

everything that they need, the rest of them grow up in precarious conditions, often without adequate care and adult supervision. These are mostly children who belong to marginalised communities, where everyday living is a struggle and government schemes and services function at sub-optimal levels. The investment of a mere Rs 200 crore towards the Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme for example, is able to cover only a third of our children in need of care services through 21,790 operational crèches (PIB release August 2016).

There are too many instances of children looking after younger siblings. Well meaning as siblings might be, they are not mature enough to fulfil all the developmental needs of younger children. Thus, universal public provisioning of care services for children under six is essential not just to protect them from harm, but also ensure adequate nutrition and developmentally appropriate learning. Further, we are yet to have a framework and mechanism for child protection at the various institutions that children interact with, be it anganwadis, pre-schools, day-care/ crèches, hospitals etc. This framework needs to be robust enough to prevent children from falling in harm's way and have strong enough redressal mechanisms if they do. Therefore, there is an urgent need to prioritise the allocation of resources towards strengthening the child protection system including the care component.

The absence of focus on these crucial areas has left out the core of what it means to be human. The system falls short of making up for it even in later stages of schooling resulting in a cumulative deficit that is visible in children's poor academic performance, the ability to complete education and subsequently also their employability. But most importantly it reflects the direction in which we are moving as a society - We must inculcate in our children the values of empathy, respect for diversity and inherent equality for all. The question one must then ask is - how much longer before we come together to demand for what rightfully belongs to children?