

Importance of the Early Years

Setting the stage for later life

Brain research shows that the early years of development from conception to age six, particularly the first three years, provide the basis for the development of competence, coping and emotional skills that affect learning, behaviour and health throughout life (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). There is growing evidence that good nutrition, nurturing and responsive care-giving in these early years, combined with high quality early childhood development programs, can improve the long term outcomes for all children's learning, behaviour, and physical and mental health (van der Gaag, 2002).

Developing through relationships with others

All young children's learning and development occurs in the context of their relationships with their caregivers (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). These early experiences form characteristic ways of relating to other people and of coping with the ebb and flow of emotions (Gerhardt, 2004). These patterns of behaviour are not just psychological tendencies, but are

actually built into the architecture and physiology of children's brains (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005).

The balance between risk and protective factors

Children's development is shaped by the balance between factors known to place development at risk and those known to have protective properties (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Children exposed to multiple risk factors become vulnerable to developmental problems of health, learning and well-being, whereas those exposed to protective factors are more likely to be resilient in the face of environmental adversities (Luthar, 2003). These determinants of child development have an impact at all levels: family, neighbourhood, community and economy (Eckersley, Dixon and Douglas, 2001). To ensure that more children develop well, we need to reduce the factors that place them at risk and promote those that are protective. Among other things, this means building more supportive communities (Scott, 2001).

Providing a comprehensive, coordinated family-centred service system

To achieve better outcomes for children and families, an integrated system of child and family services is needed that can respond to the emerging needs of children and families in local community settings (Leutz, 1999). To become more effective, service systems need to adopt a family-centred approach to working with families (Moore and Larkin, 2004), a partnership approach to working with communities (Edgar, 2001), and a strength-based approach to policy and service development (Maton, Schellenbach, Leadbeater and Solarz, 2004). Better outcomes are also achieved when services are comprehensive, inclusive and universal - that is, they cater for the needs of all children and provide a wide range of specialized and mainstream community programs and resources. The benefits of universal service systems are well known (Hertzman, 2002):

1. Children with special needs are identified and receive services as soon as possible (early identification).

2. Because all children receive services, developmental problems can be minimized or avoided (prevention).

3. Any stigma about receiving services is eliminated, because it is viewed as natural for the community to take advantage of resources.

4. Better outcomes for children can be achieved by improving the environments in which they are raised.

The challenge is to adopt an ecological perspective, collectively addressing all of the factors that impact upon child and family functioning, rather than continuing to provide separate services that each focus on a single factor or problem. To achieve a holistic, integrated system, we need to adopt an approach that is cross-sectoral, multilevel, and has strong local leadership (Rogers and Moore, 2003).