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UNIT SEVEN

Growth and Development of the Pre-School Child

7.1 Introduction

Before learning activities can be planned for children, their pattern of growth and development must be examined. Generally, while considering the development of the child, it is possible to consider several areas – development according to age levels, physical growth, development of learning, cognitive development, emotional development, social development and the development of personality.

Growth refers primarily to physical development, the stabilization of the skeleton, increase in height and weight, changes in the internal organs and so on. Growth and the development of behaviours are related to each other. The body must develop to make possible the changes in behaviour that are characteristic of different ages; physical disturbances may also cause disturbances in the development of behaviour. Maturation is the attainment of a particular level of functional ability which makes possible the achievement of a certain pattern of behaviour.

Knowledge of the growth, development and maturation of the pre-school child, will contribute to the effective teaching and understanding of the child.

Even though the pre-school child may not experience the variety of behaviours associated with sexual maturation, and other hormonal changes, it is becoming increasingly clear that the observed differences are caused not only by heredity. Environmental conditions have much influence on these processes too. The fact that puberty occurs earlier now than it did some years back may not necessarily be associated to changes in heredity, but may be due essentially to the generally improved living conditions. Diet in particular has changed and has played an important part in this development. Encouraging the pre-school child to eat a balanced diet could be helpful.

The more favourable the conditions are to the pre-school child, the earlier maturity is reached.

It would have been a simple matter for teachers if all children begin their schooling at exactly the same level of maturation. Perhaps, there may not be the need to make the curriculum relevant to the individual needs of each child, if they are operating at the same maturational level. It can also be assumed that our societies sometimes set school-age for children when it is assumed that the children have reached certain developmental level. In Nigeria, children generally enter school nowadays at the age of five or six years. However, there is increasing recognition of the importance of early childhood education. Teachers are also becoming aware of the relationship between maturation and learning capacity. It is generally recognized that it may be fruitless to attempt to force a child to acquire a skill before the child has reached the appropriate stage of development. It becomes essential for the pre-school teacher to be aware of the maturational and developmental capacities of the pre-school child during his learning experience. The pre-school teacher may, through observations and guided activities, recognize "reading readiness" and "writing readiness" in the individual child. A child diagnosed to be a slow developer may be encouraged to increase his skills in school-readiness.

The development of the pre-school child may be classified into:

1. Newborn (Neonate) 0-4 weeks
2. Early Infancy 4 weeks-1 year
3. Infancy: 1-6 years

Others classifications may recognize the toddler (1¼ years-2½ years) and the pre-school (2½-5 years).

7.2. The Neonate

The first four weeks after birth is characterized by unstable adjustment to the environment. The adaptive behaviour of the child is mostly concerned with the mouth, screaming is still the dominant means of vocal expression, socially the child seems to be more awake. The newborn, most of the time, spends much of his time sleeping. The sleep may be regular or irregular. The baby has limited command of his hands which he tends to keep clenched when not in use. His emotional expression is often intense, but lacks variety. Some reflexes may be observed in the neonate.

7.3. Early Infancy

The process of socialization is usually observed to begin at about four months. At about the same time, there is increased ability to co-ordinate, the child sometimes makes new sounds and the child may be able to distinguish the voice and face of his or her mother. At about seven months, the child is able to sit. The child can hold an object and can move it towards the mouth for examination. Beginnings of word formations can be noticed at about seven months. By the tenth month, the child has a greater control of the peripheral parts of his body, the stronger legs are now able to support the body. At about the twelfth month, great interest is shown in language and the child repeats actions and does things that arouse amusement and attention.

7.4 Infancy

The child generally begins to walk without support between one and one-and-a-half years. At about one-and-a-half years a range of behaviour could be observed that may not be accounted for, with uniform validity. By age two years, the child can move about freely without any support up and down the stairs. Language would have improved considerably and the child may have a vocabulary of about two-hundred words or more. The child's games are still restricted to himself but the child is conscious of other members of the family. The age two-and-a-half years is sometimes called the "rebellious age", because the child appears to be domineering, and wants to try out all possible courses of action. The child seems to be bound up by his or her wishes; he or she wants to try all the alternatives at one and the same time, but lacks the ability to choose. The ages three and four years in many respects appear to be decisive for growth and maturation. The three-year old can run, the child is characterized by a deeper understanding of words, likes to make new friends and is willing to surrender something he or she has to gain a person's appreciation. The four-year-old has developed ability to perform isolated movements. Other motor behaviours include ability to balance on one leg much longer than before, ability to button clothes and put on shoes. The language of a four-year-old is active and "how" and "why" questions are at their most insistent. The explanations do not seem to be of prime interest to him. At five years of age, the child has self-confidence combined with trust in others. The child becomes calmer and does not rush into new adventures. At six years of age, the child develops what may be described as "tool consciousness"; he or she embarks on many experiments involving the hands.

The girls at this age have also been observed to dress their dolls over and over again. The language of the child is sometimes aggressive and boastful while stammering often appears at this age.

The six-year-old child feels once again, the difficulties of making up his or her mind, a difficulty experienced earlier at age two-and-a-half, as the child rapidly changes from one alternative to another. The seven-year-old child is calmer with fewer conflicts when compared to the six-year-old. The seven-year-old has better ability to concentrate and his or her attention span has improved.

Following the growth pattern of the pre-school child will help the teacher understand the child better.

The growth process of children should be considered when planning learning experiences for children.