

## Early childhood care and education in Curaçao<sup>1</sup>

### Soins et education de la petite enfance a Curaçao

### El cuidado en la infancia y educacion en Curasao

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#### **Abstract**

*Children's health situation is generally good and stable. However, child abuse and negligence are growing problems. For many parents their children's education has not the priority it should have. Specialists say parents lack educational skills and motivation. Another part of the story, however, is that stabilising and compensating relationships, which were available in the traditional extended family, broke down. The end of the extended family meant the end of shared responsibility for child care and education within the family. At present Curacao has about 120 creches and play groups. The creches are rather safe places, but not all are places for developmental enrichment. Play groups generally lack qualified staff, good materials and attention for children. There is a growing need for good quality child care centres.*

#### **Resume**

*De faron generale, la sante des enfants est bonne et stable. Toutefois, l'abus et la negligence de l'enfant sont des problemes grandissants. Pour beaucoup de parents, l'education de leurs enfants n'a pas la priorite qu'elle devrait avoir. L'avis des specialistes est que les parents manquent d'aptitudes a l'education ainsi que de motivation. Une autre facette de l'histoire vient de ce que des relations equilibrees et compensatoires comme il en existait du temps de la famille elargie, ont disparu. Et la fin de la famille elargie signifie donc la fin des responsabilites partagees concernant les soins et l'education de l'enfant a l'interieur de la famille. Au jour d'aujourd'hui, Curagao compte 120 creches et jardins d'enfants. Les creches sont en principe des lieux surs, mais toutes n'offrent pas un enrichissement du developpement.*

*Les jardins d'enfants, quant d eux, manquent generalement de personnel qualifie, de bon materiel et d'attention pour les enfants. Il y a un besoin grandissant de centres offrants une prise en charge de qualite.*

1. The study reported in this article was financed by the Bernard van Leer Foundation. The foundation wanted to know whether there is a need for further financial involvement in ecce programmes in the Netherlands Antilles.

### **Resumen**

*La situación de salubridad de los niños es por lo general buena y estable. No obstante, el abuso y negligencia de los niños son problemas crecientes. Muchos padres no dan prioridad a la educación de sus hijos. Los especialistas comentan que a los padres les falta habilidad y motivación para educar a los niños. De otra parte, también se nota que relaciones estabilizadoras y compensatorias; que eran disponibles en las tradicionales familias extendidas ya se rompieron. El fin de la responsabilidad compartida por el cuidado y educación de los niños dentro de la familia.*

*Al momento hay 120 guarderías y grupos de juegos para niños. Las guarderías son lugares bien seguros, pero no todos son lugares adecuados para el enriquecimiento del desarrollo de los niños. Por lo general les falta personal capacitado en los grupos de juegos. También carecen de materiales adecuados y no tienen suficiente atención para los niños. Se puede decir que hay una necesidad creciente de centros de cuidado de niños con alta calidad.*

Curaçao, a 444 km<sup>2</sup> island off the Venezuelan coast has a population of approximately 145.000 persons. Fourteen thousand are 0-4 year old children.

This article is about the quality of the care for and education of these children. The information presented comes from documents and lengthy interviews that we had with 22 persons representing organisations involved in early childhood care and education.

### **General Information**

Together with four other small islands in the Caribbean Curaçao forms the Netherlands Antilles, all former colonies of the Netherlands. Unemployment is currently going down due to a continuing emigration to the Netherlands (presently about 80,000 Antilleans live there) and to a small increase in the number of work places mainly in the tourist industry. Yet 13% of the male and 20% of the female working force are unemployed. An increasing number of women are looking for work. Their work participation is 33% (CBS, 1991). This percentage is comparable to the participation in other countries in the region (ECLAC, 1991).

The fertility rate is lower than in surrounding countries. In 1990 for every thousand inhabitants 22 babies were born. About 40% of children born live in single parent (mother) families (Coffie, undated; Van Dijke & Terpstra, 1987). Many of these families have problems in covering the costs of a decent way of life. Of the employed 10% have a monthly income lower than 500 Antillean guilders, 35% gets less than 1000, and 70% less than 2000 guilders. One guilder is about US\$ 0.60. The costs of living are comparable to those in Western Europe. In 1992 12.700 heads of family who were unemployed received financial support from the government. A family with three children receives 400 guilders monthly, including the rent for the house and money for water and electricity. This is not enough to feed and cloth all family members (Kamara Sindikal & SSK, 1990; Sendar, 1987). An important further welfare measure to combat poverty is free medical care for 60.000 (41%) Curaçaoans.

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### **Health, food and children at risk**

Child health care is controlled by government funded private organisations and also by government organisations. They do a good job. All children follow a vaccination programme. The children's health situation is generally good and stable, although the head of the biggest baby clinic told us that the food situation of some children is problematic. They don't eat regularly and their menu is unbalanced, lacking proteins, fruit and vegetables. A variety of welfare organisations distribute powder milk for mothers with young children who cannot afford to buy milk.

Physicians, psychologists, social workers and organisations for family support and child protection all reported an increase in incidences of child abuse. The organisation for family guidance reported for 1991 contacts with 366 children (Guia pa Famia, 1992). With 47% of the children the contacts had to do with withdrawal from parental custody. In the other cases either families had volunteered for guidance or they had agreed with guidance instigated by the organisation. Twenty nine percent of the children were between 0 and 6 years. Table 1 gives an overview of reasons for contacts.

**Table 1: Reasons for contacts with the family guidance bureau**

maltreatment	57	16%
sexual abuse	11	3%
incest	13	4%
neglect	229	63%
parent drug abuse	57	16%

The report clarifies that 'neglect' in many cases refers to an extreme lack of even basic care (food and hygiene) for young children who are left on their own at home for many hours or even whole days. The percentages for sexual abuse and incest are being evaluated as relatively low, but there might be more incidences which are reported under other categories, for reasons of shame and guilt.

People whom we talked with gave several explanations for the increase in neglect and abuse. They pointed out that parents become increasingly materialistic. They think that getting rich and spending money on luxury things is more important than undertaking developmentally stimulating activities with their children. This may hold for a particular group of parents with well paid jobs. Many parents, particularly single parents do not earn enough with one job to provide food and clothes for their children. They have to take up a second job. It goes without saying that these parents have little time to spend with their children. Traditionally these children would be looked after by their grandmother, an aunt or a neighbour, but this traditional distribution

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and redistribution of educational responsibilities no longer exists on a broad scale. Emigration and social housing projects led to the disintegration of traditional family and neighbourhood structures. New, social houses are small and even lack space outside. There is hardly enough space for their own children, let alone for the children of other people.

A reasonably well documented problem is teenage pregnancy. About 15% of all new born children have a mother not older than 18 years. These children run a double risk. They have very inexperienced parents who still need to learn a lot to find their own way in life, and they have often a single parent, who almost by definition will have problems in supporting herself and the child financially.

### **ECCE programmes**

The government financially supports a variety of ECCE provisions. They finance baby clinics, which are being visited regularly by all parents with 0 to 4 year old children. Children's health status is being checked and they get the usual vaccinations. The public library has reading promotion projects for children. It organises, for instance, read aloud session in the library and informs young parents about ways in which they can stimulate their children's language development through reading. Children's library membership is free. Several state funded organisations, for instance, an educational support organisation, a mental health clinic and all baby clinics invest quite some effort in early preventive developmental screening. Strangely enough this screening rarely has a follow up in activities to resolve children's problems.

Nine creches are supported financially by the government, but other creches and all play groups (some 100) completely depend on parents' financial contributions. The monthly fees may vary between 40 and 200 Antillean guilders per child.

We give a short description of a subsidised creche, which was presented to us as one of the best.

The creche opens its doors at 7.00 am and is open until 6.15 pm. Sixty percent of the children come from the neighbourhood in which the creche is. The creche has separate baby and toddler groups. Shortly after their arrival children change into creche's clothes. At noon they have a hot meal and before they return home in the afternoon they have bread and milk. During our visit most babies were sleeping and some played together in a room with a few cubes while the two teachers were busy combing two children's hair. One toddler group played inside. *Ten children had one doll. The teacher sat down on the ground and sang a song.* Two children tried to sing with her, the others ran around. The other group, 15 children, was outside. Three children rode on tricycles all others including two teachers sat down on the ground. They said that they were waiting for the schoolbus to take them on a tour. They waited at least 30 minutes.

Neither in the rooms nor outside were places where children could play with sand or water. The activity plan stated that the toddlers should daily have two *30 minute sessions for free play with play materials and once a week the teacher should tell a story.* The rest of the time is being spend on care activities, sleeping, washing, eating and other not clearly described activities. The groups had very few play materials and we found no children's books. The creche was very clean with good sanitary provisions. The rooms were dull with a lack of toys, pictures and paintings. The director described the creches' primary task as looking after and taking care of children whose parents cannot look after them.

Teachers make home visits. An important topic is a child's problematic behaviour (e.g. aggressiveness towards other children, bed wetting). Parents don't participate in the creche's programme.

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A study on the material provisions in play groups results in a sad picture. Play groups lack play materials, and space to play. Some have no child adapted sanitary provisions (Maduro-De Palm, 1986). Other important information concerns the teachers' qualification. Nursery teachers do not like working in creches and play groups, because they would earn only half of what they would earn when working in a nursery school. Many teachers have not even completed the school course for lower vocational education, which is the lowest type of secondary education. They lack a specific training.

For a few years a new privately funded organisation, called SIFMA, has tried to improve the teachers' qualification by offering in-service training. They offer a two year training programme leading to an officially recognised diploma. This same organisation recently also took the initiative to draw up and find support for minimum regulations for early childhood centres.

### **The future**

The government has no written policy concerning young children. At this level no clear notions exist about the necessary quality of ECCE programmes. One exception concerns the medical care. Several organisations recently formed a working group aimed at formulating a policy which, when ready, will be offered to the government. The last draft version was full of proposals for new provisions and the improvement of existing provisions. The chance that the government will adopt such a policy is small. The government has enormous financial problems. Departments responsible for child and youth affairs already announced that in coming years no ecce organisation will receive money for new initiatives or for the extension of existing services. This means that, unless non-governmental organisations take initiatives and contribute financially, young children's educational situation probably will not improve in coming years.

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