

Social Institutions & Childhood



R E D I S C O V E R I N G C H I L D H O O D

Booklet

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Family

Traditionally and naturally the family is the primary context where children experience the emotional and physical care and sustenance vital to their well-being. Development theories have also long endorsed that children's competencies, especially in the early years, develop within the family. Thus, being an integral part of the family system, children's disposition reflects the interactive patterns and unspoken rules governing the dynamics of the family life. Families are important mediums of the child's early learning and guide them about personal values and social behavior. Members of the family play a primal role in instilling discipline and help them learn and internalize codes of conduct that they abide by the rest of their life. However, the influence that family members have on each other is not one-sided but rather reciprocal and interactive.

Moreover, family is conceptualized as a system embedded in other systems both formal (e.g. educational and medical services etc.) and informal (e.g. a family's network of relatives, neighbors, and friends etc.). Families provide children with a critical sense of being valued and with a vital network of people which build on the child's inter and intra personal communication skills. Relationships involving love and care provide an emotional refuge for children fostering their self esteem and well being. It has been researched that parents who are emotionally supportive and show a caring attitude towards their child's needs, their children are socially more competent and have better communication skills (Lopez, 2006).

An interesting area of involvement of parental-child interaction is the area of play. Research has probed into its ramifications and it has been found out that play is an important stepping stone towards the social and emotional development of the child (Lopez, 2006). Children who play at home and whose parents understand the importance of play are likely to exhibit pro-social and independent behavior at home (Lopez, 2006).

Nurturing and warm parental-child relationships lead to positive learning outcomes (Lopez, 2006). Psychologists have pointed out that the caregiver's effort to invoke an interest in any literary activity has a formative effect on the academic performance of the child (Howatt & Nelson, 2006). It has also been pointed out that the family makes crucial contributions towards achievement from pre-school to high school by building a home environment that promotes and encourages learning (Henderson & Berla, 2006). It is this environment that is more significant to the student than income, educational level or cultural background (Henderson & Berla, 2006).

Loud reading specifically holds prime importance as parents who read aloud to their children boost their reading skills (Help Me Read, 2006). Even talking to children about books and stories read to them helps boost the child's reading achievement (Help Me Read, 2006). Research on brain development has proven the crucial importance of home and child care experiences as critical to language development (Family Literacy, 2006). It has also been researched that children who have a diverse set of experiences of talking and listening, practicing hand eye coordination activities like reading and writing gain



Prof. Anita Ghulam Ali: *"Within the family the space for thought provoking and meaningful discussion is being crowded out."*



an invaluable experience with language (Family Literacy, 2006). However a new strand of thought that has emerged is that the process of learning should be complementary; it should involve not only parents but also extended families, schools and communities for a successful outcome.

With families providing such a rich source of learning and support, why are children losing out on their childhood? In recent times, there has been a transformation in the traditional family structure.

Tracing it historically, with the onset of the Industrial Revolution, coupled with the colonization of two thirds of the planet, the socio-cultural and economic dimension of human life changed at an unprecedented pace. This change rattled the basic structure of family life - from 'extended' to 'nuclear' family.

The invasion of consumerism, onslaught of media and technology and growing economic disparity furthered the damage to the social fabric of families. In the race for more and more resources for some and survival struggle for many, children are being robbed of their childhood. Thus, technology (TV, internet, communication devices etc), poor quality education and commodities have emerged as the apparent replacement of families and are engaging children in meaningless

activities. Undoubtedly, these exposures are not 'value free' as children often acquire certain values during the process of the interaction with technology and consumerism, which are not congruent with the values usually supported by family traditions.

FAMILY AND CHILDHOOD: A CRITICAL REVIEW

- Has the role of family in the upbringing of children degenerated in the last few decades? If yes, how has it degenerated?
- What are some core values that need to be imparted by the family for the intellectual, social, moral and emotional development of children? How can these values be imparted?
- How do consumer/technology-driven modern societies offer a challenge to the social and emotional development of childhood? What role can a family play in preparing children to respond to these challenges?
- What are the opportunities for children vis-à-vis their intellectual and social development in today's consumer society and how can the family support children in making the most of these opportunities?



Social Institutions & Childhood

Schools

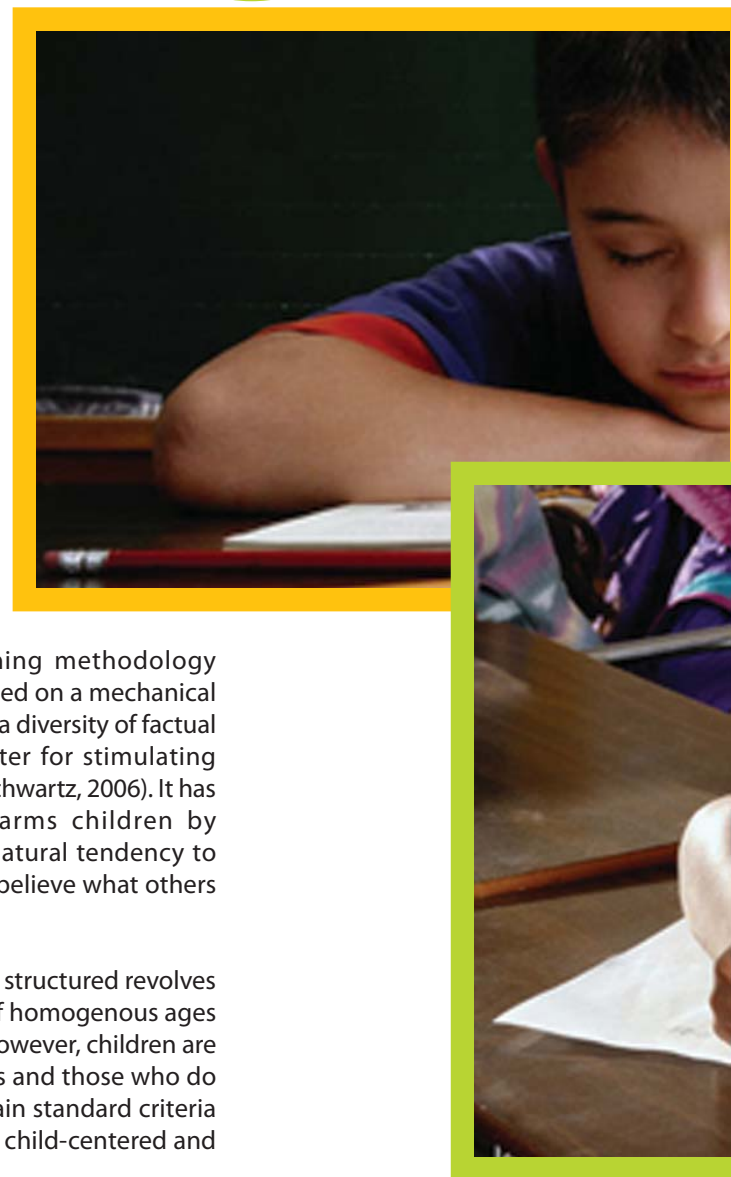
Many of us all over Pakistan are concerned about how much damage schooling is doing to our children, the burden and stress it is putting on them, and the need for radical change in the current pattern of education. Yet, very few of us have the courage or the conviction to do something about it. Ignoring our common sense, we accept the physical, psychological and spiritual tortures inflicted daily on our children - rationalizing this for the 'good of the Nation' or for their 'future career'. There are also, of course, parents' own selfish motives of not having enough time or inclination to take care of their children for which school provides the ideal babysitting solution. Many parents in Pakistan who do understand the damage being done by schooling still do nothing - their silence continues to cement our collective self-paralysis. Some (who can afford it) send their children to private schools, where the daily deprivation is better concealed and the institutional tortures imposed by mainstream schooling are delayed.

In this day and age school is becoming an institution which is based on the overriding principles of regimentation and competition. Schools have been blamed to stifle the intellectual curiosity of students since they conform to a chartered course of learning as proposed by the system (Damon & Schwartz, 2006). Teaching in a school system is conditioned to regimentation and conformity and children's creative potential is killed since their intellectual curiosity is subdued by the system proposing a definite pattern of learning (Damon & Schwartz, 2006). These

underpinnings are completely antithetical to children's physical, intellectual, moral, spiritual and emotional development; as put by Albert Einstein who claimed that it was a grave mistake to consider seeing and searching promoted by coercion and a sense of duty (Damon & Schwartz, 2006). In

In the daily routine of schools, a child's innate capacities have no opportunity to find expression. School's schedules leave little or no time for carefree exploration, play, creativity, or just a chance for children to enjoy simple pleasures of childhood. Teaching methodology adopted in schools has been based on a mechanical performance in memorization of a diversity of factual knowledge which does not cater for stimulating creativity in children (Damon & Schwartz, 2006). It has been seen that schooling harms children by conditioning out of them the natural tendency to ponder and conditions them to believe what others have said.

The system on which schools are structured revolves around the point that children of homogenous ages are assigned to the same class. However, children are of disparate developmental ages and those who do not perform according to a certain standard criteria are failed. Hence schools are not child-centered and

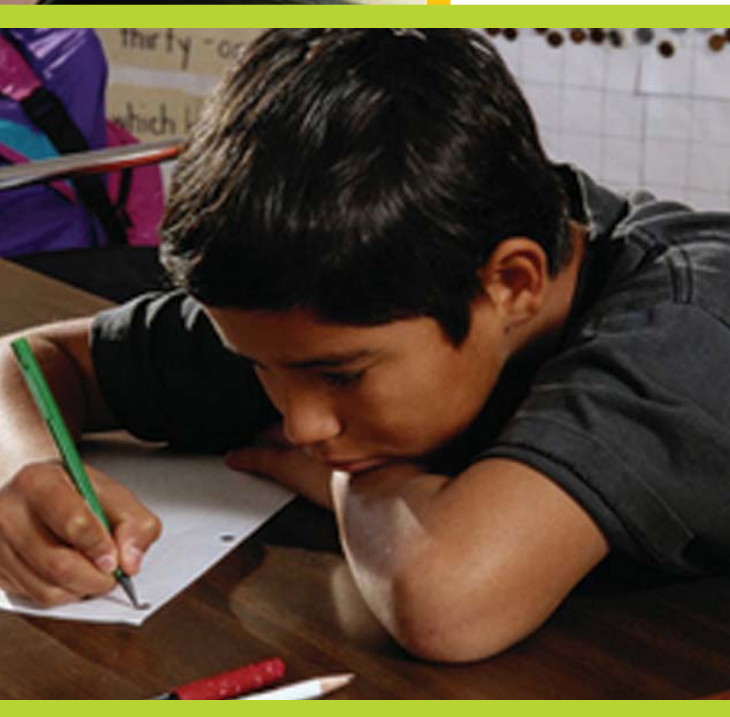


Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Moinuddin Haider:
"All children are not alike. They have individual capacities and unique abilities. Teachers must not instruct the same thing to 50 different children as they all have diverse intellectual faculties."



with the development or learning needs of the children. This hampers the self esteem of students which has a detrimental effect on their ability to learn. Children are compelled to follow the rigid system of education which is obsessed with examinations and evaluations.

The assumption that our children's academic future is more important than children's intellectual creativity has become so commonplace that it is almost impossible to convince parents and educators against regimented and monolithic schooling. Children are hurriedly sent to schools to learn the 'altered' core social values such as competition, rewards, deceit, evaluation, plagiarism and materialism which are considered absolutely necessary to acquire if one has to become successful.



Parents and communities are deemed inept and incapable of contributing in any beneficial way to their children's education as they are thought to bring obsolete and 'backward' knowledge systems, wisdom and experiences. As a result the culture of schooling paralyzes each child's sense of initiative by humiliating them to such an extent that they begin to lose faith in (and even begin to despise)

themselves, their creative energies, their cultural reference points and their innate potentials.

The singularity of schooling framework and a limited understanding of the actual learning process have devastating ramifications by their effects on children as they are pushed towards uniformity and pre-decided parameters. The challenge ahead is to deepen our insight into the existing systems of schooling/education for reclaiming the dignity and respect that our children deserve. This insight will indeed guide us towards creating a facilitative environment for our children for open, pluralistic, free and diverse learning.

SCHOOLS AND CHILDHOOD: A CRITICAL REVIEW

- Amidst global challenges, does the possibility exist of reclaiming children's dignity in the existing schooling system?
- What learning spaces and opportunities do children lose when they are forced to attend schools? Can they be re-created for children?
- How do we go about undoing the damage already done to us and our children by the present culture of schooling?
- What kind of fundamental attitudinal shifts and operational changes do we need to undergo for dismantling schooling?

Discourse on Social Institutions Childhood &

Family

Speakers recalled on their experiences of childhood and spoke of the values that existed then. The panelists recalled that there was a healthy interaction between parents and children and this bond was cemented on love and respect. It is due to the erosion of this communication between the parent and the child that has led to dysfunctional families and children to be under great emotional stress. All panelists stressed on increased parent-child interaction. Parents needed to act as a role model for their children. The family background is of extreme importance as it teaches the child love, understanding and to be free from holding any prejudices against people. Speakers also recalled that the wider community played an important role in their lives when they as children played and interacted with their neighbors.

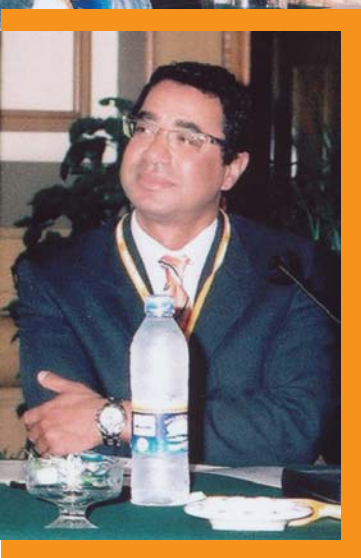
Besides just focusing on academics, play and reading also hold great significance in the lives of children. These not only strengthen the bond between the child and the caregiver but also improve the reading and language skill of the child. The speakers emphasized on parents to play a more active role in the life of the child. Some distinguished panelists also spoke of the principles of Early Childhood Development being in the purview of parents alone.

Today's changed lifestyle has been witness to both working parents which culminates in them having no time for children. There has been a transformation in the family structure from a joint family structure to a more nuclear setting. Joint family systems promote

in the resolution of conflicts and also instill the values of sharing and caring with other family members. With nuclear families and both working parents, children are left at the mercy of maids and lead dysfunctional lives. Children have hardly any interaction with parents. The panelists recalled their own rich experiences of childhood where there was a healthy interaction with parents and family members.

The important question that emerged from the discussion was that with both parents working how could one ensure that with children left at the mercy of the media, it did not have a detrimental effect on their personality? It was recognized by the panelists that children needed to be exposed to the media under proper vigilance. In this aspect, the state could also play a beneficial role by having a proper monitoring scheme under which certain channels which could potentially be a disadvantage to children would be regulated. In this regard the panelists also stressed on the fact that discipline should be taught so that the child could differentiate between right and wrong. Being able to understand that there is a cost to any undesirable deed that they commit, would impart them with the ability to be able to shield themselves from any vice that the media projects.





Schools

Speakers agreed to the common opinion that the natural curiosity and creativity of children was being destroyed by the regimented and chartered course of learning proposed by the school. Schools, as thought by the panelists, were getting more demanding and depriving children of their childhood. This was having an adverse impact on the personal, emotional and social life of children. Speakers also emphasized that children should not be indoctrinated but should be given the space to be creative and independent.

Some of the speakers also traced the roots of schooling historically through the works of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke from the behaviorist movement who claimed that everything could be learnt through experience. It was through this movement that that children could be taught anything that one wanted to teach them. This practice was put into place in schools and as a result children were forced to believe that there was one answer to everything. This stifled the creative capacity of the child and forced him/her to view the world from a very specific angle.

Speakers also noted that student and teacher interaction needs to be reflected upon. They also realized that parents should transform their own mindset and should critically reflect and keep questioning the structures that children are living in so as to change the ground realities. Speakers also claimed that there should be no hierarchical relationship between the teacher and the student and both should be involved in the learning process.

The panelists also stressed on emphasizing less on high achievement in school and focus on learning. Some panelists proposed that schooling should be a subset of an entire culture of learning. However, they realized that creating a new culture takes time. Panelists also laid emphasis on the importance of teachers and their fundamental role in the dissemination of knowledge. Speakers recognized the significance of teachers in the life of students. There was a realization that teachers had been assigned the important role of educating and nurturing the child hence they should be of the demeanor that would draw people to respect them. Teachers should primarily focus on imparting knowledge rather than just working to earn money.

Significance of Family

Children are shaped by the world around them. For children under 8 years of age, nothing has greater influence on their development than their family. Families filter children's experiences with others and provide nurture and care that strongly influence early child development. Families shape the foundations for later development. Depriving children of a loving family environment causes lasting damage to their intelligence, emotional wellbeing and even their physical stature.

Advice for Parents - What Not to Do

- Parents should not force children to take sides on arguments.
- Parents should see that children are not ignored or criticized for their feelings and thoughts.
- Parents should not be inappropriately distant and uninvolved.
- Parents should not have excessive demands on children's time, choice of friends, or behavior.
- Parents should ensure that children do not suffer any abuse be it physical or emotional.
- Parents should not have problems with children's academic work, their relationships, and their identities.

Nurturing Families

- There is enormous respect for the dignity of each family member irrespective of their age and status resulting in them doing things for each other out of respect rather than out of fear.
- Children are consistently treated with respect, and they do not fear emotional, verbal, physical, or other abuses.
- Family members can freely ask for and give attention.



- Nurturing families are not perfect; they may have bickering, misunderstanding, tension, hurt, and anger - but not all the time.
- Nurturing families have open and strong communication links. There is a strong need for discussion and discourse within the family.
- Within a nurturing family, members are concerned for the well being of each other, irrespective of their age and status in the family.
- Rules tend to be made explicit and remain consistent, but with some flexibility to adapt to individual needs and particular situations.
- Nurturing families allow for individual growth; each member is encouraged to pursue his or her own interests, and boundaries between individuals are honored.
- Parents can be counted on to provide care for their children. Children are given responsibilities appropriate to their age and are not expected to take on parental responsibilities.
- In nurturing families everyone makes mistakes; mistakes are allowed. Perfection is unattainable, unrealistic, and potentially dull and sterile.



Impact of Schooling



We Must Break Free!

- The teacher teaches and the students are taught.
- The teacher knows everything and the students know nothing.
- The teacher thinks and the students are thought about.
- The teacher talks and the students listen – meekly.
- The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined.
- The teacher chooses and enforces his/her choice, and the students comply.
- The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher.
- The teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it.
- The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his/her own professional authority, which he/she sets in opposition to the freedom of the students.
- The teacher is the subject of the learning progress, while the pupils are mere objects.

Why We Must Turn Around Schools?

What Does The Child Want?	What Does The School Offer?
Thinking	Structure
Diversity	Uniformity
Questioning	Conformity
Experimenting	Regimentation
Reflecting	Banking
Expressing	Criticism
Playing	Textbooks
Exploring	Homework
Creativity	Exams
Nurturing	Grading
Sharing	Competition
Independence	Rigidity



Source:
Excerpts from the 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', Chapter II, by Paulo Freire.

Question & Answer Session

Q: How is childhood being lost?

A: There is a joint consensus that children are denied the opportunity to be children. Children become sullen and depressed as they are not allowed to develop according to their capacities. Parents are busy in their own lives and cannot give time to children whereas schools only give importance to academics which becomes the motivating factors curtailing their growth.

Q: Is schooling a problem, solution or both?

A: Schools which are focusing only on the development of the intellect through academics is considered to be a problem. Schools should allow children to explore nature, sing, play and develop according to their own pace. Schools should be areas where the child develops his/her artistic skills and where s/he learns to appreciate nature. Nature should be given prime importance and children should be allowed to experience nature. The panelists were of the view that children who are not allowed contact with nature develop Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Nature instills a sense of peace, a connection with the world and also develops the child spiritually.

Q: What should individuals do for those children who do not learn?

A: First of all there are no children who do not learn. Moreover, low learning outcomes are never the fault of children but that of adults who try and control them. Let's explain this through an analogy. We do not like animals caged in the zoo and we are against the idea of these animals not being provided their natural environment while they are enclosed in these confined spaces. Likewise, children should be left in a free environment where they can

play and learn to discover things by themselves. The right to control the human child is a fundamentally wrong value.

Q: Even if we get out of the institutionalized mechanism of schooling, learning would still be institutionalized. How will we unlearn all the that we have studied all along?

A: We can explain this through an example. Notice how mothers shower love and care on their children and are especially mindful of those children who are weak and need attention and support. We need to reflect on this action and apply it in our lives as professionals associated with education and in schools in particular. Parents decide which school is right for their child without keeping into consideration the child's interest. Instead it should be interactive; children also being part of the learning process. We need to step out of the school boundaries and see where else learning takes place and where is it most effective. To deinstitutionalize learning one has to transform their mindset and keep questioning oneself so as to critically reflect and learn continuously.





Q: What are the three things that can be done for transforming schools?

A: Children's experiences should be displayed in schools. This infuses self-esteem and confidence in children. Secondly, children learn to read and write in schools but never to each other or for each other. If children were allowed to do so this would build their inter-personal and intra personal skills and would fortify their relationships with friends which will help them later in life. Thirdly, there is an over emphasis on the examination system. One innovative suggestion to make it a thorough learning process can be that instead of teachers being the only ones to set the examination students should also participate in devising the examination process.

Q: How can we create a situation that the child can discover oneself?

A: With the transformation in the familial structure from joint to nuclear families, parents gave little attention to children. In addition to this, schools have a regimented and a chartered course of learning which forced the child to focus a large chunk of his/her time on academics, leaving no time for other activities such as story telling, loud reading or play each of which holds primal importance in the development of the child. Parents should provide sufficient quality time to their children as it is crucial for their overall development.

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Rediscovering Childhood

Also included in this series

- Gain an understanding on what childhood is ideally meant to be and learn about the challenges of childhood in today's world.
- Learn about how media and technology are changing children's concepts of self, community, family, nature, time, and distance; and about the grave implications of media and technology on children's health.
- Examine the detrimental impacts of economic development and corporate led globalization and learn about the importance of replenishing traditional knowledge systems, social relationships, and wisdom frameworks for childhood and children.
- Review the challenges and opportunities for Early Childhood Development in Pakistan.



Introduction to the
Symposium & Conference



Media, Technology
& Childhood



Globalization,
Development & Childhood



Early Childhood
Development in Pakistan

This booklet is based on the discourse held during the
Symposium on *'Rediscovering Childhood'* & Conference on *'Early Childhood Development in Pakistan'*

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