

Education starts right at the home

The home is conducive to the development of pre-school children especially in poor communities where nurseries are a luxury. Constant interaction at home, for example, sharpens verbal skills. Suchin Preecha writes.

Every parent would like to think that his child is above average. In every home, there is bound to be a math wizard, a music prodigy or a budding artist.

But today's parent will also be the first to concede that genes alone do not produce an exceptional child, or at least a quick learner.

More and more parents and educators are taking cognizance of scientific findings that external factors enhance a child's intelligence, personality and social behaviour, and these are developed starting from the early or pre-school years.

Such findings have placed greater emphasis on basic inputs traditionally taken for granted, such as nutrition, caring, interaction between parent and child, even play. All these inputs come from the home and immediate environment.

A recent workshop sponsored by UNESCO in Bangkok brought together researchers and early childhood educators who tried to explore the features of the home and community which are conducive to the cognitive and social development of pre-school children, particularly in poor

communities, where nursery schools are considered a luxury.

At the same time, the workshop took these features into consideration in designing home and institution-based programmes for pre-school education that would make the transition from home to school as smooth as possible.

Among the main features in the home and community cited as the key factors in the development of a child's learning abilities and thus enhance his performance in formal school include: language, communication, stimulation, emotional responsiveness, exploratory play and, to a certain extent, a parental self-image and types of discipline.

Studies from developed countries describe language stimulation as the "best predictor" of school success. Actions of older people, such as talking, singing lullabies,

story-telling, reciting rhymes help to encourage a child, to talk and thus accelerate his pace of learning.

Parents whose work deprives them of opportunities for extensive verbal interaction with their children are advised to encourage grandparents, siblings, relatives and neighbourhood children to fill the gap while they are away.

Research shows that especially in poor families, greater emphasis should be placed on what is called receptive language — skills such as listening, comprehension and word recognition — rather than on language production — skills such as vocabulary, sentence, grammar and verbal expression. In other words, children generally use only language forms appropriate or necessary to their everyday experiences.

Studies have also established that one deterrent to learn

ing is the pupil's inability to drop or limit the use of his mother tongue in favour of the standard dialect language or medium of instruction. But constant interaction in the home should sharpen a child's verbal skills.

Closely related to language stimulation is emotional responsiveness. Close physical and emotional ties between mother and child provide a strong base for personality development. A child who grows up in an atmosphere of love and security is more likely to be socially mature and achievement-oriented.

The third important factor includes playthings. Strictly speaking, these are not just a source of amusement for children but instruments by which they learn to be creative. From the psychological point of view, play materials are defined as "objects available in a child's environment which can be used for play and

exploration." They must not be equated with manufactured toys.

This is where children from poor communities have an advantage over those from rich urban settings. Because of their parents' meagre resources, children from poor families make do with everyday objects such as tin cans, broom sticks or discarded boxes which they transform into toys. This is ingenuity at work.

Children in rural communities also have greater access to nature and generally find thrills in climbing trees, swimming in lakes, as compared with their urban counterparts who are often confined to the four walls of a play room.

This is not, say, though that parents should keep children away from manufactured toys and play materials. Parents who can afford it should make available to their chil-

dren games, books or even tapes of poems, riddles, songs and stories. Parents should also provide opportunities for play with peers and children of other ages — with minimal interference from adults — in order to develop traits like sharing, cooperation, empathy and a sense of belonging.

Another factor contributing to a child's learning abilities is the parent's self-image. Since ties between child and parent, particularly the mother, are established even before the child begins to recognise parents, this relationship exerts a great influence on the child. Often, a parent's self-confidence, self-esteem and competence have a bearing on his child's ability to cope, to withstand stress, accomplish tasks and surmount difficulties.

Discipline in relation to a child's learning ability refers to the extent to which a parent would allow a child to explore his surroundings. Hazards in the environment often necessitate restrictions. But eventually, parents learn to draw the line whenever children manifest negative or excessive forms of curiosity and initiative.

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