

Early Childhood Education: Topical Problems

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Important issues of care and education of children from birth to 3 years are reviewed: education content, teachers and organization of education. The status of contemporary early childhood education and its often untapped resources make this topic ever more urgent. Two opposite approaches to early childhood education are discussed: the approach which is limited to care and supervision and the approach that targets on age-inappropriate stimulation of early intellectual development. The disadvantages of both approaches are analyzed in view of insufficient competence in and a lack of knowledge about early-age mental development that many teachers and parents demonstrate. Based on the Russian and foreign practice, a model of a Support Center for early-age children and their families is proposed as an optimal form of providing comprehensive support to this population group. Basic principles and directions of the Center's work as well as its staffing are described.

Keywords: early age, education goals, education content, staffing, Support Center for children at early age and their families.

It is widely recognized today that the first years of life are extremely important for a person's further development. However, current practice of children education often leaves a child's early-age potential untapped which is mostly a result of insufficient teacher and parent competence and lack of knowledge about

child mental development, education and instruction techniques.

On the one hand, many parents and educators underestimate the potential and abilities of small children. In this case, education is limited to care and baby-sitting for a small child, to ensuring his/her physical well-being; little

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attention is paid to child's individual development, his/her initiatives, curiosity, communicability, and creativity. However, research in child psychology showed that underdevelopment or deformation of these qualities at early age can hardly be corrected at later stages of human life [1; 3; 4; 6; 7].

On the other hand, a practice of early childhood instruction has become very common as a way to ensure the child's "success" in future life. To some extent, it is a result of a huge "supply" of techniques whose authors promise the parents to teach their child to read, count, write and to know a foreign language from the first months of the child's life. The methods of instruction are borrowed, as a rule, from school: classes are in a form of a school lesson where a child should follow the instructions of the adult, acquire a certain amount of information, master a set of skills prescribed by the schooling method. These techniques often lead to memorizing some formal knowledge utterly useless for the real life of a child. With this type of education, emotional, personal and social spheres of the child's life, his/her active behavior are ignored. Such techniques are very often found today at the market of educational services: they are used by parents in home schooling, by teachers in different early childhood education facilities, both private and public, in municipal pre-school centers.

Current research data show that many teaching techniques as well as education and instruction methods that are used in school are not applicable to children at early age. For instance, purely verbal explanations and instructions given by adults are often incomprehensible for children; frontal lessons do not reach their goal. The adults' goal set on formal acquisition of knowledge and skills that do not correspond to the child's interests and age-specific abilities may hinder the child's development. A small child does not feel free, active and independent, and the acquired knowledge remains alien. Practice showed that many children who experienced inadequate schooling at early age are much less motivated to continue further education. Psychological and physical over-stress resulting from inadequate form

of instruction leads to a dangerous increase of psychosomatic diseases in early and pre-school age, and to a larger number of school disadaptation cases in kindergarten and elementary school.

Many of those defects are found in some of the current education programs for early-age children that are recommended for schools by Russian Ministry of Education, and by municipal and district Departments of Education. Personality-gearred principles and education goals, though declared in the programs, are often lacking in practical guidelines. From a psychological point of view, the following aspects of education practice contradict the age-specific characteristics of small children:

- Targeting on knowledge, competences and skills to be acquired by the child based on the child's "passport" age rather than on the child's individual abilities and needs;
- Lack of flexibility in the education process planning;
- Overly structured child activity (precluding child's free choice of games, toys, activities, materials; substitution of formal play rules for a free play).

A serious drawback in the majority of current Russian education program lies in their lacking very important education aspects: organization of personality-oriented interaction between children and adults, and peer communication. The majority of education programs focus on the curricula and the methods of teaching these curricula while methods of inter-personal communication between adults and children are undervalued. Meaningful interaction between the education facility and the family is also underestimated (usually, this interaction is formal, the parents are not involved in the life of the group, often removed from the child's adaptation process).

Recently, there emerged a dangerous trend of rejecting the variability principle in education (attempts to mandate a unified standardized education program compulsory for all pre-school institutions). This trend drastically reduces the possibility of setting up adequate conditions for the full-fledged development of a child. Strict regulation of teacher's functions inevitably regulates the entire life of the chil-

dren; it makes it impossible for the teacher to approach each child individually based on the child's interests, needs and abilities.

Children at early age require specific psychological and pedagogical environment. At this age, a child fully absorbs only the things that he/she is interested in, the things that are incorporated into age-specific interaction with adults and into subject-oriented practical activity. The learning criteria here should not be the ability to reproduce, at the request of an adult, a pre-set sample, but rather an independent, initiative-demonstrating use of the acquired knowledge and skills in play, in the interaction with adults and peers, and in other various kinds of children's activity (experimenting, visual, musical, theatrical).

The problem of education content is closely related to the problem of staffing. Currently, there is a dramatic shortage of qualified early childhood teachers. It often happens that the people who are asked to work with preschoolers are school teachers, or people with no education background who do not have the required knowledge or techniques for early childhood education. At the same time, professionalism of the teacher, teacher's personality scope, educatory techniques, and the style of interaction with children determine, to a great extent, the quality of education and the further development of a child. Though the style of communication between the teacher and the children in the education process is of utmost importance, this problem is yet insufficiently studied by program developers, practicing teachers, or education department staff who oversee the quality of education.

Current teachers' certification procedure does not fully evaluate this aspect of teachers work. The certification mostly takes into account formal parameters (education, employment record, continued education courses, etc.) which may or may not reflect the knowledge of age-specific child development and professionalism in child-teacher interaction. Needless to say, the quality of teacher's work is primarily determined by how well the teacher mastered appropriate teaching technologies, including personality-oriented ways of interaction. Thus, the system of training and certification of early

childhood teachers faces a real problem that needs to be addressed and resolved.

Currently, the Russian Federation is re-vamping the system of early childhood education. This process is at different stages in different regions of the country: from tapping public requests and initial setting of objectives to practical application of approved techniques of education and child development support. Diversified forms of interaction with children and their families are becoming ever more common. To name a few: private-home and corporate day care centers, Lekoteks [special-needs preschool facilities], Child Play Support Centers, psychological, medical and social support services for families with early-age children.

However, alongside positive changes in this area there are still unresolved issues. The demand for early childhood education services has rocketed in many regions of the country. This increase is related to the changes in demographic and socio-economic situation (increased birth rate, a necessity or desire of mothers to work, better understanding how important a quality child education is, etc.). As a result, waiting lists for preschool facilities are growing longer while early age groups are oversized. At the same time, the number of "risk groups" children (by their physical and mental development, socio-economic situation, etc.) is also growing.

The issues cited above could be mitigated by a network of facilities that provide a comprehensive support to children from birth to 3 years in response to diverse requests from families of different categories. Many countries and some regions of Russia have already accumulated a positive experience in running such centers [5; 8; 9; 10].

Based on this experience, we present below a generalized model of a Support Center for children at early age and their families.

The Center should function on the basis of current scientific ideas of child development. The Center will be effective only if its work is based on personality-oriented approach to values, goals and techniques of child development and education.

The Center's education program should be family-centered: it should take into account

the needs and cultural values of each family, should find strong sides of each family and use them in the problem-solving process.

When working with a family, the Center's staff should:

- help establish attachment between a child and parents, help set up an emotionally favorable family climate and caring, considerate relationships;

- help parents better understand and promptly respond to the needs, interests, and desires of their children demonstrated by emotions, facial expressions, gestures, actions and sounds;

- help establish the environment for interesting, pleasant and instructive time together for parents and children: involve them in play and classes, teach them the skills of interaction in different kinds of joint activities (cognitive, art-related, etc.)

Programs for children should set up the conditions for child's own activity: suggesting initiatives in interaction with adults and peers, exploring the environment, selecting games and toys. The Center should have a comforting education environment: adults should support child's initiatives and encourage child's further development, create a developmental material environment with appropriate equipment, materials, games and toys.

The Center staff should approach each child individually which generates a significant variety of child development pathways. Therefore, the programs implemented in the Center should be flexible and allow the selection of activities, materials, and classes for children of different ages and individual abilities.

An effective program takes into account interests, expectations and professional potential of the staff, promotes cooperation, care and trust both inside the Center and between the staff and family members. The Center should promote emotional wellbeing of its staff, their personal and professional growth.

The Center should meet the "territorial accessibility" requirement: each child residing in a certain municipal district (township) has a right to receive in-depth specialized care in the center nearest to his/her residence.

The Center should pursue the following spheres of activity:

1. *Detection of children and families in need of early specialized help.* (The Center will send inquiries to various institutions of the region it serves – to clinics, municipal social security service – which may have the information about "risk group" children.)

2. *Inter-disciplinary comprehensive assessment of the child's general development and of specific parameters of the child's family.* The assessment of the child's general development and specific features of his/her family is done with inter-disciplinary interaction of specialists in different fields: psychologists, special education specialist, health professionals, sociologists, attorneys. The goal of the assessment is to provide aid to children, parents and teachers and to detect and correct, at an early stage, negative deviations in child's development.

3. *Counseling* parents on child treatment, education and development as well as on issues of child-parent relationships.

4. *Correctional and developmental work.* The Center staff work with clients – children and families – individually and in groups. This is done at the Center's premises, by home visits and in combination thereof. Correctional and developmental interaction with clients calls for an individual educational "route", a strategy and a program of support for the child and the family. Developmental education groups for children, parents, and joint parent-children groups are organized (short-term stay groups, game rooms, training sessions, topical clubs for parents, leisure-time groups, etc).

5. *Research and guideline development.* The Center research staff carry out research, monitoring, and sociological studies, develop correctional/developmental programs, trainings, etc. They provide informational and analytical services: they analyze the work of the Center, organize marketing efforts, develop informational materials for parents (brochures, leaflets, etc.). The research staff organize seminars, round-table discussions, research and practice conferences for the Center staff and other specialists.

6. *Education and outreach.* The Center is engaged in psychological family education,

in outreach to the population on mental and somatic child health (lectures, seminars, publications in mass media and on the Center's website). The Center sets up parents clubs for different family categories (families with many children, young, single-parent, or foster families, families with disabled children, etc.).

7. *Interaction of Center's specialists with colleagues from other agencies.* The Center cooperates with various institutions and agencies, including: the Department of Education, Social Security Services, research and education institutions, health care facilities (women's health clinics, maternity centers, clinical hospitals, clinics, orphanages), children educational facilities (day care centers, pre-school facilities, Development Centers, Lekoteks, etc.), cultural institutions (libraries, theatres, museums), different non-profit non-governmental organizations, charity foundations.

The cooperation promotes the necessary information exchange, referrals to specialized services for children and their families, joint cultural and educational events (seminars, topical exhibits, theatre shows for children). Center's specialists provide guidance and recommendations to the staff of educational, health care and other institutions on how to organize correctional and developmental support for children at early age and their parents, as well as for expectant families. Another important mission of the Center is to develop recommendations for neighborhood urban planning so that the neighborhood contains the elements necessary for early childhood development (safe developmental environment in playgrounds, playrooms in shopping malls, movie theatres, etc.).

8. *Continued education of specialists.* The Center promotes staff professional growth, expansion of their competence zone, knowledge of the latest achievements of Russian and foreign research.

The Center hosts internship and job training for specialists from educational institutions

and students in working with preschool age children, with developmentally challenged children and with families who have very young children.

The Center's structure depends on the direction of its efforts, which, in their turn, are determined by the needs of the children and their families in psychological, educational and medico-sociological assistance. The Center should promptly respond to specific social requests from the population.

The Center should gather under its umbrella such structural departments as: medical and healthcare, psychological and educational, correctional, social, as well as informational and analytical.

The Center should employ several categories of staff: administration, medical professionals, psychologists, educators, specialists in information and analysis, maintenance personnel.

The main criteria for opening a position in an institution is its necessity for a given aspect of the institution work. The Center's staffing chart should include the following specialists: pediatrician, psycho-neurologist, nurse, special education specialist, pediatric psychologist, family psychologist, social teacher, specialist in education techniques, teacher.

The model described above has a number of advantages over the traditional forms of child care and education (day care centers for small children, early-age groups in a pre-school facility). Such Center can render a wide variety of services, can take into account the needs of different family types, can provide an individual approach to the children. Developmental groups with a flexible work schedule and diverse education programs, small size groups (3 to 5 babies, 5 to 8 toddlers from 1 to 3 years), involvement of parents in the life of a group help establish the emotional comfort – a very important factor in early childhood development.

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