

Understanding and Fostering Preschooler's Characteristics for Effective Development

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Abstract: The study examined the characteristics of the preschoolers which include physical, social, emotional and intellectual. These characteristics explained the uniqueness of the preschooler. Teachers and parents utilize play activities, story telling, painting games to foster these characteristics for optimal development and maximum utilization. The conclusion was drawn that these activities provide opportunities for preschoolers to express their ideas, experiences and develop skills for effective interactions. The love stimulating activities equally give the children a sense of security and self-appreciation. It was recommended that preschoolers should be exposed to counseling activities that enhance self esteem, foster abilities and be taught ways of discussing issues by using edifying or soothing words that will foster effective social development.

Key words: Effective development, optimal development, play activities, security, self appreciation, Abraka

INTRODUCTION

The childhood stage spans between 2 and about 12 years of age. It starts at the end of infancy and terminates at puberty. Childhood stage is in three phases, namely early childhood, middle childhood and late childhood.

This study focuses attention on early childhood which runs between ages 2 and 5 and its various developmental characteristics. It should be noted that where the term preschool age is used, it is a semantic equivalent to early childhood stage. The child undergoes various forms of development during this period. They include physical development, social development, emotional development and cognitive or intellectual development.

Physical development: Physical development is important as it plays a significant role in other areas of development of the child. The growth of the child at this stage is gradual but steady and it depends to a large extent on the diet being fed it. Physical development involves specific biological changes in terms of size, weight, structure and strength of parts of the body. Although, growth rate declines between the 2nd and 4th year compared to the period of infancy there is noticeable increase in the weight of the child between the ages of 4 and 5. This increase in weight does not however, alter the identified general pattern of decelerated growth at this stage.

There are different growth rates for different parts of the body during this period. This explains some of the changes that occur between the preschool period. The child's cartilaginous skeleton metamorphoses into bones. The existing bones grow larger, stronger and harder. The

child's babyish appearance or look begins to fade away slowly during the 2nd year of its life and continues to reduce gradually. By implication as tissues grow, their layers of fat are reduced to half at the later part of the preschool age compared to their thickness when the child was 1 year old. This growth contributes to the child's adult-like look. Other changes as well, account for the gradual transition from infantile appearance to that of young boyhood or girlhood. Not only does the relative amount of fatty tissues reduce during pre-school years, their distribution also change as a result of the rapid growth of more bones and muscles. The squat appearance of infants is explained by the fact that their waists are at least as large as their hips or chests. Their girth gradually reduces due to the relative growth in size of the internal organs and increase in height and structure during pre-school years. During the years, their abdomens gradually become more like those of the few adults who have not been claimed by the obesity characteristics of the soft and bloated living (Lefrancois, 1997; Worchel and Shebilske, 1992).

Other areas of physical developmental changes during preschool age are the body proportions such as the ratio of the head to the body in terms of size. At birth, a child's head is close to about one-fourth the size of the rest of the body. At six, it is close to one-eighth the size which is a short step removed from the head to body relationship of a typical adult. At adulthood the ratio is one-tenth. There is a significant change in the ratio of the head to the body from one-fifth to one-eighth between the ages of two and six. This change takes place as a result of fat distribution which accounts for more space for the child to develop its internal organs.

Some important aspects of physical development of the preschooler are his motor activities. Children within present age grade are extremely active. They wield a good control of their bodies and enjoy every activity they engage in for its own sake. A child learns to coordinate motor activities that it had learned and practiced before and during the time it was learning to walk. There is a close relationship between development and coordination of motor activities and the child's cognitive development during infancy as described by Piaget (1977). The course of motor development during infancy is a sequential acquisition of abilities such as those connected with locomotion and grasping (Lefrancois, 1997). During this period, the child continues to progress in his motor development; his locomotion becomes more certain and his equilibrium stabilizes with the reduction of the thickness of the layers of baby fat which gives a babyish appearance to the child.

This development improves the child's ability to walk and also helps him to acquire the ability to climb stairs and stand upright completely unassisted. Eventually, he hops and skips with both feet. The child also becomes skilled in drawing and can as well aim at and pelt objects accurately (Umudhe, 1994).

According to Lefrancois (1997), the child's motor development during the preschool period is often manifested in his sequential acquisition of such perceptual motor skills as are necessary for drawing simple geometric forms. The order of difficulty of these forms is relatively invariant, beginning with the circle (which is the simplest form), the square, the triangle, the cross, the divided rectangle and finally the diamond which is the most difficult. This drawing skill is mastered at age seven or eight.

So far there have been considering the general characteristics of a child's physical developmental growth processes. The following is a rundown of the physical characteristics in the course of developmental growth:

- There is a marked development in the coordination of large muscles which is the reason the child is better in activities involving the use of whole arms or legs thus engaging in activities like jumping, running, climbing and beating of drums, etc.
- The small muscles are not fully developed at this stage. This is why the child is quite clumsy at or physically incapable of skills involving such activities as the lacing up of shoes, the buttoning of coats and the threading of needles, etc.
- The eyes of the child are not fully developed hence, they cannot see letters that are in small prints clearly. So, he or she feels more comfortable reading boldly printed materials

- Their fingers, given that they are still undergoing growth and not fully developed cannot handle the pen with dexterity though they can manage with the use of chalk
- A full set of temporary teeth (also called milk teeth) appears though there is a loss of those teeth later
- Attention span increases considerably
- The child's body is flexible and resilient; the bone that shields the brain is still soft
- The developmental sequences in the physical-motor activities may be either continuous (as in the progression from scribbling to writing) or discontinuous (as in the sorting of thoughts before arriving at complex ideas)
- The cephalocadual (head to toe) and proximodistal (centre to periphery) principle of development is evident; the large muscles of the body are more developed than the small ones
- There is a great deal of bladder and bowel control at the end of this period
- Boys are generally bigger than girls but the female child is ahead of her male counterpart in virtually all other aspects of development especially in fine motor skills. It should not be a surprise to see the male child being clumsy in his handling of small objects. It is therefore, necessary to avoid boy-girl comparisons or to ignore competition involving such skills
- Handedness is established at this stage. Although, 90% of the human population is right-handed, it is not advisable to force a left-handed child to change to right-handedness. Compelling him to do so might cause him or her to feel queer, self-guilty, nervous, upset and even embarrassed
- The texture of the child's hair takes on a coarse form at this stage

The child's social development: This is noticed in the child's behaviours connected with his interaction with others as well as his involvement in such activities as games and language learning. The pre-school child's interaction with other people is not very pronounced. But interestingly, his play activities mark a developmental shift it illustrates a progressive change from individualism to socialization.

The child's social relationship begins to extend beyond the family circle. He learns to be self-reliant and conforms to the customs of the society. According to Umudhe (1994), children of this age are inquisitive, love associative plays and feel proud in their dresses. They enjoy social intimacy with those who pamper them. They enjoy interacting with such relations as parents, siblings, uncles, aunts and peers. In their interactions with those

the preschoolers exhibit emotional outbursts in the form of quarrels or fighting. This however does not last long reconciliation is very fast.

Preschoolers have small play groups but these are not usually organized. Their play pattern reveals something of unoccupied behaviour that is playing without watching onlookers. The friendship they make is more with their permates. They take more advice from their peers.

It is worth knowing that the preschool child is highly imitative at this stage; he prefers to be like his peers and also desires his parents behave like the parents of his peers. For instance, if a peer has a particular kind of beautiful or colourful dress, the child too would want to have such. Again, if a parent of the child's peer has a car or a certain kind of car, the child would want his parents to purchase suchlike.

The child enjoys dramatic plays and usually learns a lot from them. These plays facilitate social relationships. In the later part of this period, the child becomes more and more aware of sex roles for boys and girls. He prefers to behave to type and discard roles of the opposite sex he takes pride in behaving in a way that is identical to his sex.

Emotional development: Preschoolers are characterized by fear, love, rage, jealousy and curiosity. They express their emotions freely and openly. They show outbursts of anger. They exhibit jealousy among their age-mates or peers. Fear among them is great which is why they are seen running away from animals such as cows, ducks, goats, dogs and cats, etc. They equally run away from other frightful objects and dangerous situations. Children at this stage can hardly stay in the dark or walk alone. In some cases, they are afraid of strangers (Anwana, 1989; Egbule and Egbule, 2000; Paxson and Schady, 2005; Walker *et al.*, 2005).

They can also tell facial expressions of anger, sorrow and joy. They develop a sense of humour which is manifest especially, in their playing tricks, become affectionate towards parents and take pleasure in genital manipulations (3-4 years). Also, the child develops a romantic attachment to parent of the opposite sex (3-5 years) as well as jealousy of parents of same sex. Finally, he shows a sense of responsibility or guilt in whatever he does and takes pride in his accomplishments.

Cognitive or intellectual development of the preschooler: The intellectual development at this stage is called pre-operational because the child has not yet acquired the logical abilities that characterize later stages of thoughts

involving operations. The first stage of the pre-operational period is called pre-conceptual (2-4 years) while the second stage is called intuitive (four to seven).

Piaget (1977) believes that the first stage marks the beginning of the use of symbols to dominate the development of intellectual ability. At this stage, the use of language increases. The child begins to attach new meanings to the stimuli in their environment and uses one stimulus to stand as a symbol for another. He exhibits egocentrism in his speech and actions. He lacks conservation, a lack in the understanding that amounts do not change when shapes do (Jarda and Klerke-Hamel, 1982).

The lack of completeness in development of concepts permits the child to make simple classifications necessary for identifying some of the objects of the world. The child recognizes characteristics of concept (for example, a man) but may not be able to distinguish among different individuals belonging to the same species (Emah, 1996; Hurlock, 1978; Oniyama, 2004).

Two striking features characterize the reasoning process of the child during the pre-conceptual period. They are transductive and syncretic reasoning. Transductive reasoning is a neurotically reasoning process whereby the child makes inferences on the basis of single attributes of objects. For example, A flies and B flies also therefore A and B are the same. This assertion could be true if A and B are birds. But if A is a bird and B is an aeroplane the reasoning is faulty.

The behaviour of the preschool child is marked by the use of syncretic reasoning in form of neurological reasoning characterized by classification of objects according to egocentric. Here, disparate or dissimilar objects are grouped according to the preschoolers' limited and frequently changing criteria. For example, a 2 years old child who is placed in front of a table bearing a number of objects of different kinds and colours and who is asked to group those objects that go together might proceed in the following manner. Truck goes with truck because they both are trucks and this thing goes with them because it is blue and the trucks are blue. Here is a ball and here is a marble and they go together and here is a truck that is red like the ball so it goes with it too.

The period of intuitive thinking begins at about ages 4-7. The child's thought is based on immediate comprehension rather than on logical, rational processes. Children solve their problems on the basis of insight rather than on logic. He is also characterized by egocentricity-a limited ability to classify and a marked reliance on personal perception.

The child views the world from his own perspective and believes that objects and people exist only because of himself. His thought is in parts and cannot integrate the parts into a satisfactory whole.

The pre-school child is limited in his use of grammar i.e., his grammar is far from perfect. There is a remarkably implicit grasp of language structure. In addition to knowing the words that designate and communicate thoughts, he also exhibits a very sophisticated understanding of the rule that governs the combination and use of these words. They speak in full sentences with phrases and clauses.

Children at this stage, treat objects as symbolic of real things. For example, the preschooler usually practices cooking using sand, objects and probably sitting in a chair behaving as if he is in control. Imitations and repetitions are found among the preschoolers. They become very inquisitive and make requests of whatever they see from their parents. Some behave to dolls as if to a living baby. Sometimes, you see them often practising what they see on television screens.

FOSTERING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PRE-SCHOOL CHILD

Having considered all the major characteristics of the preschool child the following suggestions are made to enable these characteristics to develop effectively.

Fostering the physical characteristics:

- The teacher should encourage the child to freely engage in various activities involving exploration, discovery and experimentation. This will enable him to exercise his large muscles. Organized activities should be minimized since they do not provide opportunity for exercising the developed large muscles
- The skill of the preschooler is still tender. His play should be monitored by the teacher to avoid violent plays that may cause injury
- The preschool child should be provided with sufficient rest period, particularly after engaging in strenuous activities. The relaxation activities include listening to tales, music and rhythmic actions, etc. The child should be encouraged to observe his siesta. This is particularly in cooperation with the child's parents
- Balanced diet is necessary at this age. This helps in preventing ill-health and contributes in no small measures to the physical development of the child. A lack of this could retard growth and cause restlessness or aggressive behaviour patterns
- Toys and other materials that can be handled with the hands should be made available to the child to keep him busy and creative
- The preschooler has not developed his intricate muscles so his concentration is low. Instructional materials meant for him must be bold especially alphabet or letterings

- The activities that require the handling of objects involving the coordination of sight and grasp should be provided in order to develop the eye organs
- Undirected and directed settings that provide opportunities for gross and motor play should be provided

Fostering the intellectual characteristics of the child:

The preschool child needs a lot of cognitive exposure. This exposure involves what they see and do which eventually leads to what they know through experience. The teacher should make available a stimulating environment by providing toys, colouring books and other learning materials. The child, at this stage is good at developing skills in language. He should be given the opportunity to speak among his peers. Activities or plays that allow the child to speak in front of an audience should be encouraged. This will make him to be more skillful in verbal expressions and help him overcome shyness in front of a crowd. Also, opportunities that involve the naming of objects and pictures should be given to the child. The sharing of information that will enable the child to develop clear and specific speech such as telephone conversation should be encouraged. The teacher should provide opportunities for the child to describe features of things around him. There should be a forum for recitation and organization of information in a logical and chronological sequence.

It is also necessary that teaching aids that are appropriate should be used to foster learning as concrete objects facilitate understanding at this stage of the cognitive development of the child.

It is imperative for parents and teachers to present learning materials sequentially so as to facilitate intellectual growth in a child of preschool age.

Activities that satisfy the child's curious nature through the utilization of his sense organs should be provided. A forum for the seeking of clarifications by way of asking questions should be created.

Opportunities should be provided by teacher for the child to enable him to express his ideas and experiences in a variety of ways.

The preschool child should be provided with materials that will get him involved with sorting, grouping, counting and classifying.

Inventiveness should be encouraged in the child through play-acting, story-telling and painting. The child should be encouraged in various types of activities that will stimulate his cognition. The stimulating activities should form part of the curriculum.

Children at this stage cannot conform with adult rules in grammar so, one should not be surprised if a preschooler fails to respond to one's effort at encouraging him to use adult forms of grammar.

To help in increasing the attention span of the child, the teacher should provide a variety of experiences that are of interest to the child. These activities are a means of elongating the child's attention.

Competence is a skill that must be developed in preschoolers. The teacher can therefore, develop his competence skills in the following ways:

- Interact with the child often and in a variety of ways
- Provide opportunities for the child to investigate and experience many things
- Permit and encourage the child to do things independently
- Urge the child to try to achieve mature and skilled types of behaviour
- Forms and limits regarding acceptable forms of behaviour should be established
- Love and warmth should be communicated in a sincere manner

Ononeme (2000) says that preschoolers should be helped to develop very rapidly in various aspects of cognition and language in order to sustain their interest in learning activities. The teacher should constantly monitor their level of achievement. To accomplish most of their tasks, the preschool teacher therefore, requires adequate training in preschool education.

Fostering the social characteristics of the preschoolers:

Preschool institutions bring children from different families together and in doing so, the children learn to live together like brothers and sisters. They learn to respect other people's rights and are taught to be law-abiding. This environment creates avenues for social interactions among children from different tribes and languages.

The teacher should provide activities or games that involve two or more participants. The types of activities introduced by the teacher should enable shy children or children that prefer to be alone to develop the skill for interaction.

Preschoolers should be allowed to carry out one form of activity or the other because of their short-span attention. The teacher should encourage organized games such as fly like an airplane and jump like a grasshopper.

Children at this stage are very quarrelsome. The teacher should however, just look on except in cases where the quarrels are turning violent.

Television programmes considered healthy by the teacher may be exposed to the children. Also, the teacher should take care in bringing up the children in their

traditional sex-roles for example, making girls of preschool age that have learnt the sex roles behave or act as traditional housewives will be dangerous since their roles in the society are fast changing. These facilities provided by the teacher promote impersonal understanding among children. This lays the bedrock for team spirit, cooperation and leadership. This also widens their chances of making friends and lays a good foundation for healthy inter-tribal and inter-ethnic relationships.

Positive communication skills should be emphasized and encouraged among preschoolers. They should be taught how to discuss issues using edifying or soothing words; the pattern of communication that will foster an effective social development.

Fostering emotional characteristics of the preschooler:

The teacher should provide a forum that will allow the child to express his feelings openly within broad limits. This activity enables the child to recognize and face emotions.

The child at this stage is involved in constant quarrels. Because of the above characteristics, teachers should ask questions that will enable the child to analyze or criticize his actions. When children are encouraged to analyze their own behaviour, they are more likely to become aware of the causes of their feelings. This awareness, in turn may help them learn to accept and control their feelings. If the anger expression is as a result of tiredness or hunger, the teacher should provide food or rest for the child. The teacher should discourage fighting. This will help the children to develop self-control in the expression of their emotions, a factor which will form the basis for responsible adult behaviour in the community.

Attention-seeking and jealousy are common with this group. The teacher should spread his attention equitably among the children. When a child is publicly praised or recognized by a teacher, this can cause a feeling of resentment in the other children. Praise should be done casually or in private to avoid jealousy or envy among children.

The place of love is fundamental in the emotional development of the child so activities that stimulate love should be promoted by parents and teachers at home and at school, respectively. This gives the child a sense of security and self-appreciation.

CONCLUSION

Preschoolers is a period of mastering of large motor muscles where babyish appearance is gradually fading away. Social interaction is not always effective because of constant emotional outburst. Cognition at this level is purely on concrete objects.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Preschoolers foremost need is security. Child care personnel who are warm, sensitive observer and is able to interpret and analyze children's emotional and intellectual experiences should be employed. They can help to minimize the threat to the child leaving home by helping his parents prepare him for the new setting
- Counselling activities such as play therapy, music therapy, games that enhance emotional, social, academic and intellectual potentials are utilized
- Environment for preschoolers should have educational play things such as puzzles, mosaic design kits and science materials. In addition, musical equipment and pets like hamsters, rabbits, fish and birds should be provided. This type of environment provides the preschoolers opportunities to interact freely with other children, adults then also explore and experiment their surroundings

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