

Health, Safety and Nutrition Status of Pre-Schoolers: Ensuring a Secured Future in the Education Industry

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Abstract

Early childhood education is a programme introduced to the educational system for children of ages 0-5+. Over the years, there have been clamours for good health, safety and nutrition of children. Healthy and safe experiences in early childhood lays a necessary foundation for development and growth in all areas. Children are more able to fully develop socially, emotionally, cognitively and physically when their health and nutritional needs are met and when they are safe from physical and emotional harm. This paper therefore submits that health, safety and nutrition of children in order to thrive lies on early childhood professionals, working in partnership with families and communities. It proffers suggestions as to what the government, caregiver, educators and all stake holders can do to have a key opportunity and responsibility in providing environments and experiences for all young children that set them on a pathway towards lifelong health well-being.

Keywords: *Early Childhood, Health, Safety and Nutrition, Secured Future.*

Introduction

Early childhood is the period from birth to eight years old, Oduolowu (2011). A time of remarkable brain growth, these years lay the foundation for subsequent learning and development. UNESCO advocates for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programmes that attend to health, nutrition, security and learning and which provide for children's holistic development. It organized the first World Conference on ECCE in September 2010, which culminated in the adoption of a global action agenda for ECCE called Moscow Framework for Action and Cooperation: Harnessing the Wealth of Nations. As a follow-up to the World Conference, UNESCO worked in Partnership with Member States, partners and other stakeholders to encourage timely and effective implementation of the Moscow Framework so that all young children develop their potential to the fullest.

Young children need help to develop healthy eating and physical activity habits for life. During their early years, parents and our preschooler's doctor are partners in maintaining the child's health. The preschool years are an important time for developing healthy habits for life. From the ages of 2 to 5, children grow and develop in ways that affect behaviour in all areas, including eating. As preschoolers grow, they change physically, mentally and socially. Every child develops eating habits at a different pace.

Healthy Growth

Growth is one of the best indicators of good health and nutrition in children. There is a wide range of normal growth. Heights and weights differ depending on:

- * **Family History:** The height and size of the parents have effect on the height and size of the child if both parents are tall and thin, their child is more likely to look the same.
- * **Sex:** Preschool boys tend to be taller than preschool girls. Boys and girls tend to have similar weights until puberty.
- * **Nutrition:** Healthy food choices from each food group are necessary for your child's growth.
- * **Sleep:** Preschoolers need 11-14 hours of sleep a day, including naps, and night-time sleep.
- * **Health Status:** Chronic illness or other special needs in children can also affect growth. Children who are often sick or have special needs should be closely monitored by their doctor.

Growth charts are a good way to monitor a child's growth and health. A healthcare professional should weigh and measure the child and track his or her information on a growth chart. A doctor or nurse will review the growth chart during routine visits to be sure the child's rate of growth is appropriate.

Oduolowu (2011) opined that every child is entitled to good health, protection from diseases and proper medical care for survival, personal growth and development. It is the responsibility of government to provide curative and rehabilitative health care delivery system, and provide facilities for treatment and health care delivery. In addition, it is government's responsibility to implement measures that would reduce infant and child death, provide regular medical check-ups for school children, promote family life education and provide family planning services. Parents and the general public should be mobilized for proper hygiene and environmental sanitation, ensure provision of adequate nutrition and safe drinking water and abolish harmful traditional practices which affect the health of children. Parents have the role to ensure proper nutritional status, that their children take the necessary immunization, ensure adequate medical check-up to prevent disability and death. The knowledge of childhood diseases, ailment and their prevention is essential for those who are concerned with the care and education of children.

Healthy Development

World Bank (1996) in Atlanta, Georgia Organized a Global Conference on Early Childhood Development: Investing in the Future, Representatives of governments, non-governmental organizations, foundations, academia, multilateral and bilateral agencies gathered to affirm the importance of promoting a deep commitment worldwide to children's rights and to meeting children developmental needs. At the conclusion of the conference the following list of necessities which are endorsed by United Nations International Children Emergence Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organization (WHO) and numerous NGOs were defined as basic children's growth. These necessities recognize the importance and synergistic effect on healthy physical, cognitive and emotional development.

Nutrition

Nutrition is very important to human life and it cannot be over emphasized, good nutrition is essential to good health and the American Academy of Pediatrics encourages parents to think of nutritional decisions as health decision. Nutrition is the process by which food is being obtained and used for growth, metabolism and repair. Brookover (1998) defined nutrition as the sum total of the processes involved in taking in and utilization of food substances by which growth, repair and

maintenance of the body is accomplished. Good nutrition is a corner stone of good health. World Health Organizations (WHO) (2012), defined nutrition as a critical part of health and development. Good nutrition is related to improved infant, child and maternal health, stronger immune system, safer pregnancy and child birth, lower risk of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and cardio vascular diseases and longevity. Proper nutrition begins from the mother's womb. The food the mother eats during pregnancy helps the baby to develop physically and mentally. An undernourished child may suffer from irreversible brain damage including learning disabilities and mental retardation. Iron deficiency in young children may also cause permanent brain damage, learning and behavioural problems.

Over 90% of children do not get enough fruits and vegetables in their diet: As our children grow taller and stronger in their pre-school years, they also become more independent and start to form their own personalities. This is the time when they also start to control what they will and will not eat.

Children who lack essential vitamins, minerals and essential fatty acids have shown to perform worse academically at school and are seen to be more aggressive in their outward behaviour (Supernanny Team, 2014).

Children who do not eat a variety of foods could be missing out on some vital essential nutrients that are needed in the development period of their lives. These are nutrients that contribute to excellent growth, clever minds, physical fitness, and great overall health which will take them into adulthood. This is a serious matter because high number of children are failing to grow at the correct rate and have problems at school or with childhood obesity. Often its all tied up with nutrient deficiencies in their diet.

Yvonne, (2010) gives a step by step account of what children need in their diet and how we can provide it. Making sure the children gets a good mix of the following suggests a balanced diet.

- * Starchy food i.e. bread, pasta and rice (whole wheat is the best source).
- * Large amount of fruit and vegetables remember to aim for at least five portions a day.
- * Protein foods i.e. meat, fish, eggs, beans. At least two servings of fish per week (salmon, mackerel, sardines and fresh tuna)

* **Vitamin C**

Humans cannot make their own vitamin C, so it must be obtained in the diet. Its function is quite specific as an important synthesiser and blood vessels. It is also critical to brain function and is known to affect moods. It is a highly effective antioxidant and free radicals, which can cause cancer, it aids iron absorption. Giving your child a glass of apple or orange juice (not concentrate) with a meal containing meat or fish and will enhance iron absorption. Food like dark green vegetables, oranges, dark berries and apples also contain vitamin C.

* **Vitamin A**

It is needed for healthy teeth, skin and produces the pigment in the retina of the eye which helps your child to see. It is also an antioxidant (like vitamin C) found in eggs, meat, milk, cheese, carrot and many dark green vegetables.

* **Vitamin D**

Vitamin D is needed so that the body can absorb calcium. Without this, bones are not able to fully form and rickets can occur (this disorder is on the increase due to teenagers not wanting to eat dairy products, fearing weight gain). The good news is that the most significant supply of vitamin D comes from sunlight, it does not need to be bright sunlight either. Also, we can find

vitamin D in oily fish (i.e. salmon and sardines), eggs and some breakfast cereals. Making sure your child spends time out of the house everyday should ensure the correct quota.

* **Iron**

This is needed for the formation of blood cells. Haemoglobin (the red pigment in blood) is what transport the oxygen around the child's body without it he/she cannot run. So if the child is always tired, iron may be lacking. Iron is found in meat, fish, dark green vegetables, (dried apricots, pumpkin seeds, whole grain (brown bread), pulses, beans and lentils. Many foods are also fortified with iron, therefore always check labels.

* **Folate**

It is very important for the production of new cells. It makes Deoxyribonucleic Acid DNA, the building block of cells and is especially important for the rapidly growing infant and young child. It can be found in dark green vegetables and spinach.

* **Essential Fatty Acids (EFA)**

These also cannot be made in the body, diet has to provide them. There are two types of EFA's (omega 3 and omega 6) which are needed in balance for efficient brain function, the immune system and overall mental health. Oily fish is the best source of EFA's but another great source is Flax oil. If the child is showing signs of poor concentration at school, difficulty in memorizing things, a poor reader, has mood swings or difficulty sleeping, it is possible that he/she may be deficient in the omegas. Supplements are a good second best option for absorbing the omegas, but only buy a good brand.

* **Calcium**

This mineral is predominant in the formation of bones and teeth. It can also be obtained through the diet. Calcium regulates muscles contraction (including the heart beat) and helps the blood to clot normally. Without Vitamin D, calcium would not be absorbed, so the two go hand in hand. It could be found in dark green leafy vegetables, seeds, nuts, almonds, whole meal bread, cows milk, dairy product in the main, even in water (hard water).

* **Fibre**

It is essential for a healthy bowel movement. Many children in the UK suffer from constipation. The best way to prevent constipation is to increase fibre in the diet. Good sources are fruit, vegetables whole grain rice and pasta, nuts, seeds and cereals.

* **Water**

Water is the best fluid intake a child can get. They should drink plenty of it to prevent dehydration, and constipation six to eight glasses per day is about right. Tap water is absolutely fine. The nutritional environments to which children are exposed, both before birth and throughout their early childhood years influence health across the life span. Optimal nutrition provides children with the building blocks they need for healthy growth and development.

As a child moves from infancy into the pre-school years, their nutritional needs change. Although they still need to consume the basic foodstuffs: proteins, fats, carbohydrates, minerals and vitamins they need more calories as they get older (Sorte, Joane, Daeschel, Inge, Amader and Carolina 2011).

Health and Wellness in the Early Childhood Years

Every child deserves to be born physically fit and to achieve self responsibility for good health habits. It is important to create environment that promotes and nurtures health and wellness in young children (Oduolowu 2011).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 2003, health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. It is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. The health of a child can be determined by aspects of genetic makeup, family history, of disease and age. It will be difficult for an individual to change some aspects of his/her health, but health status can be improved, health could be established through positive growth and development.

The health status of a child consists of his/her:

- 1 **Physical health:** The condition of the body which can be established through diet that provides appropriate nutrition, adequate exercise and sufficient rest.
- 2 **Mental health:** The ability to participate, communicate and function in developmentally appropriate ways. This aspect of the child's health enhanced by positive social and emotional development e.g. loving, stable and trusting relationship promote positive mental health and wellness whereas depression, decreased mobility or impairment may negatively influence impact on a child's health and well-being.

There are some common health problems affecting children in developing world particularly children living in poverty. These health problems include:

- * Inadequate immunization which subject them to high risk of contracting infectious diseases.
- * Sleep deficits which cause problems with attention and difficulties in learning
- * Vision and hearing problems which cause learning difficulties.
- * Infectious diseases which lead to absenteeism from school.
- * Mental illness causes low self-esteem and poor peer relationships.
- * Nutritional deficits which may cause physical complaints and learning problems.

Child Health Policies

The Nigeria government has put in place some health policies (guidelines that defined desired outcomes) to ensure that safe and appropriate health practices are in operation. The Health Policies are in the areas of nutrition, health and safety.

- * **Nutrition:** Agriculture to ensure adequate provision of food
- * **Health:** Hand washing to control (the spread of diseases)
- * **Safety:** Environmental etc

Conclusion

Every child deserves to be born well and is entitled to good health, protection from diseases and proper medical care for survival and development. Good nutrition is the foundation for good health and optimal learning. Many children are poorly nourished resulting in numerous childhood illnesses. Some common health problems affecting children are inadequate immunizations, vision and hearing problems nutritional deficits, infectious diseases, sleep deficit and mental illness.

However, there are health policies in the area of nutrition, safety and health to ensure that safe and appropriate health practices are in place to safeguard the health and wellness of children.

Recommendations

- * Child health policies by the government should be enforced in school and at home
- * Parents should give smaller meals which are rich in protein and vitamins
- * Adequate supervision of children by adults during play should be paramount to ensure safety.
- * Parents should monitor their children eating habits and ensure taking of balanced diet
- * Government should checkmate the stakeholders in the running of pre-primary schools in accordance with stipulated policy
- * Provision of mid-day meals by some state government to pre-schoolers in public schools is a step in the right direction which should be emulated by all states of the federation.

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