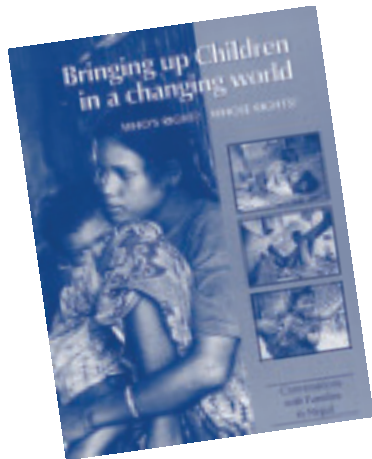


Bringing up children in a changing world:



Who's Right? Whose Rights? Conversations with families in Nepal

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Conversations with families in Nepal is a systematic description and analysis of how an indigenous culture raises its children. Perhaps uniquely, the childrearing study from which it is drawn was set in a child rights framework. The study took place in four villages in Nepal and was a joint initiative of the Save the Children Alliance; UNICEF; Seto Gurans National Child Development Services; City University of New York's Children's Environments Research Group; Tribhuvan University's Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development; BASE; NNSWA; Bal Bika Samaj Sudar Kendra; and SAC.*

The intent of the study was to highlight families' frontline roles in ensuring children's rights and that meant working closely with the families and proceeding with a clear understanding of their concerns. It was a qualitative study that looked at how families seek to ensure that their children grow up healthy, with enough to eat, and protected from harm; how families support their children's developing identities and their opportunities for learning; and how they encourage their capacity to get along with others and to participate in and contribute to their

families and communities. In other words, all the areas of development which concern both early childhood and many broad-based development programmes, and in many of the areas that contribute to the establishing and upholding of children's rights. It was concerned with the beliefs and practices of families, considering their hopes and expectations for their children, as well as their concerns and frustrations and constraints. It also considered the different expectations that families have for their sons and daughters, and the effects that these expectations have on

what they do with and for their children.

The study had three specific goals:

1. to encourage approaches to ECD programming that build on the strengths, traditions, achievements and resourcefulness of families and communities;
2. to develop effective participatory methods for initiating discussion and dialogue with parents and other caregivers on key issues for young children; and
3. to expand the shared knowledge base

for stronger programming which can be responsive to both local values and rapid social change.

And it had a number of specific perspectives:

- it took a comprehensive look at children's lives in four villages;
- it highlighted families' frontline role in defending and managing children's rights;
- it highlighted families' perspectives and their achievements as well as constraints;
- it concerned itself with change and

- how families deal with this;
- it used a highly participatory methodology – and an emphasis on developing methods for getting into genuinely collaborative dialogue with families and communities;
- it used a practical child rights framework for the analysis;
- it emphasised the importance of attention to, and action at, all levels as the broader social and economic realities are so important in shaping how families operate;
- it was concerned with the whole child; and
- it considered implications for overall policy and programme planning.

Given its goals and its areas of interest, the study naturally made use of approaches based on participatory learning and action (PLA), to which were added ethnographic interviews and observation. To make all of that possible, methods were developed to facilitate collaborative dialogue around key issues for children as the basis for joint planning. These methods are being compiled into a toolkit.

In terms of its relation to the CRC, the study was not constantly cross-

referenced to CRC articles. Rather it held close to the spirit of the Convention and the ways in which most parents – all around the world – articulate their concerns for their children. In this, it reflected the CRC's clear support of the family as the 'fundamental group of society and natural environment for the growth and well-being of children' that 'should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community'.

Revelations from the study

The study revealed the vital contributions that ECD programmes make in ensuring that young children's rights are established from an early age, showing that they can be developed and supported by and through many of the everyday practices within the family and community. In this it highlights the fact that many child development programmes around the world fail to recognise and respect families' and communities' achievements and resourcefulness generally in raising their children. It also highlights the fact that many programmes are message driven and ignore or devalue what families are

saying. Overall, the study confirms that family, community and culture are the heart of Nepal. Nepalese of all castes and ethnic groups have accumulated knowledge and developed a conventional wisdom as to what is best for their children. Of course, there are issues that need to be addressed – practices that may actually be harmful, for example. But tapping into the family and cultural stream in which children are nurtured is essential.

What emerged generally was that patterns of early care and the traits that parents continue to describe as ideals for their children are still those that are associated with a conservative agrarian life style: compliance, cooperation and respect. But that these are changing as a range of livelihood strategies are increasingly being drawn on to supplement traditional activities. Even so, many of these long-valued traits continue to be functional, and children gain many of the skills that will help them succeed in life. In addition, specific rights are reinforced – for example, an emphasis on cooperation in the community instils a sense of belonging; while respecting and learning from elders as the chief

repositories of significant knowledge helps children to develop their sense of identity.

Everyday experiences with parents and the right to learn

The study shows that children's learning merges imperceptibly into the life-tasks and everyday events of village life; and that young children in all of the villages spend much of their day engrossed in various forms of play, something that most parents and other caregivers recognise as important for their development. It also makes clear that there is a richness of the environment even in the poorest homes that is often overlooked. Young children in these villages have:

- the experience of a stimulating social environment with multiple caregivers and peers, and the opportunity to interact with and learn from many different people;
- opportunities to interact with a wide variety of natural materials and to engage naturally in activities that formal ECD centres in affluent countries set up in special corners;
- the chance to learn through a wealth of daily activities, such as washing,

dressings, mealtimes, as well as involvement in work activities such as cooking, cleaning up, collecting water and animal food. Although curiosity, initiative, independent thinking and decision-making may not be explicitly valued in these villages in the same way that compliance and respect are, there is in fact much that supports these qualities in the everyday routines that children are part of.

The following examples illustrate some of the learning opportunities that parents developed in these environments.

Learning about different kinds of fish
Manno Chaudury, aged 22, is the mother of four. Her husband works as a labourer and returns home only briefly every few days. She was observed to have exceptional interaction with her children in spite of her very busy schedule, was very patient with her children and took a lot of interest in what they were doing.

One day she returned from fishing and the children ran to her excitedly, crying

‘Mother has come! Mother has come!’ They were all jumping up at her, except baby Suresh who was being carried by his seven-year-old sister Laxmi. Manno smiled at them and asked six-year-old Sunday to bring a large flat dish for the fish that she had just collected. She emptied out the fish and Sunday started sorting them out. He tried to keep the others away at first so he could see all the fish himself. But then Manno sat down next to the dish and all the other children sat around in a circle.

There were many fish of different types and four year old Dinesh looked at them with great interest and asked the names of each one. Manno told them one by one what they were and started to sort them out into piles – there were prawns, flat fish and crabs. The children helped her and discussed the size of the fish, and which ones they liked to eat most.

Two big crabs started moving and Dinesh backed away, frightened. Sunday said ‘No need to be scared. It won’t do anything. See!’ He held up one of the crabs to show that it would not bite. Manno took four small crabs from the

dish and said ‘These are small ones – one each for you to play with’. The small crabs were moving and again Dinesh was scared. Manno said ‘Look you can touch it’, touched it herself and then took Dinesh’s hand and touched it with him. Dinesh seemed quite confident so Sunday put a small crab on the palm of Dinesh’s hand. The crab started moving and Dinesh laughed. The children played crab races and later ate one of the big crabs which Sunday helped Manno roast.

Infant learning: Dankumari’s morning in Koldanda

Early in the morning nine month old Dankumari is being breastfed by her mother out on the porch. There are numerous breaks in the feeding as her mother talks and smiles at her, getting a laugh from the baby and laughing, talking in return. After the feeding she ties the baby to her back while she tends the animals. Dankumari is tied on quite loosely, so that she is able to pull herself over to the side and peer under her mother’s arm, watching as she feeds the goats. Then when her mother squats to scrub a large copper pot, the baby’s legs are able to reach the ground, and she

flexes them up and down as she reaches for stones on the ground, and watches what her mother is doing.

Later, while her mother is away washing clothes, Dankumari sits on the porch on some rags, playing with a set of keys. Nearby in the yard, her father is weaving, with four-year-old Som by his side. When Dankumari is bored with the keys, Som passes her some coloured rags to play with. Various children, her own siblings and neighbours, take turns holding and amusing her. Indra, her 8-year-old brother, back from cutting fodder, and two neighbour children, put her in her hammock and play with her there, bouncing her while she laughs loudly. Her mother, passing by from fetching water, reminds them not to overexcite Dankumari. When the boys go back to work again, a small girl from next door takes over, standing the baby in the doorway where she can hold on to the threshold and move herself around. After a while, her mother picks her up and takes her into the house to clean her up, and then she sits on her father’s lap while he takes a break from weaving.

Through these simple interactions Dankumari has the chance to learn a lot – about human relations and mutual exchange, and about language. In her activities she practises her physical skills, explores with her feet, hands and eyes, and manipulates objects, learning in the process about colour, shape and texture.

The joy of achieving

One day, while his mother was rolling out dough to make bread, three-year-old Suresh, as usual, sat very close to her. She gave him some dough to play with and Suresh made a long 'rope' using both his hands.

His mother asked what it was and he replied that it was a snake. She asked him to make another one and then told him to put it in the fire to cook. He did this very carefully and then asked his mother to make him a frog. She agreed that she would once she had finished making the bread. She took his 'snake' out of the fire and he ate it as soon as it was cool enough. While she made the frog she let Suresh use the board and rolling pin, to his great delight. This is an excellent example of a busy

mother managing her household chores while providing her son with some exciting learning opportunities, encouragement and a sense of achievement.

The chance to experiment

A five-year-old girl in Jahbahi was sitting with her mother, watching her make a basket. The mother went inside to the kitchen, so the little girl picked up the basket, took the needle out and started trying to weave it. Her mother came back and said, laughing 'Eh! You're spoiling my basket'. She then made a small basket base and said, 'First you put the needle like this, then this...', while showing her daughter what to do. Then gave it to her to try herself.

These examples show that some caregivers seem quite consciously to affirm and maximise the potential for active learning and problem solving. For other parents, it is a matter of becoming more aware of the advantages in an expanded repertoire for children, so that opportunities are more systematically supported. Generally, the study revealed that parents' primary



interest in teaching their children revolves around work skills. Girls are taught household tasks and boys outside work. In all communities they are encouraged to learn by doing. There is a recognition that children will make mistakes and that in fact they also learn through these. A small girl is encouraged to sweep by her mother even if she makes a mess of it. Children start helping pluck rice plants for transplanting before they can do it properly – all so that they will learn by doing. Most parents emphasise encouragement and reward as learning tools, although punishment for poor work was also observed.

Missed opportunities and constraints

There is a great deal of variation in the extent to which parents and other caregivers take advantage of everyday opportunities, either consciously or unconsciously

Some parents were clear in their understanding of their role in helping children learn. Others do involve children in everyday chores. Still others may ignore a window of opportunity for teaching entirely, unaware of the value of what they have to offer.

Poverty often forces repetitive, routine behaviour with verbalisation reduced to a minimum. Curiosity, questioning, creativity, experimenting, discovering may well be discouraged.

However, parents respond with enthusiasm to discussion of the issue. They want support and advice and make it clear that they feel bewildered and inadequate in many ways. A good example is their sense that their children's shyness prevents them from making full use of their teachers or of people and opportunities from outside.

Workloads can result in children being left alone for long periods – especially during peak seasons.

Babies and young children may be left for long periods, or left in the care of four or five year olds. There are some opportunities for play and learning, but without the occasional intervention of a guiding adult these may end up being limiting for both the older and younger child.

Safe but frustrated.

Manisha, aged four years, had been left in her cradle (a piece of cloth tied between two poles by ropes). While her parents were out at work, she screamed

continuously, but although the neighbours were nearby, nobody came to see what was happening. Her grandfather was in his workshop about 50 metres away. He was in the middle of his ironwork and could not leave it, although he could hear her screaming. He said 'She will cry and cry and then eventually she will get tired of crying, keep quiet and sleep'. He finally came to see her, when he came to get some food for himself. By that time she had fallen asleep again, so he went back to his work. She was left on her own for about 2 hours, restricted in her movement, unable to see beyond the end of her nose.

The connections between learning and overall health status may be a cause for concern.

Children are active learners, and can be effective in stimulating the interactions they require for learning. But the connections between children's interest in learning and their general health and nutritional status implies a particular responsibility on the part of parents.

Conclusions

The CRC recognises children's right to a standard of living adequate for their full

development – physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social. It gives parents primary responsibility for ensuring this right, with all its implications for children's learning in different areas (Article 27). In addition it specifies children's right to formal education (Article 28), and identifies learning's basic aims: to develop children's full potential, to prepare them for responsible life in a free society, and to ensure respect for others and for the environment. Overall, *Bringing up children in a changing world: Who's Right? Whose Rights? Conversations with families in Nepal*, demonstrates how parents, in very practical and natural ways, can make the first of many of the most significant contributions to making these CRC aspirations real. ○

* Arnold C, Bartlett S, Hill J, Khatiwada and Sapkota P *Bringing up children in a changing world: Who's Right? Whose Rights? Conversations with families in Nepal* (2000); Save the Children/UNICEF
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