

Early Childhood Development: A Review of Integral Components*

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Abstract

A child is born with all the potentials and capabilities that are required for acquiring basic human qualities and these are nourished, cultivated and realized over a period of time. Early childhood is a very delicate period of developing and supporting this crude state of the child, which in turn supports building of his self-esteem and confidence in his abilities.

This early development of the toddler can be reinforced by providing apt environments for his free movement and associations, having his/her own experiences, developing, nurturing and fostering each dimension of his/her personality, and transferring all his individual potentials to the fullest. A free environment and mindset to act, perform and play with a sense of autonomy, is in harmony with this initial state of the child, and should be the appropriate setting for the early childhood development paradigm. Offering this environment and settings, keeps the innate potentials and capabilities of the child intact and provides the appropriate foundations for these competencies to be flourished.

The primary setting for this holistic development and progression of potentials towards perfection needs the establishment of a specific theoretical background, identification of themes and discussion of various aspects to be carried out at first.

For this vital and important stage of early childhood development, five inclinations of fit'rat are discussed, as endowed by the Allah Almighty. These are the

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basic inclinations that are required to be addressed and developed at this initial stage of life, as they lay the foundations for any further development of child's behaviors and personality, and are the required integral virtues in the upcoming stages of his life.

Keywords:

Early Childhood, Development, Integral Components, Sovereignty, Freedom, Play, Fit'rat

Introduction:

All individuals move towards independence from the dependence of infancy and childhood, and as teachers, mentors and parents it is our responsibility to guide them in this quest to become a zestful, happy and content adult (Nirmala Rao, 2019). Human child as a developing individual is a subject of scientific inquiry that requires a systematic formulation; this directs us to the problem of child development and its understanding and comprehension (Cairns, 1998). A child is a whole which is articulated with many parts, in which physical, socio-emotional and cognitive domains are some of the fundamental elements (Zaff, 2003). Human development is not related to the individuals only but also includes the environment the individual finds himself in. This includes fulfilling individual's nutritive and experiential requirements, addressing societal responsibilities and expectancies, and providing direction for the development of behaviors for his expression and interaction (Bell, 1940)

Does the child has his own individuality or it is developed and designed by the people around him? This is an important question to answer that whether a child is like a dough, to be formed and reformed, or does he himself has to discover his potentials and develop within self (Suissa, 2006). Generally, it is believed that children show less attraction towards responsibility and 'the ought', and hence, whichever action brings him relief and comfort is performed freely by him (Charlotte R. Wallinga, 1987).

Educational institutes, such as schools, have been established over a period of time to support and develop the personality and capabilities of the learners. Here, an important inquiry to be pursued is to identify whether these institutes are

fulfilling the purpose they were made for? The importance of pupil's individuality and development of his identity in an atmosphere of freedom is the essential spirit of this first phase of education. The institute of the school was established for the purpose of serving the society, but it should not merely make the individual subservient to the society. Pupil personality is sacred and every stakeholder should value this fact. The personality of the pupil should not be sacrificed on the altar of standardization; the purpose of the education is to set the soul of child free in the pursuit of truth and this cannot be done without appropriate amount of freedom (Broudy, 2017).

Thus, the major ingredients of an active educational institute are freedom and child centered quality, in which objectives are thoroughly planned and tested to attain the maximum efficiency in using the interest and time of the child (Lerikkanen, 2016). The preschool is an institution that develops the totality in the personality of the children. A wide variety of required spheres of life are systematically supervised, routines are controlled and abilities are developed there (Horowitz, 1940).

Another key aspect in the development of the child is the family, which being the microcosm of the society (Hess, 2018), has the fundamental responsibility of child nourishment and upbringing that cannot be performed by the school or any other institute. School can supplement the task of parents but it may not and should not ask to perform, what should be done by the parents (Belsky, 1984).

Much has been said and theorized in the domain of early childhood education and development. It is a fact that the most indispensable, crucial and decisive period in the growth and development of a human being is that of his early childhood. This period provides the foundation for the further progress and excellence of his personality, character, traits, behaviors, learning style and patterns (Papalia, 2007). Plenty of consideration and attention is required to identify, evaluate, analyze and develop the methods, processes and boundaries of this domain of early childhood development.

Defining the shape and circumstances of a child's ambience, understanding his basic traits and adopting appropriate methodology to preserve that to its natural condition is of critical importance for the holistic and natural growth of the child. In this article, a brief review is presented, starting from a couple of basic charac-

teristics of humans and then converging the discussion on to the basic ingredients required for this early child development, which are integral for the formation of a conducive environment and are necessary for the appropriate nurturing of the child.

Human Being, a Distinguished Creation

All the existence, present in this material and non-material world, is created by a single Creator and among these creations, a superior kind is present known as human being (Farhadiyan, 1999). How is this being superior, enriched and enhanced from other species that are also blessed with life? What features could there be that differentiate human beings from other creations? They all share the basic traits of life alike; the attribute of movement, feeding, reproduction, growth and feelings. Perceptions and understanding are also common in most of the creations (Bahishti, 2011). Then the question that arises is that what brands them apart?

Amongst all these creations, human beings have specific distinct features and qualities. Humans are created with two basic characteristics; firstly, they have the power of analysis and synthesis and secondly, they have the will and freedom of action. It is a state of being that is unique to the humankind only and differentiates human beings from other creations.

These two characteristics, that mark this difference, are strictly associated with human beings alone. We are all created with entire permissible authority, power and possibilities to choose from among the right and the wrong, and accomplish willingly with the help of our potentials. These qualities are endowed by the Allah almighty only to the humans to explore, improve, advance and achieve (Bahishti, 2011).

Allah almighty has created every other living creature with some self-guiding capabilities and specific characteristics, which are required for their growth and nourishment. They don't need to learn or being taught about any required or necessary responsibilities and tasks for their survival and existence. On the other hand, the blessed combination of wisdom and choice makes an individual sovereign, independent and self-governing, which requires some special arrangement and environment for his development and advancement.

These are a couple of the most vital, basic and important traits of human being that start developing, right from his birth and their significance is being felt since old times. These qualities play a major role in developing human learning and nourishment. Development and progression in various aspects of civilization and society is associated with the human skill of being educated, which is also strengthened by the transmission of experiences and understandings of the elders, to their younger generations.

This basic characteristic of human being is also addressed as a very first revelation by the Almighty Allah in the Holy Quran, “Who taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know”, (The Qur’an 96:5, Translated by A. A. Maududi). This also confers that the subject of this teaching and instruction is solely the human being.

Thus, human beings are created with capabilities, competencies and abilities. To expand these potentials of individuals and to make them progress individually and collectively, special conduct as well as an environment is required.

Human Being, a Responsible Creation

Allah the Almighty, upon the creation of human beings, declared him as His caliph on this earth. “Just recall the time when your Lord said to the angels, ‘I am going to appoint a vicegerent on the Earth’”, (The Qur’an 2:30, Translated by A. A. Maududi). It was the will of Allah by this appointment that His distinguished creation would depict every noble characteristic and value that exists, and should make proper use of every blessing bestowed upon it.

Secondly, this is also stated in Quran that we are from Him, Allah the Almighty, and we have to return to Him, (The Qur’an 2:156, Translated by A. A. Maududi). So, every action and energy of each human, being an informed individual and having his own will in his actions, should be directed towards Him, the Almighty. Pursuing righteous and moral standards and directing every effort towards the Creator brands the entire human race as a responsible creation.

Allah Almighty also declared, that He created man according to His nature (*fit’rat*), “Adhere to the true nature on which Allah has created human beings”, (The Qur’an 30:30, Translated by A. A. Maududi). Thus, He provided the context for the human beings to actualize this commitment of responsibility towards perfection.

Hence, by creation, a human possesses all the required capabilities of wisdom, intelligence, insight and goodness, so that he could be able to actualize these potentials, capabilities and competences and could easily carry out this obligation and responsibility with commitment and ease. This holy ideology confers that this righteous being, in this temporary life, strives for a specific objective, in which he completes different levels of perfection and prepares himself for the next eternal life. The desired pure life in this world determines the prime objective of every individual as well as the developmental approach required to attain that objective.

Human Development, In Stages

In viewpoint of human development, majority of the developmental theories consider age a critical factor in the development of a human as they view human growth as advancement from one developmental stage to another. Jean Piaget considers cognitive progression in four different stages from birth to age 12 and further (Siegler, 2016). Bruner considers cognitive representation development in three stages (Grider, 1993). According to Erikson's psychosocial development theory, people go through a sequence of eight oldness related stages since their birth to age 65 or more (Thomas, 1996).

These initial years as a child, is the most conclusive time in an individual's life, where foundations of his/her personality are laid down. (Cote J. E., 1987), discussed the formation of ego identity of individuals at this very initial stage of lifetime and its relation and effect on the remainder of his/her life cycle as formulated by Erick Erikson (Erikson, 1998).

In all of these stages, the leading developmental phase of a child is the most vital i.e. from his birth to 06 or 07 years of age. This period provides the foundation of his profound personality and lifelong learning aptitude. Learning in this age is like an impression on the stone. Every observation and action, hence development of the child, is learning in this age. Jean Piaget explained this process with the terms schemata, assimilation and accommodation (Bodner, 1986). Initially at this stage, a child possesses very little schemata. With a sound and profound development of both, schemata and process of accommodation, cognitive development matures and plays a vibrant role in providing the foundation of a life-long equilibrium and learning capability of the child (Piaget, 1952).

Early Childhood, a Critical Period

As mentioned in the last section, childhood is the leading and most vital developmental phase of an individual's life. According to (Elman, 1993), successful learning depends on starting small, and an individual's greatest learning occurs in this time of childhood. This period shapes the foundation of a child's reflective personality and lifelong achievements. Early attention and care has long lasting consequences on child's development, capability to regulate emotions and the ability to learn (Shore, 1997).

In the life span of a human being, these early years are of the greatest importance as individual competencies and personality grooming acquire their roots in this period. Psychologists say that if we compare our abilities as adults to that of a child, it would require us almost 60 years of hard work to achieve what a child can achieve in his first 3 years (Montessori, 1959).

The realm of a child is a pure one and free from any dishonesty and deception. Child sees this world with his unadulterated, unspoiled and clean nature. The sole purpose of early childhood upbringing, and hence education is to keep these traits of a child intact and to prepare him for the future life. Research shows that provision of appropriate consideration in child's care, development and education in this early childhood phase gives the opportunity to evade learning difficulties and personality problems in the future, as well as provides a solid foundation for the success in future education and helps in realizing the meaning of life in the later stages of his life (Phillips, 2000).

Thus, for the required, smooth, true and proper development of an individual's learning abilities, cognitive competencies and emotional capabilities the period of early childhood development provides the appropriate opportunity for a perfect beginning.

All the basic and elementary developmental areas of a child i.e. sensorial, phonological, physical, intellectual, moral, social etc. are developed rapidly during these early years. Right after the birth, a child starts exploring the environment and learning to communicate, which allows him to construct ideas and concepts about the surrounding world (Meadows, 2012).

Child in this era of his development is very inquisitive and curious by nature,

and tries to explore everything he observes. He tastes things, throws objects, and imitates elders to experience new things. Preschoolers build and test hypothesis and make inferences, they learn from informal experimentation and from watching and listening to others (Gopnik, 2012).

Lev Vygotsky's model of providing scaffold for the child, built its foundation on considering a child as an individual with recognition of his cultural and social background (Jacobs, 2001). Likewise, Piagetian premise of knowledge acquisition is the result of an active process of construction, and preschool learning requires fostering this construction and use of knowledge effectively (Forman, 1977). Autonomous state of a child is thus reinforced through active construction of knowledge. Recognition and preservation of the autonomous state of a child for active learning and building his\her personality's foundation turns out to be the primary assignment in these early years of the individual's life.

The inquisitive nature, multidimensional development and process of non-formal learning adheres us to maintain this state of child until some specified time of his age, to ensure holistic growth and prudent lifelong learning behavior. This state or individuality of the child requires considering him as a sovereign individual, arranging enough authority and autonomy to preserve his free movements and inquiring character.

To attain this objective, the nature, structure and dimensions of a personality, at this early stage, are needed to be examined, reviewed and understood carefully. Also, as the subject of this learning and instruction is human being, so in order to carry out this complex, delicate and challenging endeavor, basic aspects of the human personality and structure are required to be considered, i.e. the reality and actuality of human being should be recognized, endowed capabilities and competencies should be known, prime objective of the task at hand should be comprehended, and the methodology and resources required for this nurture should be identified beforehand along with any expected challenges.

So, an important notion that forms the basis of this arrangement of child development according to the milieu under study is the identification of nature and reality of human being; identification of human potentials; identification of objectives for the individual's development; identification of the resources and means for this

endeavor of grooming, mentoring and nurturing and finally the identification of the complications, challenges and difficulties of this task along with their resolution (Amini, 2005).

Early Childhood Development, What is?

As discussed earlier that early childhood is a critical phase in the development of an individual's personality and has effects on a person's overall lifelong achievements. Moreover, this fact is also supported by different contemporary developmental theories that this development occurs in stages and every stage requires its own methodology and approach.

A brief overview of the distinguished creation and characteristics of human being is also presented and it was established that sovereign and responsible nature of human beings require some special developmental criteria and standards. If these benchmarks are not met, one cannot complete his\her life journey perfectly and as per understood requirements.

Now, considering the importance of this very first developmental stage and conferring to the saying of Holy Prophet (PUBH), it was stated that, "Child is the ruler during his first seven years, next seven years he is a subordinate and an advisor in the next seven" (Farhadiyan, 2013). Accordingly, here not only the developmental stages of a child have been mentioned but also the developmental states of a child, in various periods, are also discussed.

At one other place Holy Prophet (PBUH) expressed, "Let the child play for his first seven years, next seven years guide him and in next seven years take advise from him" (Farhadiyan, 2013). In this earlier stage, phenomenon of play is very crucial and necessary for the development of a child. Play as a training and instruction methodology for the child is very basic and common since a long time.

Many contemporary theorists have shed light on this aspect, and various theories of play have been evolved over several centuries (Rubin, 1983). Jean Piaget describes play as pure assimilation (Piaget, 1951), while in Vygotsky's view, play initially demands action and later it becomes imagination (Vygotsky, 1967). Its importance can be recognized through its effect on other related phenomenon such as exploration, peer and social interaction, behavior adjustment and other personality traits (Johnson, 1987).

Similarly, in one other statement, Holy Prophet (PBUH) also implied that a child is free during first seven years of his life, (Farhadiyan, 2013). Interaction and association in the first seven years of a child's life turns out to be crucial with respect to his overall personality development and learning foundations. The concept of freedom is also important in parenting practices. As parents and educators raise children to live as humanly as possible, to be themselves and live their own life, they should have a good understanding of the concept of freedom. Freedom involves attaining laws of nature (mind) and rising above conditions (Kotaman, 2013), but staying within the permissible boundaries. Emphasizing this fact (Bahishti, 2011) narrates, "If you don't give food to your child, you are cruel to him, but this is not that big offence. As to, if you confiscate the free living environment from him, you do biggest cruelty with him. Why? Because you have put his humanity in danger."

Thus, early phase of early childhood development perceives a child as being a self-governing and sovereign individual with enough autonomy to have ample activities, exploration, observation and play. This thematic concept converges to the subject that sovereignty, freedom and play are one of the basic and integral themes that constitute early childhood development paradigm, scope, boundaries, challenges, methods and techniques which are needed to be researched and documented.

Early Childhood Development, How to?

As mentioned earlier, every individual is created upon the *fit'rat* (Nature) of the Creator. Nurturing the child to the perfection of his/her true potentials means providing him such a sovereign, free and playful environment that keeps this *fit'rat* (Nature) intact throughout, in this initial phase of his/her life. What basic practices would be required to ensure this holistic nurturing and the availability of suitable environment at this level? What basic attributes of human nature are there, that are needed to be groomed in this environment?

To address this question, first attend to these basic concepts of *tabi'at* (character), *ji'bil'lat* (Instinct) and *fit'rat* (Nature) (Muthari, Fitrat, 1990).

Generally, the term "***Tabi'at***" is used for non-living things, although sometimes it is used for living things as well, but it is more specific to non-living things.

When some characteristics of any non-living thing are needed to be explained, this term is applied. Particular and own attributes of non-living things are in fact their nature (*tabi'at*). This term is also used for living things in the dimensions which they share with non-living things because living things do possess the characteristics of non-living things but vice versa is not correct.

The term "***Ji'bil'lat***" is used mostly for animals, although it is sometimes used a little for humans too, but it is never used for non-living things or plants. Animals do have distinctive qualities and characteristics which guide them throughout their life; these attributes are not attained, but are inherent and instinctive. Moreover, animals are not consciously aware of these instinctive features within themselves. These attributes and characteristics are known as *ji'bil'lat*.

"***Fit'rat***" is the term used only for human beings and is specific to human character only. This capability is also innate and natural but human being is conscious and aware about this. In addition, this aptitude differs from instinct (*ji'bil'lat*) as it relates purely to humans, and is an abstract phenomenon.

There are some preferences in human character that are not based on self-centeredness and a general common regard and respect is acknowledged for these inclinations, i.e. the more inclination someone has towards these preferences, the more exalted he will be considered. These noble inclinations are '*tendencies of fit'rat*' and in essence they are of five types;

Tendency towards Pursuit of Reality

The first one is pursuit of reality. This term implies the quest of wisdom and discovering the universe, meaning that the human has an instinctive inclination to discover and understand the realities as they are. That is, he is eager to realize the existence and creation of 'being' according to its real essence.

Tendency towards Goodness and Virtue

One of the inclination that human has, is towards goodness and virtue. This tendency encompasses the moral aspect, which is called ethics. Normally, an individual desires many things which are beneficial and profitable for him, but there are matters where he prefers things not because they are advantageous for him/her but because they are rationally good and valued.

Tendency towards Beauty and Perfection

Humans have tendency towards beauty and perfection. This tendency can be in form of liking of exquisiteness or in the form of creating beauty and splendor by their skills, which is termed as 'Art'. Every individual has this preference and nobody is devoid of this intrinsic feeling. Even if a person wears something, he tries to ensure that it looks good on him.

Tendency towards Creativity and invention

Another inherent tendency in individuals is to invent things that don't exist. It is correct that human imagines, creates and invents things to fulfil his daily life needs but as knowledge and science are essential for the human life and society, but they themselves are also desirable, likewise creativity and imagination themselves are vital and required.

Love and Submission

The fifth inborn capability and tendency in human is to love and submit. Everybody possesses this feeling and it can have many forms. The higher degree of this affection and sentiment places focus on the beloved and leads towards submission. This tendency of love and submission towards perfection is intrinsic. If someone comes across some other more superior and perfect being, he instantaneously diverts his attention to that more superior one.

Inferring from above discussion, a child turns out to be a curious, inquisitive and enquiring individual inherently. He tends to be righteous and honest in his endeavors, actions and interactions. His artistic sense, imagination, observation, reflection, ingenuity and creativity are inborn, and his needs for emotional and spiritual aspects of his personality are intuitive. These tendencies and inclinations are essentially needed to be addressed and developed, secured and preserved, established and maintained in this phase of early childhood, so that, being a distinguished creation, every individual can carry out his responsibilities in this material world effectively and efficiently.

Conclusion

Keeping in mind the distinguished and responsible creation of a human being,

while being endowed with all the required capacities and capabilities to realize the desired perfection, development is an elective process which itself requires guidance of others and appropriate methods. This process of development and progression is gradual and in phases, in which initial stage of early childhood is the most significant and vital one.

Early childhood development contains specific context and perspective where attributes of freedom and independence, which contributes towards the sovereignty of child, are worthy enough to keep them intact and undamaged in the course of child upbringing. Allowed freedom and active participation in activities and play are the basic necessities of this period of child development.

Growth of external physical abilities as well as development of internal humanistic inclinations are desired to be addressed in a coordinated and harmonic manner, so that holistic development of a child can be actualized, which in turn will provide the context for his lifelong excellence.

Five discussed inclinations are the common elements in humans which are bestowed upon them by the Allah according to His own true nature (fit'rat) in order to direct them towards the common and ultimate goal of perfection and excellence. At this early childhood stage, these five inclinations should be kept intact by the teachers, parents and every other related personnel, as these inclinations integrally constitute and formulate the nature of the child. Difference in their development, realization and direction forms the variance and diversity in human beings, both positively and negatively.

A conducive environment, precise methodologies, appropriate activities, consistent and suitable interaction behaviors, maintaining child's individuality and autonomy are essential factors to keep these attributes and inclinations intact. Similarly, avoiding and keeping children away from any potentially harmful and hazardous conditions is also obligatory.

Finally, different means, methods, practices, approaches, techniques, and activities are needed to be identified to develop, foster and cultivate each of these five inclinations in early childhood period.

This discussion concludes to the leading and vital principals of child development i.e. upbringing the free individual (Shukuhi, 1999); Free from other's domi-

nance, free from resentment, wrath, rage and temptations; A sovereign individual with authority and control over his actions and intensions; An active being, giving him appropriate environment to show and demonstrate his/her potentials freely and spontaneously, striding towards perfection (Muthari, 2005). Proper development of integral components and inclinations in early childhood with appropriate methods and suitable environment provides the ground for such a transformation of the individuals.

ig: Integral Components of Early Childhood Development

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