

Family's Social Climate and Support System in Rural Haryana

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ABSTRACT The child learns the best lesson of citizenship between the kiss of the mother and the care of the father. The way in which the parents communicate with the child, the choice of words, the underlying ideas and values, the extent to which they give meaning to their experiences have a lasting impact in shaping the personality of the child. Lack of stimulation and an unresponsive environment can hamper children's overall development. In the present study, quality of home environment describes environmental stimulation provided by mothers to their children. In day to day life, mothers perform certain activities consciously or unconsciously which may become an effective stimulative channel for the development of children. The family's social climate and support system was judged by observing the home environment of the preschoolers using Mohite's Home Environment Inventory. The results revealed that in case of language development, physical environment, variety in stimulation and discipline of children, mothers exposed their children to low level of stimulation. Moderate level stimulation was provided for encouraging social maturity among children. The poorest aspects were the physical environment and variety in stimulation, as almost none of the mothers provided high quality stimulation for these two aspects whereas in other aspects, high level stimulation was provided though by few mothers. From the above findings, it can be summarized that maternal contribution was of low quality as poor stimulation was provided by mothers.

INTRODUCTION

Preschool years of life are the golden years for laying of a good foundation for a lifelong system of thoughts and feelings about self and others. The relationship between home environment and cognitive development has been and continues to be a controversial issue. The information is necessary for understanding the construct of cognitive development, and the degree to which environmental process is regulated. Considering the importance of cognitive development and impact of home environment, intervention programs have been prepared and planned by different researchers (Wasik and Seefeldt 2000). Patterns of cognitive development were associated with intensive early educational care and responsive stimulating care at home enhanced through intervention (Burchinal et al. 1997). The intervention on cognitive training facilitated the intelligence and creative thinking scores of children and this facilitation was maximum in the group which received training (Hejmadi and Mohanty 1992).

If one were to simply take all aspects of the social and physical environment that influence cognitive development and incorporate them into an intervention program, the result would be a scattershot, chaotic effort. The family's social climate and support system should be the first target of intervention for providing a mother with information about normal child development, or about how to stimulate the child ap-

pears to be of little use unless the mother's own life circumstances are addressed first. The parent's educational level also places limits on the effective use of play materials and adequate linguistic stimulation through verbal interactions and reading. Encouraging the mother or father to complete high school, though difficult to achieve, should benefit both parents and children in the long run. Finally, efforts to strengthen family functioning may help (Simpson and Roehlkepartain 2003).

Even though most parents want to encourage their children's development, many do not know when to provide the proper experiences. This aspect of the parent as a teacher includes knowledge of normal child development, and the ability to 'read' children's readiness for given experiences. Parent education, it follows, should emphasize interpreting child behavior as it relates to the timing of experiences, especially for parents who may feel that infants and toddlers cannot benefit from early stimulation. Parents also need to know 'what to' provide in the way of stimulation and 'how to' do so. As Jemni (1963), the writer of '*Brahmaputra*' says, "The child learns the best lesson of citizenship between the kiss of the mother and cares of the father." The way in which the parents communicate with the child, the choice of words, the underlying ideas and values, the extent to which they give meaning to their experiences have a lasting impact in shaping the personality of the child. Showing parents how to have fun with

their babies could foster a warm, responsive relationship. This might involve, at earlier ages, give and take, social games, whereas later in the development, mutual activities such as cooking, story-telling, and play could be the vehicles for parental involvement. Changes in the physical environment of the home may be more difficult to achieve because the family's economic resources ultimately influence many factors of it. Over stimulation of the child could be prevented through judicious use of the television, and by fostering a predictable, regular routine in the home. Visual exploration could be enhanced with mirror games and homemade stabiles and mobiles. Finally, establishing toy and book lending library would help increase the variety and appropriateness of stimulation in the home (Ravner and Knitzer 2002).

Merely describing aspects of the environment that can be manipulated to modify cognitive development, though, begs the policy issue of where intervention should be focused. Ideally, one would want a prevention strategy that produces powerful effects with a minimum of money and effort. Given existing data, an age and organism specificity, though, different intervention curricula may have to be designed for different stages of development and for various types of children. Furthermore, we can infer from the emergent principle that intervention at several points simultaneously may produce synergistic effects (that is, more dramatic changes than modifications of individual components). For example, Bronfenbrenner (1979), in reviewing the effects of early educational intervention programs, concluded that Center based programs with cognitive curricula produced greater gains than play oriented programs; parent intervention yielded benefits that extended to younger siblings, and to the attitudes and feelings of the parents; and families who are under the most economic and psychological stress are the ones least likely to become involved in an intervention program.

This suggests that a combination of approaches may be most effective. These might include quality daycare, parent education programs to loan education materials, and expanded social services that move the child and family into a broader social support network. Home-based programs, in contrast, often attempt to change a broader network of influences on development (Andrews et al. 1982). Therefore, the

present investigation was planned with the following objectives-

- To assess the level of stimulation provided by mothers to preschool children.
- To assess the home environment of preschool children.

METHODOLOGY

Locale of Study

Hisar district from Haryana State was considered purposively due to easy accessibility.

Selection of Villages

A list of villages of Block I (Hisar I) and Block II (Hisar II) of Hisar district was procured from Block Development Office. Following a simple random selection, a survey of 10 villages, 5 from each block, was done. Further, to meet the sample size, two villages namely Ladwa and Kharar from Hisar I and two villages namely Rawalwas and Neolikalan from Hisar II were selected purposively as they were found to be matching up to the maximum in their base line profile. The villages Ladwa and Rawalwas from Block I and II respectively served as experimental group villages and Kharar and Neolikalan from Block I and II respectively served as control group villages.

Selection of Subjects

a) Children as Subjects: From each of the two experimental group villages, 30 children i.e. equal number of boys and girls (15 each) were selected thus making a sample size of total 60 children in experimental group. Similar procedure was followed for the selection of 60 children of control group. Therefore a total of 120 children between 3-5 years served as subjects.

b) Mothers as Subjects: The mothers of selected children from experimental group as well as control group (n=120) served as sample for the present investigation. The existing status of stimulation provided by mothers was judged during pretesting in control as well as experimental group. The observation inventory of Mohite Home Environment Inventory (MHEI) was used to assess the level of stimulation children receive in their homes from mothers and thereby identify children, who are likely to face,

or are already facing, learning difficulties. The test has 5 sub-scales containing a total of 24 items.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A stimulating environment deals with the way children manipulate the environment to exercise and develop their abilities. The environment has a powerful effect on the development of child's competence. An environment responsive to the child's skills and stimulation, timed slightly ahead of the child's development level will accelerate a child's progress. Lack of stimulation and an unresponsive environment can hamper children's overall development. In the present study, quality of home environment describes environmental stimulation provided by mothers to their children. In day to day life, mothers perform certain activities consciously or unconsciously which may become an effective stimulative channel for the development of children. Under the ongoing section, an attempt has been made to provide a broad view of maternal stimulation being provided to the children at home. Table 1 depicts the maternal stimulation provided to the children in various aspects of MHEI, that is, language stimulation, physical environment, encouragement of social maturity, variety stimulation, maternal attitude and disciplining.

Language Stimulation

Table 1 portrays the level of stimulation provided by mothers at home. It was noticed that low language stimulation was provided by 56.6 per cent of control group and 70 per cent of experimental group mothers. In control group, equal percentage of mothers (21.7%) provided moderate and high level stimulation to their children. In experimental group, more mothers (16.7%) provided moderate language stimulation than high stimulation (13.3%). The results are in tune with those of Sandhu (2001) who found that higher percentage of mothers provided low level of language stimulation followed by mothers who provided moderate stimulation, concluding that mothers exposed children to low level of stimulation for language development. The related reason for low level of language stimulation may be that parents feel that the child need not be bothered much at such a young and tender age. They also feel that from their interaction, responsiveness and involvement, the children are not going to be benefited much, as mothers assume that when the child will mature chronologically, he/she will automatically acquire the knowledge. The results gain contention from the study undertaken by Bakeman and Brown (1980) who expressed that parental responsiveness or awareness to the child's needs and to the actions initiated by child has also

Table 1: Maternal stimulation level in control and experimental group

S. No.	Variables	Stimulation level	Groups			
			Control (n=60)		Experimental (n=60)	
			No.	%	No.	%
1.	Language Stimulation	Low	34	56.6	42	70.0
		Moderate	13	21.7	10	16.7
		High	13	21.7	8	13.3
2.	Physical Environment	Low	45	75.0	43	71.6
		Moderate	15	25.0	17	28.4
		High	0	0	0	0
3.	Encouragement of Social Maturity	Low	11	18.3	8	13.3
		Moderate	37	61.7	47	78.4
		High	12	20.0	5	8.3
4.	Variety in Stimulation	Low	36	60.0	30	50.0
		Moderate	24	40.0	28	46.6
		High	0	0	2	3.4
5.	Maternal Attitude and Disciplining	Low	30	50.0	29	48.3
		Moderate	18	30.0	21	35.0
		High	12	20.0	10	16.7
Overall Stimulation Level						
		Very poor	6	10.0	4	6.7
		Moderate	53	90.0	55	93.3
		High	1	1.7	1	1.7

been found to be associated with child's language development. This responsiveness was not seen among the respondents which led to low level of language stimulation.

Physical Environment

Low or poor physical environment was noticed in majority of the control (75.0%) as well as experimental homes (71.6%). Rest of the mothers provided moderate level physical environment in both the study groups. High level physical environment was evident in none of the families in either of the groups. The reason observed was that with the breakup of joint family system, every nuclear household demands a separate space including kitchen and sitting room etc. But the area of construction has not increased in majority of the families. So portions are constructed within the built area keeping the consideration of lighting and ventilation at bay. Thus, there remains no proper space structure in the house.

Encouragement of Social Maturity

Moderate level encouragement for social maturity was provided by majority of control (61.7%) as well as experimental (78.4%) group mothers. In control group, this was followed by (20%) mothers who provided high level encouragement, further followed by 18.3 per cent mothers who provided low level encouragement. But in experimental group, reverse trend was observed with 13.3 per cent mothers providing low level encouragement followed by 8.3 per cent mothers who provided high level encouragement. The root of moderate level of social maturity be that, due to lack of resources and more manual labor, when mothers go out to work, either the older sibling looks after the younger ones or they have to manage at their own thus getting early social maturity.

Variety in Stimulation

Poor variety in stimulation was provided by mothers as indicated in Table 1. Sixty percent of the control and half of the experimental group mothers provided low level of variety in stimulation followed by moderate level in control (40%) and experimental group (46.6%). None of the control group mothers provided high level

variety in stimulation and only 3.4 per cent experimental group mothers provided high level variety in stimulation. Evans and Short (1991) reported that best of all possible educational environments allows the child to develop powers with which he has been endowed by nature. So, the parents are required to let the child achieve 'functional independence' as called by 'Montessori' even with the help of child's immediate environment. Low cost, indigenous play material which are always available in child's surroundings are to be activated which is not done in rural areas. To provide variety in stimulation, anything and everything can be pressed into service, according to the purpose of the movement and skills of children. Hands cannot be inactive nor imagination infertile, as long as children are free to make and do. The reason for low level variety in stimulation might be lack of opportunities and resources in rural areas. Moreover, mothers do not realize the importance of quality of interaction and responsiveness with the child, as indicated in a study by Pooja (1997). Even the activities not requiring any resources are also not being cared of by mothers as they are not aware of role and importance of such activities for child's overall development. The child's development may be stimulative during the daily activity pattern of the mother also. She just needs to provide assistance to the child to develop.

Maternal Attitude and Discipline

Maternal attitude and discipline was also found to be of low level in 50 per cent of control and 48.3 per cent of experimental group mothers. This was followed by 30 and 35 per cent mothers who provided moderate level of discipline in control and experimental group, respectively. High level of discipline was provided by only 20 per cent (control) and 16.7 per cent (experimental) mothers. The evident reason for low level maternal attitude and discipline might be lack of rules and restrictions and set routine in rural areas. Rural mothers do not adopt reward and punishment as a way of disciplining children.

Maternal Stimulation

The score of mothers for maternal stimulation was derived by the summation of their score

on each of the five sub items of MHEI. It is evident from Table 1 that almost all the mothers provided very poor home environment for stimulation in both the settings. Within this category, 90 per cent respondents from control and 93.3 per cent from experimental group had scores in the range of 6-10. One respondent in each of the settings hailed from family providing moderate home environment stimulation. As far as the level of stimulation provided at home in both the study groups is concerned, the trend was same in control and experimental group which indicates that no difference existed in stimulation given by mothers in both the study groups. So, it can be concluded that almost similar kind of stimulation was provided in control as well as experimental groups and the stimulation was of low level.

Thus, it can be summarized that in case of language development, physical environment, variety in stimulation and discipline of children, mothers exposed their children to low level of stimulation. Moderate level stimulation was provided for encouraging social maturity among children. The poorest aspects were the physical environment and variety in stimulation, as almost none of the mothers provided high quality stimulation for these two aspects whereas in other aspects, high level stimulation was provided though by few mothers. From the above findings, it can be summarized that maternal contribution was of low quality as poor stimulation was provided by mothers. The study conducted by Pooja (1997) supported the above results. She observed that low stimulation was provided by the mothers for intellectual development of children. The associated reason for the low quality of cognitive stimulation may be that most of the mothers are engrossed in household chores. They do not realize the importance of quality of interaction and responsiveness with the child. The important thing is not quantity but quality. Mialaret (1978) emphasizing the importance of environment for child's development suggested that all the situations of child's everyday life should be used as material for training the young child in finding out new ideas and using it in routine life. Another reason for low quality stimulation might be lack of education, awareness and low literacy prevailing in rural areas. The results of the present study are in consonance with findings of Kuntala (1996) who reported that when the parents are edu-

cated, they are aware of needs of children and try to fulfill their needs besides providing a conducive and enriched environment for their optimum development.

The family members in a joint system promote language development through the interaction and communication with the child from very beginning even if the mother is busy with household chores. The results are in line with those of Hooda (1998) who assessed the language development of 4-5 years old rural children and reported that children who belonged to larger families scored higher on language development aspects than the children from small families. The evident reason being that in the absence of mothers, in a joint family, there are other family members to interact with the child. There are marked differences in the behaviour and emotional states of children who have had secure attachment relationships and those who have not. Securely attached children tend to have higher self-esteem, are more positive, less aggressive, and generally excel with regards to their social and emotional health, more able to develop and maintain healthy and happy relationships as an adult. Children who have not had secure attachment relationships tend to suffer from depression, show anti-social behaviour and are generally more emotionally and behaviorally troubled. Without the relevant support, such as counseling, and encouragement, subsequent relationships may result in problems especially in adult relationships. Adamakos et al. (1986) too suggested that there is increasing interest in the role of social support in determining risk for child abuse and neglect. The present study assessed the relationship between maternal social support and two areas: stress in the mother-child relationship and level of stimulation provided in the home. Maternal social support was assessed prenatally and at a two-year follow-up, while the latter variables were compiled at the two-year follow-up. The data were obtained from 38 urban, low SES (80% on public assistance) mothers and their 2-year-old children. Maternal social support correlated positively with level of stimulation and negatively with level of mother-child stress, and was the best predictor of both, relative to any SES, mother or child variables. In addition, high stress, low support mothers provided significantly less stimulation to their children. The theoretical implications for social support as a

mediator variable as well as its implications for early identification and prevention efforts in abuse and neglect are to be taken care of.

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