Parent participation: what's it about?

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The author is the Director of the Department of Programme Documentation and Communication of the Bernard van Leer Foundation. In this article she draws on many years of direct experience to look at the different ways that parents are included in ECD programmes, and to show the benefits that are known to accrue to parents, children and the programmes themselves from that participation. She also surveys factors that determine the nature and extent of parental participation; and reviews what helps and what hinders participation.

One of the hottest topics in the ECD field is parent participation. It is lauded as a key to having effective programmes, so it is listed as a component in project proposals and included as part of the design of new initiatives. But what does parent participation really mean? A review of ECD projects reveals a wide range of participation by parents, from being recipients of services through to being instigators and controllers of programmes. To get a broad sense of the nature and degree of their participation, this range can usefully be seen as a continuum from passive to very active roles, with a complementary continuum for the enabling agency.

Some notional points on this continuum are indicated in the table.

Extent and nature of parent participation		Complementary roles of enabling agency
parents receive goods/services	✔	agency supplies goods/services to parents on the basis of the agency's perception of what parents need
parents participate in the delivery of services	✔	agency and parents supply goods/services, as determined by the agency
parents participate in establishing the foci of programmes	✔	agency discusses needs with parents then decides what will be offered
parents and agency jointly determine all aspects of the programme	✔	agency and parents jointly determine all aspects of the programme
parents define and operate programmes		agency makes services/funds available, in response to parents' requests

Benefits of parental participation

There is powerful evidence to demonstrate that parental participation has wide benefits for the parents themselves, for their children and for ECD programmes. And, although they are discussed separately, interests and benefits are frequently mutual.

Benefits for parents

Through their participation, many mothers and other caregivers in the community have gained confidence in recognising how, when and where they can support their children's development in their everyday lives. This has important implications for the caregivers' sense of worth. In a review of evaluations of the impact of parental participation in ECD programmes conducted by Myers and Hertenberg (1987), they note that changes in the adults were evidenced

Kenya: Ledero Manyatta ECD activity centre: *in the hands of the parents*
Samburu ECD Project
photo: Joanna Bouma.

by different attitudes and actions in terms of the way they talked about the project, reached agreements, and acted on decisions. Overall,

> The basic change identified was from apathy to participation in constructive activities as a sense of self-worth was strengthened.[1]

An evaluation of parent groups in Bangladesh (Akhtar, 1998) echoes the above findings.[2] The evaluation included interviews of participants and staff, data were gathered on participants' feelings, and observations were made of parent group sessions to determine the quality of participation. The results provided very positive feedback, including:

- that parents felt honoured and important when they realised that cultural practices are really valuable in supporting children's development;
- that parents realise what an impact they have on their child's development. A participant stated: *I never knew I was doing so much to help my daughter grow up strong and clever. Now I know I can really help her have chances I never had.*

For those parents who have become active agents for change in their communities, wider personal and community benefits are also clear, as a survey of the women involved in the Rehlahlilwe Project in South Africa[3] shows:

> *We have become 'social workers' in our community. Some say we are preachers – it's OK, they have learned to take care of their children, which is all we ever wanted.*

> *A lot of people come to my house for help and they trust us with their problems.*

Women are also confident enough now to help caregivers access services, and their new knowledge gives them confidence to speak out for children in their communities:

> *We are never able to keep quiet when someone is doing something wrong to children. Some people will hate you for talking out but we [don't worry about] this and only find the child being important to us.*

In addition, involvement with the project has helped women at a personal level.

> *I've not only learned to work and respect the children I work with, but my family life improved as well. I relate much better to my husband than I used too. Had it not been for this programme I would have not been here by now; I would have left my family or my husband and I would be divorced. I was saved by implementing what I learned, for instance I improved communication between me and my family and understand why people do the things they do to others and why certain people behave in a certain way.*

In summary, a parent's own development can be greatly enhanced by participation and many move along the participation continuum over time, taking more responsibility for aspects of programmes as their confidence and experience grows. Also, there are many examples of parents from ECD programmes becoming involved in wider ranging development programmes in their communities. This echoes common experience in the development field as a whole.

Benefits for children

Benefits for children are seldom evaluated through direct assessment of the children. Rather, the possible benefits for children are revealed through parents' perceptions of changes in their children. For example, the Alliance Project in Guatemala[4] uses as one of their impact indicators that fathers and mothers understand the benefits and importance of incorporating the traditional ways of stimulating children with the new techniques that enrich and reinforce their integrated development. To the programme implementers, success occurs when parents are able to observe changes in children. Comments to demonstrate their understanding include:

> *Now he is not afraid to go to school.*
> *They feel more secure.*
> *Now they are not afraid to speak to other people.*

According to the child's growth, he is changing his way of thinking.
His father spends more time with him.
She is not afraid to participate, she is animated.
She can write more easily.

Once parents realise how important their role is in supporting the child's development, several evaluations reveal that there is a change in the parent's behaviour, particularly in terms of their interactions with their children. But change is not easy:

I should say things were really tough at first – I found it very difficult to change from what I was: very violent and intolerant. I found it hard to change and listen to my children and practise what I learned at Rehlahlilwe.[5]

Benefits for programmes

The more parents participate in the programme and its development, the more the programme is likely to be appropriate to its context, and therefore more effective in reaching its goals. For programmes to be appropriate and ultimately viable, parents are key. At the most basic level, early childhood programmes could not exist without parents because parents choose whether or not their children will participate in an ECD setting. Looking at the youngest children – those aged up to two or three – the only ways in which programmes are likely to reach them are through parents. Taking the broader view, parents are seen as great assets to programmes, especially as they move from relative passivity to more active roles.

Determinants of parental participation

It's important not to make judgements about parent participation. There are many reasons why parents participate in the ways and to the extent that they do, many of which are associated with interacting factors and variables that are well understood and respected. There are at least three kinds of variables: contextual, programmatic and personal.

Contextual

The nature of parenting today
In both Majority World countries and industrialised nations, conditions, demands and expectations of families have shifted tremendously over the last twenty years. Whereas in the past, most societies could claim a normalised parenting pattern – an extended family model, a community/tribal model, a nuclear family or some other stable pattern – now most societies are reporting that their family norms are disrupted, and the effects on children and parents alike are devastating. As a result, the on-the-job training many parents used to receive from extended family members or from religious and cultural traditions is largely unavailable to contemporary parents.

Added to this, it is not always clear who is providing the parenting. It is generally taken for granted that the primary caregivers are the child's biological parents, but this assumption is not always valid. Apart from cultural norms and practices, for an ever-increasing number of the world's children, biological parents are not available to them most of the time, if at all. Parents are leaving children behind to go in search of work; losing children in the context of Diaspora and armed conflicts; leaving children in the care of other children while trying to earn a living; dying of AIDS; being ravaged by drugs and poverty; or trying to carry on while juggling inhuman demands caused by long work days and the need to simply survive. Thus programmes need to identify who is actually caring for children and find ways to give those individuals support.

Local culture, tradition and norms
Culture and traditions will obviously impact on parental participation. For example, it may be that childcare is seen as a family concern, and that it is not appropriate to involve outsiders. In this case, to support the development of the youngest children programmes focus on working directly with family members. Equally, the experiences and norms of communities will help to determine – at least initially – the nature of participation. For example, in some instances there is a history of paternalism. This has created the expectation that goods and services will be provided at the whim of outside individuals and organisations. In these instances it is difficult to generate true participation as a project begins.

Nicaragua: *parents lead their children from preschool to primary school*
Pre-Escolares Comunales Project (Ministerio de Educación)
photo: Marc Mataheru.

In contrast, there are examples of countries where there has been a strong sense of community responsibility within which programmes can be developed. Following independence in Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, the first President, created the Harambee (pulling together) Movement within which people work together to solve their own problems rather than always being reliant on outsiders to provide for them.

A strong sense of community also exists in the Philippines, where, during the dictatorship of President Marcos, people learned to organise in opposition to his policies and programmes. As a result, there is now a rich tradition of People's Organisations where the impetus for action comes from the people in the community. Outsiders may be involved when the People's Organisations are seeking technical and/or monetary support, but it is the parents and the community members who initiate and drive the process.[6]

Programmatic

The 'stage' and nature of the project
During the lifetime of a project, the degree of parental participation may shift from one point on the continuum to another. For example, some programmes begin with the parents and the community taking the lead, but when the resulting programme is adopted by a government and 'institutionalised', the programme may have little parent input. This is frequently the result of 'scaling-up' and the need to create an easily disseminated system. In this instance the programme becomes a source of information rather than a generator of information. The opposite can also occur. There are programmes where the 'outsider' creates the initial project. But, over time and by design, the control of the programme may be shifted to parents.

Beliefs about the value of parental participation
The attitudes of those who are responsible for programmes can limit participation, consciously or unconsciously. Those creating programmes may make *a priori* judgements about the types and extent of parental participation that is appropriate. There may be limits on the domains that parents are permitted to operate in. For example, some believe that the ECD setting is the domain of the promoter/childminder while the parent's domain is the home. Thus control of centre-based programmes may remain in the hands of professionals. Even when parents are seen as important they may only be allowed to operate in certain programme areas. For instance, they may be restricted to cooking the food, and/or engaging in fundraising activities. Parent's views might only be sought to confirm decisions that have already been made. Parent's views might not be accepted if they happen to clash with those of people who think they know best. There may also be limits on the extent to which parents are allowed to 'own' the programme. Often projects

claim to promote parent participation but the actual ownership of the project remains with the 'outsiders'.

Access to resources
The extent to which parents can take determining or controlling roles in ECD programmes depends to some extent on the resources that they can access. The more resources they have available to them, the greater their potential to control the programme; the fewer parental resources, the more control is likely to remain with, or shift to, outsiders who provide needed resources.

Personal

The fact that parents are not a homogeneous group
Parents do not all think alike. Furthermore, needs or problems are seldom experienced collectively, even though there are common factors that help to determine what parents experience and need. Social class, religion and gender are also significant factors in determining the extent to which people are comfortable participating in community activities.

Not all parents may be offered the chance to contribute their views. Project developers frequently work with a group of parents (the designated leaders, usually men) assuming that they represent the views, needs and goals of the community as a whole. The actual beneficiaries (often women) may not have the power to make decisions as to how money is spent, for example. Some programme planners have developed specific strategies for addressing the marginalisation of women in programme decision making. Women in the Rehlahlilwe Project in South Africa describe their approach as follows:

> *Our entry point is not organisations but individuals ... usually individuals who are on the fringes of the community: women, peasant women, disempowered ... We have gone the route of structures [in the past] and as soon as men realise there is any money to be made, they move in and put themselves on as chairs of everything and as treasurers and everything else, and elbow the women out. So we have a policy of beginning with those very people who are elbowed out.*[7]

Parental knowledge/skills/experience base
Parents may lack knowledge in key areas. For example, parents may be very good at caring for their children in their own homes, but may have little idea about how to put together an appropriate curriculum for a centre-based programme. On the other hand, parents may have skills and experiences that enable them to provide services to a programme, and may indeed supply those services as they simultaneously acquire the knowledge the lack of which has so far kept them from fuller participation.

Daily life factors
Sometimes there is a tendency to blame parents for not taking a more active role in an ECD programme. However, the issue is not that parents don't want to support their children's development, but that all the many factors that put families at 'risk' to begin with, also limit what parents are able to do. These include:

- a woman's workday. A woman who needs to spend 16 plus hours a day working inside and/or outside the home has little spare time or energy available.
- Long distances to be travelled in order to receive services.
- Women's lack of autonomy in terms of making decisions.
- Poor communications. Parents may not be aware of the value of ECD programmes, and thus they do not get involved.
- The lack of transport and the need to carry young children to whatever services exist.
- Timing of the services may be out of sync with women's needs and availability.
- For some parents – especially those who have never had the opportunity to participate – lack of confidence, apprehension, even fear, may need to be overcome.
- Illiteracy may also be a factor.

Determinants of parental participation such as those considered above, have to be recognised and taken into account; and practical ways to overcome them have to be developed. As noted, these determinants can be explored by considering the relationship between parents and the organisation that sets out to create/implement an ECD programme. This relationship is not static; it changes over time and is framed to some extent by local conditions. Two key interacting variables can influence the ways in which relationships are initiated and developed and, therefore, the nature and extent of parental participation: the places in which projects are able to work with parents; and the processes created for engaging with parents.

Where people work with parents

Parent support in the home

One of the most intensive ways to work with families is through visits to the home by a trained home visitor. A home visit addresses the issue of care for the child within the child's natural context and underscores the importance of the caregivers' role in supporting the child's development. Furthermore, home visits are designed to help parents/caregivers to feel more at ease in expressing their views, and help break many mothers' feelings of isolation. Home visitors are frequently recruited from the local population that is being served by the programme. With appropriate support and training, they can provide very effective services that lead to both increased parental support of the child's development and the enhancement of the caregiver's self-concept. Home visitors also benefit considerably from being involved in the programme, gaining respect within the community and expanding their employment options.

Parents' groups

Parent groups generally bring parents together for a series of sessions. These are commonly organised as long courses (for example once a month over the course of a year), but they can also be short intensive interventions. Usually, those organising the course determine the topics, although some are defined by the parents themselves. Typical topics include: health, nutrition, child development, social development, and so on, and modules may consist of theoretical as well as practical applications. To help reinforce what is being learned, modules frequently include activities that parents can use with their children at home between sessions.

Within a parent group format, parents can be engaged in a discussion, even when the content is basically pre-determined. Facilitators can present materials for discussion, rather than presenting 'facts' and they can ask questions to which there are no necessarily right or wrong answers. Good facilitators can stimulate parents to ask their own questions, and encourage active exchanges among parents as a part of the process of introducing new material. For example, in a project with families from Afghanistan that have been affected by war and displacement, the facilitator presents pictures and asks questions that help parents to think about their children's experiences, and to focus on their responsibility to address their children's needs.[8] This replaces simply focusing on what the parents feel they need for themselves. Often one of the outcomes of these meetings is the formation of informal parent groups that continue to meet once the formal course is completed.

Through existing service delivery systems

Parenting messages can also be delivered through services that already exist – for example, health programmes. The World Health Organisation has a new initiative underway to introduce child development messages into its Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (INCI) programme. More general community development programmes can also provide indirect support for parents by enhancing the environment as a whole, thereby positively benefiting families and children.

How people work with parents/caregivers

Regardless of where programmes choose to work with parents, choices are also made about how to work with them. These choices range from a deficit model that assumes parents know little or nothing about the topic, to an approach that supports parent's initiatives. Examples along the continuum include the following.

Telling/informing

Historically, outside professionals have made decisions about the nature of an ECD programme and its components. This 'top-down' or 'outside-in' approach has been especially common in the health field where some very basic health messages were (and are) assumed to be of such universal significance that they can be promoted without a great deal of consideration for the cultural context.

The approach of simply telling parents what to do is the least participatory methodology. In such programmes parents attend organised lectures where, using a didactic format, a specialist instructs them on providing for the young child's health, nutrition, cognitive, and/or psycho-social needs. There is little or no time for discussion and/or exchange among parents. The assumption is that parents lack the necessary knowledge about their children and need to be enlightened. This deficit model assumes that just telling parents what they need to know means they will do a better job with their children. Clearly this has not always worked and this has meant a shift to approaches in which, while the professionals are still in control, local adaptations are seen as appropriate. This may include additions to reflect the culture and/or taking examples from the setting.

An example of the shift from simply telling and informing to adaptations based on culture is the development of the treatment by parents of diarrhoea in their children. The vital message from 'outside' is that children need to continue to be fed and to be given liquids to restore and maintain their water levels. The initial approach to rehydration was to distribute Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT) packets that contained an appropriate mixture of sugar and salt that could be added to boiled water and fed to the child. This approach undoubtedly saved many lives, but was only moderately successful in many environments because of such factors as difficulties in distributing the packet; problems in understanding the instructions; inappropriate units of measurements; limited access to boiled water; and children's rejection of the awful tasting liquid. So new strategies were developed, building on what existed locally. The basic message was still the same – keep feeding children and do not let them become dehydrated. But the approach to hydration was different. It involved working with local people to identify locally available foods that children would eat that help alleviate dehydration.

Showing/modelling positive behaviour

This strategy involves having a trained teacher/facilitator demonstrate ways that parents can support children's learning. It is frequently used in home visiting programmes. The most common format is for the home visit to focus on the child's development and to discuss and then demonstrate the ways caregivers can promote that development, providing developmentally appropriate activities that parents can do with the child. The home visitor is generally perceived as the one with the knowledge and the parent as the receiver of the knowledge. This is particularly true where professionals are the home visitors and parents are shown how to do the 'correct' activity with the child. Needless to say, some parents can end up feeling that they do not know how to raise their children, and/or that there are 'special' things that they must do to give the child appropriate support. In home visiting programmes where the home visitors are peers of the parents, parents are on a more equal footing with the home visitor and the experience is generally more enabling for the parent being visited. (See the article about the Mothers Inform Mothers programme on page 18 for an example of a peer support home visiting programme.)

A related strategy is to identify parents from within the community who

represent ‘positive deviance’ (that is, they deviate from the norm, but their deviation has a positive impact on children). Since these parents are able to provide children with appropriate support, even in conditions of risk, the idea is to try and discover what it is that these parents are doing well and then spread these practices across the community. Here parents participate as models for their peers and, in some programmes, their knowledge base has been enhanced and their participation has been formalised so that they, in fact, act as tutors.

Building on people’s strengths

Programmes that build on people’s strengths shift some of the power and control from the service provider to the parent. The approach identifies, acknowledges and uses parental strengths as the basis for programming. The idea is that what parents do on a day-to-day basis with their children is valuable and should serve as the basis for building a programme. A project can begin with simply talking with parents about what they do with children. As Engle, Lhotska and Armstrong (1997)[9] note:

> Parents may not be aware of all of the different activities which they are already doing to support their children’s development; they may think that they are just watching children grow.

One way to create a programme is to begin by observing the kinds of activities that adults and children engage in throughout the day. Another step involves getting parents to talk about their children, what they are like and what they can do. From this, programme content can be developed that includes pictures of common activities and a simple explanation of what the child learns while undertaking a given task. For example, parents are told that an activity like cooking involves the development of estimating skills. But, even though the programme is based on things that parents do naturally with children, it is still outsiders telling parents what to do – in this case, ‘Keep on doing what you are doing’. On the other hand, it emphasises that parents are children’s first educators, and that they are participating in the programme – indeed they determine some of the content by turning everyday activities into developmentally significant opportunities. This approach also reinforces the fact that what mothers are already doing has enormous value for the child. It is a combination of being practical while also reinforcing what is currently taking place. This is summed up well by one of the Community Motivators in the Rehlahlilwe Project in South Africa,[10] in her discussion of what happened on visits to a rural area.

> *We then went back to a workshop and most of us expressed the same problem in various ways. We talked about it, that most of the people here in the rural areas have a lot of things to do during the day, and listening to us talking about children was considered a waste of time.*
>
> *We then shared better ways to reach these women and we went back, this time things were much better. One of the things we noted it was important to do was to join the work we find caregivers doing when we approach them and that worked well for us.*
>
> *We taught them that in all the household chores they are engaged in, a child can participate and learn. When you are doing your laundry a child can separate clothes in terms of colour and design.*

In summary, by beginning by observing daily life, programmes can work with parents so that they are aware of developmental stages and recognise the difference in children’s development over time. They can identify learning situations at home through daily activities; recognise the human and material resources in the home environment; and can stimulate children while attending to daily work.

However, observation alone has limited value. Child rearing studies are a tool for going further in identifying positive parenting practices. Such studies can help programme planners to reach another – deeper – level of understanding. For

Philippines: *a father in his natural role*
Community of Learners Foundation Project
photo: Feny de los Angeles-Bautista/Lourdes I Aldecoa

example, childrearing studies have proved to be a useful vehicle for trying to understand attitudes and beliefs, and for developing ways of working with parents that build on existing strengths. In essence, child rearing studies

> aim to combine a developmental psychology perspective with a cultural anthropological approach, valuing both.[11]

The key here is to ensure that the childrearing studies are done with the people whose practices and beliefs are being studied. Furthermore, conducting childrearing studies does not always guarantee that the content is truly grounded in local practice, attitudes and beliefs. Frequently, when the results of childrearing studies are turned into a curriculum and then used with the people studied, they end up asking the question *'What of us is in here?'* Something more is needed.

Engaging in partnership

The partnership approach to parental participation involves the joint determination of needs, and joint decision making about how those needs are to be met. The parents and the programme planners are equal partners, with the latter serving as catalysts and mobilisers. Arnold argues for programmes to be developed with parents through a dialogue that

> respects different views and allows different voices to be heard – valuing diversity and with an openness to creating new knowledge and new ideas.[12]

This open dialogue would result in a generative content – that is, one that is created out of genuine interaction with those for whom the content is to be created. Arnold explains the **generative** process as the

> pooling of knowledge bases, with both being regarded as valid, followed by dialogue in which new knowledge and ideas may be created, with all involved learning along the way.[13]

In engaging in partnership, however, at some point there is going to be a conflict between the practices and beliefs that are identified through childrearing studies, and those that are introduced by outsiders, who see some of the traditional beliefs and practices as harmful to the child's development. When that happens, decisions have to be made as to how this will be addressed. In general, what tends to happen is that the community yields to what has been brought in from outside. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) argue that this is the result of the power of 'modernity':

> The power of modernity… is such that the argument that its ways are 'best' can, and has, led some in the Majority World to accept the argument and the 'new ways'.[14]

To stay truly open to the process of creating partnership is extremely difficult. In addition, a genuine partnership is new in each setting, although it should be possible to create

Peru, Villa El Salvador: *workshop with parents drawing*
Pronoei Project (Effectiveness Initiative)
Photo: SUMBI

a widely applicable process that will result in generating true partnerships. Nonetheless, few have enough patience to undertake the process, or the belief that it is really important and will yield appropriate results. Those of us who are outsiders continue to think that we have the answers to what people need. In summing up work with Native Americans, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence make the following comment that can be applied to the work of most of us involved in development:

One can only sit in stunned disbelief that intelligent and well-intentioned individuals can truly believe that they know more about what a community needs than the community itself. Such is the power of modernist belief that it can erase the evidence of history, the generations of well-meaningness that have reduced a population to death and despair, and still sincerely believe that this time it will be different, this time they will be proved right, this time it will work.[15]

Conclusions

ECD programme content comes from a variety of sources. But there is increasing recognition of the fact that what exists locally is often as good as (and sometimes better than) what might be introduced from outside. Even if this were not necessarily so, it is widely accepted that if you are going to change people's behaviour, you have to respect who they are and what they do before they are going to be open to learning something new from you. The value of many traditional practices and beliefs, and the need to respect those with whom we work, are increasingly at the foundation of parental participation within many ECD programmes today.

In summary, parents can be – and should be – valued partners. After all, they are their children's first teachers, and are the primary determinants of the environment within which their children are raised, particularly during children's earliest years. No programme can operate and survive without parental participation. Programme planners and policy makers need to recognise, value and respect what parents/caregivers have to offer. As they do that, they must also acknowledge that parent participation is not a constant or predictable construct. It varies depending on such factors as the nature of the parents, the opportunities and experiences they have had, the culture within which a project is being developed, the point in time within the project that parental participation is being defined, the attitudes and philosophies of all those involved, and a myriad of contextual variables.

Thus, in ECD programmes we should not impose one model of parental participation, nor should any degree or quality of parental participation be judged as inherently better than any other. But in programming – both on practical and philosophical grounds – we need to ensure that, whatever the local situations and circumstances, parental participation is an integral part of ECD programming as fully as is possible. ❍

Peru, Puno: *conversing with children, using a flannelgraph to help them express themselves*
Pronoei Project (Effectiveness Initiative)
Photo: SUMBI

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