

Re-Thinking the Role of Motherhood and Its Influence on Early Childhood Education in the Changing Socio-Economic World

Jaluo Murunga William¹ & Maina Anne¹

¹Maasai Mara University P. O Box 861 Narok.

Abstract

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) is a very crucial stage in Child Growth and Development. This fact has been emphasized by most founders of Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE), especially Johann Froebel, Heinrich Pestalozzi and John Dewey among others. For years nurturance has been equated with mothering. The role of the mother in child rearing has a direct bearing on the way the child acquires holistic development, skills for survival and coping with the future roles as adults. The mismanagement of motherhood at the ECD stage may have far reaching consequences to the future of children. This paper is set to re-think the role of motherhood in the ever-changing family structure and socio-economic world we live in. The paper will examine the importance of the ECD in human growth and development. Secondly, the paper will examine the role of a mother in child development in relation to the education and training of children. The paper will discuss on the impact of working mothers in relation to the modern trends of motherhood where career mothers have to struggle to create a balance between mothering and careers. The paper will then draw a conclusion.

Key Words: Motherhood, Socio-economic, Re-thinking, Role, Early Childhood Development

Introduction

The importance of Early Childhood Development (ECD) programs is now fully appreciated as the base of all human capital. Full potential can only be achieved from this resource if the foundation is solid and nurtured for. Proper nutrition, health care, and stimulation during the early years improve learning and other abilities. Programs that facilitate the many dimensions of a child's development have considerable long-lasting effects on the child's life. The role of the mother in child growth and development including educational achievement can't just be wished away.

Importance of Early Childhood Development and Education

Early childhood generally refers to the period from birth through age 8. A child's cognitive development during early childhood, which includes building skills such as pre-reading, language, vocabulary, and numeracy, begins from the moment a child is born.

Developmental scientists have found that the brain acquires a tremendous amount of information about language in the first year of life even before infants can speak. By the time babies utter or understand their first words, they know which particular sounds their language uses, what sounds can be combined to create words, and the tempo and rhythm of words and phrases.

There is a strong connection between the development a child undergoes early in life and the level of success that the child will experience later in life. For example, infants who are better at distinguishing the building blocks of speech at 6 months are better at other more complex language skills at 2 and 3 years of age and better at acquiring the skills for learning to read at 4 and 5 years of age. Not surprisingly, a child's knowledge of the alphabet in kindergarten is one of the most significant predictors of what that child's tenth grade reading ability will be.

When young children are provided with an environment rich in language and

literacy interactions and full of opportunities to listen to and use language constantly, they can begin to acquire the essential building blocks for learning how to read. A child who enters school without these skills runs a significant risk of starting late.

Early childhood is a crucial stage of life in terms of a child's physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. Growth of mental and physical abilities progress at an astounding rate and a very high proportion of learning take place from birth to age six. It is a time when children need high quality personal care and learning experiences.

Education begins immediately after birth and continues until the child starts to attend playgroups and kindergartens. The learning capabilities of humans continue for the rest of their lives but not at the intensity that is demonstrated in the preschool years. With this in mind, babies and toddlers need positive early learning experiences to help their intellectual, social and emotional development and this lays the foundation for later school success.

First Three Years of the Early Childhood

During the first three years, parents and especially mothers will be the main influence in the child's learning experience and education. What parents do and expose their children have a vast impact on the development of the child. Parents sometimes forget that an interested parent can have a tremendous impact on a child's education at any age. If the parents choose to participate in a Mothers and Toddlers group or child-care arrangements, including family babysitting or center-based child care, these all have the potential to provide high-quality, individualized, responsive, and stimulating experiences that will influence the child's learning experience. With this in mind, a child in a negative environment could also result in negative effects as well. This fact makes it essential that the environment that the child is placed in during these early years be as positive and intellectually stimulating as possible. Very strong relationships are imbedded in everyday routines that familiar caregivers provide. It is the primary caregiver

that a child learns to trust and looks to for security and care.

Speech development is one of the first tools that a child will demonstrate in his/her lifelong education. Wordlessly at first, infants and toddlers begin to recognize familiar objects and to formulate the laws that systematically govern their properties. With encouragement through books and interaction, toddlers soon pick up vocabulary.

It is really useful to understand how language unfolds. The first words that toddlers learn are normally the names of familiar people and objects around them. Then they learn words that stand for actions. Only then do they start to have the words that describe their world, that are about ideas. This development is usually in the second part of the second year of life. A parent or caregiver can have a vast impact on a child's speech development by the amount of time that is spent talking with and reading to a child.

Every caregiver can, in culturally appropriate ways, help infants and toddlers grow in language and literacy. Caregivers need presence, time, words, print, and intention to share language and literacy with infants and toddlers. All five qualities are important but it is intention that can turn a physical act like putting away toys or lining up at preschool into a delightful learning experience. Even a trip to the grocery store can be turned into a vocabulary lesson about colors and the names of fruits.

The Role of the Mother in Child Development

A woman's life undergoes a major change immediately a baby comes into her life. Once the child is born, all her attention is drawn to the baby. A mother plays a vital role in the life of a child. She has to create an enabling environment for her child to facilitate movement, play and creativity. A mother should know when her child can be toilet trained, be able to eat meals, play alone etc. As a child grows and begins to

crawl and walk around in a faltering manner he or she starts to pull down anything that is within his or her reach and as a mother she has to cope patiently with this phase of a child's development.

A child's behavioural development also needs to be closely observed by its mother. By watching the child's expression, actions, listening to their voices and feelings, one can easily notice the underlying purpose. A mother always holds the tendency to compare her child with other kids may be siblings from the same house or children from the neighbourhood. Her comparisons may be favourable or even unfavourable. It can prove to be counterproductive or even harmful: - She is quick and fast in learning compared to her elder siblings is a favourable comment. But an example such as she just can't do what other kids of the same age do is an unfavorable comparison and can hurt the sentiments of the child.

A mother sometimes tries to draw her own childhood experiences and use that information in bringing up their own child. A mother sometimes tends to ignore genetic factors and considers her own child rearing as significant. As a parent a mother takes the credit on her own child rearing methods if the child is doing well and deny self attribution when the child becomes a failure. A mother becomes self protective by attributing the child's behaviour to environmental forces than genetics and also prevents herself from direct action to help the child.

Mothers should try and gain knowledge about child development and child rearing when the baby is born. This will help them to interact with the child in a positive way that will help in the child's required development. As a mother, she should have a clear perception and understanding of the child's temperament and the environment necessary for the well being of the child. A mother evaluates her own parenting behaviour and uses this insight during her own child rearing time. A mother's upbringing is influenced by her culture, family and generation to which she belonged. That era will be different thinking which were valued then may not be

valued now. Expectations and demands of a child may be entirely different then and now. Mothers of different cultures have different expectations from their children. Some may expect too much or too little from their child while others may have a mediocre expectation from their child.

The environment in which a child is brought up is of primary importance in a child's life. A suitable environment supports the proper development of the child. Hence, it is necessary to have a comfortable environment for the child. Children are basically temperamental and hence their preference of environment also differs. One child may prefer an active environment while another may prefer a peaceful and calm environment. Therefore, a mother has to understand her child's mindset and create an environment which they don't find boring or distressing. When children are in their infant stage some may act difficult and react in a negative manner to its environment, but a mother has to prepare herself well to deal with such situations.

A child's academic performance depends a lot on the encouragement, praise and moral support from his family than objective indicators as report cards. Children feel they are the cause of parental anger but not for parental happiness, sadness or fear. Mothers also consider children as the cause of their hyper moods. Children overreact to their parent's temperament. Such misperceptions may damage the family life. There are women who are sensitive to the developmental task of their child and don't know how to go about it. A mother should have a thorough knowledge of the normal behaviour of a child and its responses such as:-

- Being aware of the child's goals and needs when he is in a problematic situation which she can have only by her closeness with the child.

- A mother should be sensitive, understanding and use proper child rearing methods for the child's physical mental and intellectual development.
- Her emotional intimacy with the child will help her to respond better to the cues of the child who has a problem.
- She should provide opportunities to the child which are positive in nature and inclined to his pattern of thinking, behaviour and fixation of goals.

Thus, we have observed that a mother and child's relationship is a special bond as compared to the child's relationship with others in the family and it has been accepted since ages. Though a woman whether she is working or a homemaker she should acknowledge her role in bringing up her child and making him/her a good and intelligent human being.

The Impact of Working Mothers on Child Development

In recent years, full time employment of mothers has become the norm in the United States, Africa and specifically Kenya. Recent statistics indicate that 75% of mothers work full time in the first year of their child's life. Since most jobs in Kenya only offer maternity leave for the first six to nine weeks of a child's life, the reality is that mothers are generally back to work when their child is still an infant.

Research on the Long-term Impact of Maternal Employment

The research on the long-term impact of maternal employment seems to tell a consistent story. In 1991, the National Institute of Child Health and Development initiated a comprehensive longitudinal study in ten centers across the United States to address questions about the relationships between maternal employment, child-care experiences and various outcomes in children. The leaders of this study were

among the most respected researchers in the field of developmental psychology, making the conclusions of this research particularly worthy of attention. In a recent review of their findings, they drew the following conclusions:

In terms of the behavioral adjustment of children of middle class or upper middle class mothers who worked when they were infants:

- Full-time maternal employment begun before the child was three months old was associated with significantly more behavior problems reported by caregivers at age 4½ years and by teachers at first grade;
 - Children whose mothers worked part-time before their child was one year old had fewer disruptive behavioral problems than the children of mothers who worked full-time before their child's first birthday. Increased risk for behavioral difficulties was apparent at age three, and during first grade;
 - The pathway through which those protective effects of part-time work operated was through increases in the quality of the home environment and in the mother's sensitivity.
- With regard to cognitive difference in the middle and upper middle class sample, the study found that:
- Children of mothers who worked full-time in the first year of that child's life received modestly lower child cognitive scores relative to children of mothers who do not work on all eight cognitive outcomes examined. Associations at 4½ years and first grade were roughly similar in size to those at age three;
 - Mothers who worked full-time were more likely to have symptoms of depression;

- Lower cognitive scores were not found in children of mothers who worked part-time during the first year of their child's life.

While these findings point to the need to consider the impact of full-time maternal employment on children, particularly before they are three months old, some benefits of full-time work were found in the area of the mother's ability to be sensitive to her child. Mothers who worked full-time tended to use higher-quality substitute childcare and to show higher levels of sensitivity to her child. The researchers speculate that the higher levels of maternal sensitivity seen in employed mothers might have stemmed from their having greater financial security.

A recent meta-analysis of 69 research studies spanning five decades, evaluating the impact of maternal employment, came to similar conclusions as those summarized above. Early maternal employment was found to be associated with beneficial child outcomes when families were at risk because of either financial challenges or as a result of being single-parent families. In those families, children of working mothers showed higher levels of achievement and lower levels of internalizing behaviors such as anxiety and depression. These benefits are generally explained by a compensatory hypothesis that views work in those families as providing added financial security, lower levels of family stress and enhanced learning opportunities for children who would otherwise be home with a parent who is dealing with the ongoing stress of poverty and child-rearing challenges with little external support.

Employment was associated with negative child outcomes, however, when children were from intact, middle class families that were not at risk financially. In those families, early full-time employment (relative to mothers who were not working outside the home) was associated with later risk for child behavioral difficulties. It should be noted, however, that this increased risk was not the

case when mothers worked full-time when their children were toddlers or preschoolers. It appears that working full-time when the child is an infant – a critical period in terms of attachment and emotional and cognitive growth – is more likely to be associated with subsequent difficulties.

In summary, the consensus of the empirical studies on the impact of maternal employment finds that child adjustment is tied to a number of relevant variables. In the case of single-parent families, or families otherwise facing poverty, the impact of maternal employment appears to be mostly positive. In the case of middle class or wealthy families when the mother is working full-time, particularly in the early months of a child's life, there appears to be a mildly increased risk for later behavioral problems and subtle cognitive impact relative to mothers who aren't working or are working part-time.

It is very important to note, however, that these conclusions cannot necessarily be generalized to our community. There are numerous variables that may differ. For example, in the case of African and Kenyan families, where husbands learn full-time, the possibility of a more flexible schedule may result in fathers having the potential of greater involvement in their child's life than in the case of a father who is employed full time in a traditional job. Similarly, grandparents might be more actively involved in caring for their grandchildren – a factor that is generally associated with improved childcare and improved outcomes.

Awareness About Full-Time Versus Part-Time Engagement of Mothers

Although based on relatively small levels of statistical significance, the findings of a number of well-executed studies suggest that when parents have a choice early in their child's life (particularly during the first three months), they should consider working part-time. During that

critical period, when there is an option, the father should make an effort to be present in as active a parenting role as possible. Similarly, if at all feasible, grandparents should be more actively recruited to take care of their grandchildren when they are infants and both parents are working full-time. This has an added benefit since research has found that actively-involved grandparents serve a crucial role as a protective buffer against the potential harmful influences of parental stress.

It is important to note that the potential dangers of full-time versus part-time work are only found in middle and upper middle class families. This recommendation is therefore most relevant for the segment of our community that falls in that category. The finding that full-time mothers are at times at greater risk for depression should not be taken lightly. Researchers have found that infants are clearly impacted by their mother's depression. Infants of parents with depression have been found to have difficulties with self-quieting, lower activity levels and decreased ability to attend. Relative to the children of non-depressed parents, their affect tends to be more negative, as typified by increased likelihood of expressing sadness and anger.

Equally important are the studies on the role of chronic stress in parenting. Powerless parents are more likely to:

- be hyper-vigilant with their child;
- focus on the negative, while ignoring improved behavior;
- engage in coercive and punitive parenting;
- misread neutral child cues as malevolent, and
- derogate child in efforts at power repair.

This style of parenting frequently engenders high levels of resistance and at-risk behavior in the adolescent. The implications of this

body of research are that high stress levels, and particularly depression in stressed-out parents, can have long term implications on child development. The community needs to take this into account when prioritizing the need to provide young parents with support.

Research on the Impact of Substitute Childcare for Working Mothers

Longitudinal studies of the association between child academic and behavioral functioning and type and frequency of childcare when they were younger finds that both quality and quantity of childcare is associated with a child's later behavior and achievement. For example, when the sample studied in the NICHD longitudinal study referenced earlier is evaluated a decade after leaving childcare, the researchers found that childcare quality was associated with improved cognitive and behavioral functioning at age 15, with escalating positive effects at higher levels of childcare quality. Similarly, in that study, higher quality care predicted higher cognitive academic achievement (e.g. better vocabularies) at age 4½, as well as during elementary school.

At 4½ years of age, the number of hours in childcare was associated with higher levels of externalizing behaviors such as non-compliance and aggression. The more hours spent in childcare, the greater the likelihood of difficult behavior. Similarly, more hours of non-relative care in the first 4½ years of a child's life predicted greater risk-taking and impulsivity at age 15.

In a fascinating series of studies, researchers found that childcare quality is related to a child's cortisol levels (a hormone released by the adrenal gland in response to stress). When children receive high-quality childcare, characterized by high levels of emotional support and cognitive stimulation, they are less likely to have increased cortisol levels over the course of the day. Such

children showed cortisol levels that were more similar to children who spend their day in the less stressful environment of their own homes.

Guidelines for Evaluating Quality of Childcare in the Absence of Parents

Given the enduring impact the quality of childcare has on child adjustment, it is important for parents to understand what researchers have determined are the core characteristics that define a high-quality program. The NICHD research team developed the following set of nine caregiver behaviors that can guide a parent who is observing caregivers on a typical day in their program:

If parents are trying to assess a particular program, they should pick out a child in the program who reminds them of their own child and in half-minute intervals observe whether the caregiver:

- responds to the child's vocalizations;
- reads aloud to the child;
- asks the child a question;
- praises or speaks affectionately to the child;
- teaches the child;
- directs other positive talk to the child;
- has close physical contact with the child;
- is occupied (as opposed to doing nothing), or
- is occupied actively with the child as opposed to watching television.

While all nine of these behaviors were found to be associated with quality of care, the most important was the kind of verbal interaction used by the caregiver. Those who asked questions, praised, taught and, in general, created a warm, enveloping atmosphere by interacting with the child as an individual rather than only with the group and by talking

to the child in positive ways contributed to the high level of quality that later predicted more positive cognitive and behavioral outcomes for these children a decade later. Other important caregiver characteristics include a disciplinary style that is characterized by offering children choices and gentle suggestions rather than harsh and punitive ultimatums.

In addition to the quality of caretaker-child interactions, the characteristics of the physical space of the childcare environment have also been found to be relevant. Researchers have found that having at least twenty-five square feet per child is important. Day care settings that have less space are more likely to have children who are aggressive and less intellectually stimulated. Since orderly and predictable environments are so important for children, it is not surprising that researchers have documented the importance of settings that allow children privacy and separate space for quiet and loud play.

Having a wide variety of age-appropriate play materials has been found to maximize the intellectual challenges in daycare settings. When materials are limited in quantity and variety, children have been found to fight more and to show less progress in language and social development. Another important characteristic of daycare is the balance between structure and free play. Programs that provide all structure with no time for unstructured play have been found to result in defiant, stressed and unhappy children. In contrast, programs that completely lack structure result in children with lower levels of social skills. Researchers therefore conclude that the ideal is a balance between adult-initiated group work that is educational in nature and free play that is directed by the child yet includes activities that promote exploration, thinking and social interaction.

The opportunity to play with even one other child on a regular basis is associated

with more gains in both social and cognitive areas. This finding argues for the benefit of giving young children the opportunity to have repeated play sessions with the same group of children. The staff-child ratio is an important component determining the optimal size of a childcare center. Research finds that in the care of infants, the staff-infant ratio should be one to one. The sensitivity of staff to the infant's needs often deteriorates when the ratio goes to one staff member for two or more infants. Obviously, as children get older such intensive ratios are no longer essential. In one study, when the ratio for toddlers improved from 8:1 to 6:1, teachers relied less on negative discipline and became more responsive to the toddler's needs.

Unfortunately, parents in our community are given very little in the way of evidence-based information on how to evaluate a quality program. The guidelines summarized in [*The Importance of Choosing the Correct Childcare*](#) should prove helpful in providing parents with a cognitive map of what to look for. Data from a recent survey of parents of adolescents in the Orthodox Jewish community did not find any differences in adolescent outcomes for those mothers who reported being at-home mothers as compared with mothers who held other professions. However, this was just a first glimpse of the subject.

Additional research needs to be done to determine how the various issues addressed in this paper might present differently in the Orthodox Jewish community. It is clear that we need to do a better job of guiding the next generation of parents on how to navigate the challenges of young parenthood. Perhaps husband and wife classes can include a segment on some of the guidelines discussed in this paper and rabbinic leaders can set a more mindful agenda about how to marshal the resources of our community to prioritize on the importance of provision of high-quality childcare. I can think of no priority as important as helping parents nourish their young child's developing mind and soul by

better equipping parents to manage the balance between work, parenting and marriage.

Conclusions

- Every child is special and unique in his/her own way. The future success and career of any child depends on the talent (s) of an individual child. Homes and schools are expected to provide exposure to children to bring out the talents. Once the talents have been identified, teachers and parents provide the necessary environment and time to develop the talents. Depending on the age, culture, and gender of the child, the African culture had clear roles of each parent in child rearing. Informal education only served to set ground for the formal education later in life.
- Education is fundamental to development of human resource capacities for sustainable economic growth and development. Education is a vital tool in achieving greater autonomy, empowerment of the child at whatever age.
- Studies report mothers as strong role models in their children's education. Maternal influence was found to be a leading factor on whether children stayed on in school. The link was strongest between mothers and daughters although there was still a distant link between mothers and sons (Walker, 2010). Meaning that parents are the first teachers of their children. They interact with children differently and their roles are not interchangeable

- with any other care giver
- Poor social interactions and attachment between parents and children have been associated with parent's nature of work. Work schedules, distance and job responsibilities place demand on parents that must be accommodated by the family (Bernett and Hyde, 2001). Literature on work and family conflict suggests two elements; Work Interference with the Wamily (W.I.F) and Family Interference with Work (F.I.W). The more the working hours, the less the time there is for interaction, bonding and developing attachment with the child or participating in their school activities (Hass, 1992). Although research on mother's employment is not conclusive, there is some concern about the negative effects of working mothers. There are fears that interaction may not be well established in families where either parents work long hours and over time hours. Excessive work for long hours results in job stress especially with young mothers when career goals are not met. This means, needs for career investment competing with family responsibilities. Job demands and over working results to reduced energy for parents to interact with children. Few hours at

home limits interaction time for effective participation in school work, or provide the cognitively enriching environment required for both the parents and the child's learning. This shows work responsibilities at the expense of their children's education achievement.

Today, less stimulation is given to children by mothers due to the steady rise in the number of women in the labour force. Mothers who traditionally provided the greatest attention to children are no longer available for full time child care because of work and studies. Migration in search of green pastures has characterized the labour force in Kenya. Many men and women are working outside Kenya in Botswana, Southern Sudan, U.S.A, and Saudi Arabia and in the European countries. The ever busy lives that parents are leading and the ever growing number of dual career families only serve to worsen parents involvement in their children's learning. Meaning, when children need parents for some reason, they need the help that very time, and not at the convenience of the parents. Mothers should note that engagement, time and all children need not given at the appropriate time, means denial of an opportunity in the development of the child (Ulune, 1984).

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