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Editorial

Establishment of hospital-based parenting education program in Karachi, Pakistan.

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Abstract

The following editorial accentuates the role of responsive caregiving and efficacious parenting strategies, specifically during the first 1000 days of a child's life and early childhood development, especially for children in low- and middle-income countries. Adequate and potent parenting interventions proficiently contribute to the early years of a child's life and lead to overall positive outcomes in the future. This editorial aims to introduce the first-ever Hospital-based Early Childhood Development Parenting Readiness Program (ECD-PREP) initiated by the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Aga Khan University, and narrates the model in use. The program strongly advocates early childhood development, responsive parenting, and caregiving by integrating nurturing care into care practices and guaranteeing each child's holistic development and future well-being.

Keywords

Early Childhood Development, Parenting Education, Healthcare Setting.

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Early childhood development is built on the foundation of effective and responsive parenting, nurturing growth, and fostering a sustainable future. Educating caregivers is crucial, as the first 1000 days shape crucial brain development with rapid neuronal connections[1]. A child's exploration and interaction form new connections, reinforced by positive experiences. Early childhood is critical for development and future skills. Neglect and poor parenting effects are challenging to offset later[2].

Millions of children from low and middle-income countries today cannot achieve their potential development.[3]. In comparison, research has shown that many interlinking environmental factors, such as immunological, physiological, epigenetic, and psychological factors, influence brain development in a child. An essential intervention provided through responsive caregiving can significantly offset the detrimental effects[4]. Hence, parental intervention is crucial, as evidence supports it. Low-income Children families in Jamaica who had received psychosocial stimulation had a 25% increase in future outcomes[5,6].

Responsive caregiving forms the foundation for early childhood development and future skills. Nurturing care activates brain systems and fostering growth[7]. Parenting programs have shown fruitful results in attenuating childhood adversity[8,9]. Parenting programs that focus on child enrichment and learning, positive parent-child interactions, and stimulation opportunities for children have the potential to impact development significantly. Practice plays and strategies to provide emotional support to children and caregiving routines can be taught through these interventions. Moreover, longitudinal follow-ups of parental programs have shown a wide range of beneficial effects and much promise. In children exposed to poverty, the implementation of these programs showed improved health biomarkers[10], intelligence quotients[11], and adult earnings[4].

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (UN) include early childhood development (ECD) with a greater focus on child well-being and the introduction of policies and strategies that support parenting education programs. Thus, it is essential to design and implement a parenting education program[12,13].

Care Model-Nurturing, Neuroscience, & factors that impact ECD

To ensure and support every child's right not just to survive but also to thrive, early childhood development should be prioritized[14]. Nurturing care is necessary for a child to develop their full potential by maximizing their growth and development. A child's growth period from conceiving to age three is critical because of 80% of brain development[15]. The nurturing care framework includes a healthy, safe, and secure environment with adequate nutrition and learning opportunities from caregivers, which is crucial for establishing a child's lifelong health and well-being[16].

In 2018, the World Health Assembly introduced the revised nurturing care framework for early child development[17]. This framework describes the essential policies and programs required to assist and support parents and other caregivers in offering nurturing care to infants. It is based on global health coverage and primarily focuses on the healthcare sector.

It is designed to provide an evidence-based roadmap to unite parents and caregivers. The framework provides evidence-based policies to improve awareness about early child development, and the investments are utilized to provide support and services for parents and caregivers.

The framework includes five strategic actions: leading and investing, focusing on families and communities, strengthening services, monitoring progress, and using data and innovating. These actions must be taken to ensure that childhood development is prioritized in every country, every locality, and every household[18].

Establishment of model for the continuum of care in an Academic Medical Center

With utmost dedication, our organization pledged its unwavering support to participate actively in this transformative movement, ensuring the fulfillment of every child's fundamental entitlement to survive and flourish. To foster children's growth and development, a robust and enduring system of parental support, from pre-birth to the critical age of eight, is crucial in establishing a solid foundation. Considering this, the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Aga Khan University Hospital (AKUH) has initiated the Early Childhood Parenting Readiness Education Program (ECPREP), which will provide an extensive array of services focused on educating parents and promoting responsive caregiving by integrating education and research seamlessly.

ECPREP is a one-of-a-kind program launched in 2020 from a university hospital platform in Pakistan, and intensive efforts are required to achieve its success. The plan is to prepare the ECD workforce as AKUH-certified parent educators, scaling up this at regional, national, and global levels (where it has campuses) and strengthening evidence-based practices on responsive caregiving. Moreover, proposes policy briefs and ideas for strengthening systems of holistic early childhood development service provision.

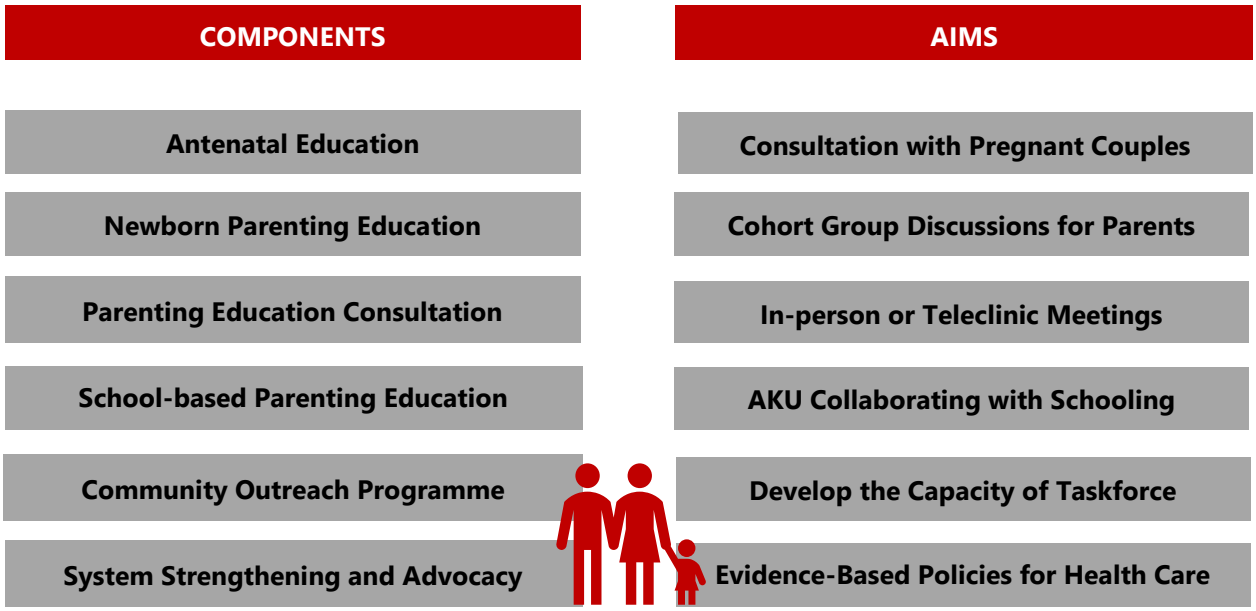

Figure 1: Components of the ECPREP program.

a. **Antenatal education:**
Parenting education starts when a couple plans to conceive a baby. The first intervention window comes at the antenatal stage, and this education aims to consult expectant couples regarding pregnancy navigation, maintaining a healthy pregnancy, talking to the baby in the womb, father's engagement, early childhood learning opportunities, stimulation, and fostering playful parenting practices.

b. **Newborn parenting education:**
Then comes the stage when the baby is delivered, traditionally known as postnatal parenting education. Newborn parenting or postnatal education, which we modified and

converted into an inclusive delivery package of parenting education with the inclusion of early childhood development and responsive parenting interactions. There are two types of sessions: a) on the bed after the delivery and then via Zoom, teaching parenting in groups online. Moreover, a series of public awareness sessions and workshops are open to all and focused on responsive caregiving, promoting healthy child development, and school readiness.

c. **Outpatient parenting education clinics:**

Parenting education consultations are available in outpatient consultation settings. Parents can schedule an appointment to seek guidance regarding various aspects of ECD and parenting education, such as developmental milestones, preparing children for school, fostering life skills development, parents' engagement with children, practicing responsive caregiving, grandparents' involvement, and promoting social learning.

d. **School-based parenting education:**

The school-based parent education program seeks to partner with various school systems to offer parenting education support through workshops, group consultations, and sessions held within schools. These sessions and workshops will cover topics such as parents' involvement in the learning process, encouraging home-based learning, balancing screen time and hands-on learning, age-appropriate parenting techniques, and guiding parents to different pathways for health and developmental needs.

e. **Community outreach and ECD:**

The community outreach program aims to build the capacity of nurses, healthcare professionals, and other relevant stakeholders through training sessions. These sessions will focus on nurturing care, responsive caregiving, Parent-Child interactions, family-centered care, and promoting health within hospitals.

f. **Strengthening systems to support ECD:**

Systems strengthening and advocacy concentrate on establishing evidence-based policies to create a health-promoting environment and improve maternal and child health outcomes. Advocacy involves developing briefs, position statements, and social media campaigns promoting responsive caregiving and ECD.

Memorandum to health care settings, workers, academic & research institutions

Solid commitment and collaborative efforts are required to carry out the strategic action and to achieve the vision outlined in the framework. This framework depends on a multisectoral approach that includes parents and caregivers, local and national governments, private sectors, educational institutions, and service providers to ensure that every child has the opportunity to survive and thrive. The healthcare sector is an essential pillar that should bridge support gaps for young children, complementing educational enhancements for pre-primary education and addressing critical needs in their development. To ensure the safety of families, communities, and young children against neglect, violence, and abuse, work together with social protection and child protection services. Advocate for the rights of every child, particularly giving attention to the most vulnerable, ensuring no child is overlooked. Generate valuable evidence on the benefits of nurturing care, adapt proven interventions, and incorporate nurturing care into professional practices for health care professionals involved in early child development.

Academic and research wings can contribute by generating new evidence of nurturing care benefits, adapting proven interventions and programs, and integrating nurturing care for professionals working with young children and their families. ECD requires a multisectoral approach for its access and implementation, and healthcare settings can play a pivotal role in scaling these initiatives.

Conflicts of Interest

The Author(s) declare no conflicts of interest.

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