

# Parents and the needs of children

Health professionals are sometimes asked to give talks to groups of parents, especially mothers, in the community in which they work. They may be requested, for example, to give a talk on the needs of children and how they can best be met.

Parents who come to these talks will often have their own very definite ideas about the upbringing of children, so health professionals may find that it makes for a good introduction to ask mothers first to describe, for example, what are the most important things for parents to do when bringing up their children, what are the mistakes most often made and how best these can be avoided. There are great differences between societies in the way children are brought up. If a health professional encourages parents to express their own views first, she will be in a better position later on in the session to relate her own views to those of her audience. All the same, children's needs are similar throughout the world. What follows is information about these needs.

## 15.1 Basic physical care

Children first need enough nutritious food and drink to enable them to grow. They need to be kept warm in cold climates and protected from the sun in hot climates.

## 15.2 Secure sense of attachment

Attachment is a bond of affection between the infant and the main caregiver(s). The bond is reciprocal between the child and the caregiver. It has arisen to meet the child's need for safety, security and protection. It is a process in which both caregiver (usually the mother) and babies play an active part. Attachment, occurring similarly in all societies in both high-income and LAMI countries, unfolds in the following way.

- Although it is not easy to observe, babies can in fact tell the difference between their own mother and other people from the first few days of life.
- At the same time, the main caregiver develops a strong sense of affection or love for the baby.
- By 6 months of age, the infant is smiling in response to familiar faces. At this point the baby develops a more active and easily observed interest in special people. It is at this stage of development that the baby is distressed if separated from its main caregiver. The intensity of attachment tends to be strongest towards people who spend time with the child and give affection – usually the mother and other members of the family. Fears also begin to develop now, first to unexpected sounds or sights and later to specific situations such as darkness.

- At about 8 months, babies show fear of strangers and may panic if someone approaches them too quickly (stranger anxiety). This usually disappears in a few months.
- Between the ages of 1 and 2 years, a specific pattern of attachment develops with the people who are looking after the child, i.e. the primary attachment figure(s). In some societies the child's attachment is strongly focused on the mother; in others where childcare is more widely shared, attachment develops between a number of caregivers and the child. The pattern will depend on the early experiences of the child. Various patterns have been described.
  - A warm, supportive and interactive relationship between the infant and the mother (or the mother and the other people who are mainly responsible for bringing up the child) leads to the development of a secure attachment. The child is distressed when separated from its caregiver, but because he learns to trust that the caregiver will return, he is gradually able to tolerate longer and longer periods of separation. This is a universal finding.
  - Overprotective parents, frequent separations, frequent change of home environment and carers, an unusually sensitive temperament in the baby and an insecure environment can combine to form a poor or insecure attachment. This may result in later emotional difficulties as well as feeding problems and failure to thrive (see Section 6.1). Lack of stimulation and failure to provide adequate care and nutrition (see Section 14.6 on neglect) can also lead to developmental problems.

### 15.3 Love and affection

This is a most important ingredient in the upbringing of children. It seems so simple – of course children need love. But there are complications. Should love be unconditional? Should parents love their children no matter what they do? Yes, to a degree. A parent can and indeed should disapprove of behaviour that is wrong and perhaps punish the child if necessary, but this should not stop parents continuing to love their children. But love does not necessarily come just because it is ordered, so one needs to know the conditions that result in parents being able to provide their children with enduring love. What are these conditions?

- Parents who love each other, support each other emotionally and do not repeatedly argue with each other are more likely to be able to love their children unconditionally.
- Parents who are not stressed by financial hardship, fears of unemployment or other stresses are more likely to be able to give their children the love they need.
- Parents who are physically and mentally well are more likely to be able to love their children.

From love comes the mutual attachment described above, with the child being unhappy when separated from the parent and the parent having the same feeling about the child. Gradually, the child feels safe even when the parent is not present. Much learning about feelings occurs within this attachment relationship.

#### Safety and security

Elsewhere in this manual we describe the way many children experience physical, sexual and emotional abuse as well as neglect. Most such abuse arises within the home, inflicted by parents or other family members, so a child's safety and security largely depend on what happens in this environment. Safety from uncontrolled anger of parents, safety from sexual feelings that other family members may have for young children, and safety from the humiliation to which some parents expose their children by teasing or belittling are indicators of how children need to be kept safe. Of course there are also risks outside

the home, including physical risks from road traffic, agricultural machinery, poisons and medicines that should be kept well away from young children.

## 15.4 Age-appropriate stimulation

A child's learning begins in the very first few weeks of life and communication between mothers and children begins well before the first signs of the understanding of spoken language appear. Play is the way young children learn. If they have the opportunity to play with their parents as well as their friends, this will improve their capacity to learn. The following are useful ways in which parents can provide stimulation for their children.

- Talk to your child about what you are doing.
- Ask him to tell you what he is doing.
- Ask him what, for example, a cup or a spoon is used for.
- Help him to learn what words like 'up' and 'down', 'over' and 'under', 'above' and 'below' mean.
- Help him to make comparisons, such as 'Where is the biggest tree?'
- Playing games with children and talking at the same time is a good way to encourage language development. Going shopping provides many opportunities for this too.
- Try to make watching television an active experience by making sure the child talks about what he sees.
- Telling stories to the child is more likely to help language development if he is engaged in adding to the story or (if it is a familiar story) recounting what is going to happen next.
- Reading to children and, later, listening to children reading and then talking to them about what has been read is an excellent way to improve their vocabulary.
- Watching television may be a rather passive form of entertainment, but if parents talk to children about programmes they have both watched, this again stimulates learning.

We have listed many other tips in Section 4.2.3 when discussing the needs of children with language delay. However, all children need this type of stimulation.

## 15.5 Guidance and control

One of the basic traditional roles of being a parent is to teach children the difference between right and wrong. Children mainly learn this difference from watching their parents and from their friends rather than from their parents telling them what to do and what not to do.

### 15.5.1 Principles about discipline

- Children learn more from reward for good behaviour than from punishment for bad behaviour.
- The best rewards are signs of affection when the child has behaved well. A word of praise and a hug are often enough.
- Material rewards such as sweets or money should be small and given very soon after the good behaviour has occurred.
- When children are behaving badly, the best course is often to divert their attention to something they like to do.
- If they behave badly, children will often feel upset and less likely to repeat the behaviour if their parents simply tell them their behaviour is not acceptable.
- It is important for fathers and mothers to be consistent in their discipline. If one parent is more lax than the other parent, the child may try to play one parent off against the

other. Of course, mothers and fathers will behave differently to some degree. This will help children learn that family life and relationships are complicated.

- In some societies, it is common for parents to beat their children. In other countries it is illegal for parents to punish their children by hitting them. In general, hitting children for bad behaviour teaches them that people who are stronger and bigger can always get their own way. This is a negative lesson for children to learn. Parents who hit their children so hard that they leave marks on the skin may be accused of abuse. Children who are beaten are more likely to become anxious and aggressive later on in life.

## 15.6 Encouraging independence

Children need to become more responsible for their lives as they grow older. To encourage children to develop a level of independence that is appropriate for their age, parents should think of:

- consulting their children about decisions that will affect them – it is important too that parents take into account what their child says when they make a decision;
- encouraging them to do more and more for themselves – helping with the cooking, making their own bed, cleaning up after themselves – these are all tasks children should be expected to do, boys as much as girls.

Children should not, however, be expected to shoulder more responsibility than they can comfortably manage. It is not appropriate for children to be asked to decide, for example, whether their parents should separate or stay together, although if parents do separate, it is right that children should be asked where they would like to live, how often they would like to visit the other parent, etc.

## 15.7 Respecting the child as a person

Parents, teachers and friends are important influences on how a child's personality develops. Parents need to recognise and value the different personalities and talents their children have and not try to mould them into people they cannot be. A child who is easily upset may need to be more protected against stresses than one who is more robust. A child who is easily distracted may need a less stimulating environment than one who can concentrate well. The mother of a daughter who is shy may need to make greater efforts to help her child make friends than the mother of a very sociable girl.

## 15.8 Building self-esteem and confidence

Children are exposed to competition from an early age. This happens especially when they go to school. They will hear remarks such as 'My dad's better than your dad because he makes more money', 'My team's better than your team because we won the championship' or 'I'm better than you are because I got 84% on the test'.

This emphasis on competition is very strong in many societies. The health professional will sometimes find it hard or impossible to make parents feel differently. Parents should note the following.

- Success is less important than taking part and enjoying the experience.
- Children need to have targets that match ambition to ability. It is not sensible to put up unrealistic targets.

- Avoid humiliating children. For example, sarcastic comments are hurtful if a child does not do well. Use encouragement instead. Praise the child in the areas in which he does well, rather than shaming him where he does less well.
- Never link your love to achievement. Children need love however they achieve.
- When children are disappointed because they have not done well, let them express their feelings. But remind them how well they have done in the past.
- Give children the opportunity to meet challenges, for example by giving them tasks such as family games and household chores in which you know they can do well if they try.
- Do not hide your own failures. Let your children know of the times you have not done well. Children need to know their parents are not perfect.
- Set an example by treating competition in the way you would wish your children to do. Encourage enjoyment more than achievement.

Now you may like to prepare a talk you could give yourself to a group of parents in your own society on the needs of children. You could perhaps use the same headings, but with messages that are more in tune with the ideas in your own community.