

PROMOTING CHILDREN'S HEALTH: HEALTHY LIFESTYLES AND HEALTH CONCERNS

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Abstract

This study examined promoting children's health focusing on healthy lifestyles and health concerns. The paper discussed proactive measures in promoting children's wellness in the areas of posture, physical activity, nutrition, and injury prevention, oral, social-emotional and mental health. Significantly, it focused on the issues related to how health, safety and nutrition are interrelated to healthy lifestyle of the growth and developmental characteristics of children. It also concerned with the determinants of human health, national health initiatives influencing children's health behaviours towards healthy lifestyle, self-esteem and social-emotional competence of teachers, promotion of emotional classroom climate with impact on social-development and effects of intense stress in children's lives were also mentioned. The healthy lifestyles behaviour on health concerns of adults as role model on competent parenting are also of great significance to the children. Based on these significant health concerns of children towards inculcating healthy lifestyles, it was therefore recommended that competent parenting is necessary for helping children manage adversity and avoid its potentially damaging consequences. Teachers should promote resiliency by establishing classrooms where children feel accepted, respected and supported in their efforts to promote children's health and healthy lifestyles.

Keywords: Healthy lifestyles, competent parenting, resilient, determinants, physical activity, nutrition.

Introduction

In recent years, the ideas about health, disease and health care system have undergone significant changes. In part, these changes are being fueled by escalating medical costs, lack of health insurance, and disabling conditions for which there are no present and permanent cures. Public attention is gradually shifting from a mode of dependency on a medical profession for treating diseases and chronic illnesses to a realization that individuals assume some personal responsibility for their own well-being. Experience has shown that, positive health outcomes are demonstrated when people accepted healthy lifestyle behaviour (Butterfoss & Cohen, 2009). Thus, children and adults need to make choices and engage in healthy behaviors that improve the quality of life and lessen the risk of disease. The early years are an ideal time for children to begin establishing preventive behaviours that will foster a healthy and productive lifetime. Young children are often more receptive to new ideas and have fewer unhealthy habits to overcome and capitalize on endless curiosity, take advantage of learning opportunities throughout the day on positive health, safety and nutrition practices towards healthy lifestyle.

The positive health outcomes that are achievable through preventive practices continue to gain increased public interest, especially with respect to young children. Poor standard of health, safety and nutrition have long been acknowledged as significant barriers to children ability to learn and to ultimately become healthy and productive adults. Thus, there is need to programme children access to preventive services for improving children's health to include physical activity and fitness, avoid nutrition-overweight and obesity, avoid harmful substance abuse, mental health, adequate sleep,

elimination of lead poison, injury and violence. Other significant needs include effective immunization against infectious diseases, adequate (oral health) maternal and infant health, adequate access to health care services, health education and vision, hearing, and communication disorders (Healthy People, 2000).

Health, safety and nutrition are closely intertwined and dependent on one another. The status of each has a direct effect on the quality of the others. For instance, children who receive all essentials nutrients from a healthful diet are more likely to reach their growth potential, benefit from early learning opportunities, experience fewer illnesses, and have ample energy for play. In contrast, a child whose diet lacks critical nutrients such as iron may develop anaemia, which can lead to fatigue, diminish alertness, growth failure, and loss of appetite. Disinterest in eating is likely to further compromise the child's iron intake. Thus, nutritional status has a direct effect on children's health and safety, which in turns, influences the dietary requirement needed to restore and maintain their well-being.

An unhealthy lifestyle results in more illnesses and more expense to treat those illnesses. This means a bigger burden on an already challenged healthcare system. Poor health among children means more time loss at work, less quality recreational time, and even shorter lifespan. But the people in this modern day have a mindset that takes good health for granted. Children can suffer from years of aches and pains, and feel surprise when someone finds out to have developed serious chronic disease. Majority of parents usually leave their children's health to the hands of the medical doctors, relying

on the advance medical technology and medical drugs when they fall sick.

Concept of Health

Definitions of health are as numerous as factors that affect it. In the past, the term health referred strictly to an individual's physical well-being and the absence of illness. Contemporary definitions of health view it from a broader perspective and recognize it as a state of wellness considering physical, mental, social, emotional, economic, cultural, environmental and spiritual well-being (Berk, 2009). Each interactive component is assumed to make an equal important contribution to health and has an effect on the others. For example, a stressful home environment may be contributing to a child's frequent illness, stomachaches or headache. A child's repeated chronic disabilities may have profound effects on the family's emotional, financial, social and physical stability which affect his or her health status. Similarly, health therefore is the ability of individual or communities to adapt positively when facing physical, mental or social challenges (Huber et al. 2012)

Health as a concept is fundamental to man and a total force affecting every level of human daily life considering climate, food, air, house, water, family, associate cultures, habits, norms, attitudes and knowledge (WHO, 2014). Health is the ability and capacity of an individual to cope with all his daily demand functions physically, mentally, socially, emotionally and spiritually effectively. It is the dynamic state of well-being of an individual and the society considering the physical, mental, spiritual, economic, political and social well-being in harmony with each other, the natural environment and with God. Health is a complex state determined by ongoing interactions between an individual's genetic-make up and everyday environmental factors (Guyer et al 2009). This view of health accounts for the difference between what health, its composition and the traditional view of health as not being sick and living a long time.

Health also recognizes children and adults as active participants in multiple groups including family, peers neighbourhood, ethnic, cultural, recreational, religious, community, and significant others. The environment also serves as an influential factor in both the spread and control of the diseases considering the recent outbreaks of bird flu, Ebola, HIV and AIDS (WHO, 2011). The best way to describe good health today is wellness through health promotion. Wellness is the reflection of the ability of a person within the dimension of health to participate in all activities that will contribute to the growth and development of an individual throughout his or her life cycle (Wass, 1995). It is the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve their health. Health promotion refers to a wide range of health-enhancing activities that seek to enhance health

status towards functional ability, increase longevity, and reduce the prevalence and consequences of disease. These diverse activities include identification of modifying genes, proposing laws that seek to reduce cigarette smoking, and offer blood pressure and cholesterol screening. The significance of health promotion activity is well known to offer the best, if not cheapest method of reducing the burden of life-threatening conditions and maintaining a healthy, well-functioning, long-live population (Healthy People, 2010). Many of the most serious health disorders can be prevented or postponed by immunizations, chemoprophylaxis and healthy lifestyles

Determinants of Children Health

There are many factors contributing to the degeneration of health among people today. People live in a terribly polluted world and are exposed to thousands of toxins and chemicals every day at work, home, in the air, and in the food that we eat and water we drink. Children that consume too much junk food or eating more processed foods than ever before in human history and they constantly abuse pharmaceutical products are likely to be unhealthy. Children are constantly bombarded by fast foods at every corner and video games, leading to the majority of teenagers spending countless hours watching television resulting in sedentary lifestyle in a generation that is out of shape, overweight and obese.

The range of personal, social, economic, and environmental factors that influence health status of children are known as determinants of health. Many factors combine together to affect the health of children and the communities. Whether they are healthy or not is determined by their circumstances such as the human genetics, the income and low educational level of parents, relationships with friends and families, availability and accessibility to the use of health care services under the care of the parents or care givers (Mayo Clinic, 2016). Other significant factors influencing children health include socio-economic status, physical environments, person's individual characteristics, attitudes and behaviours. Moderate stress level and good self-confidence with conducive physical environment on safe water, clean air, healthy workplaces, safe houses, communities and roads, all contribute to good health of the children. Employment and good working conditions of parents make children healthier particularly those who have more control over their working conditions.

The social support networks from families, friends and communities always linked to better health among children specifically the culture, customs, tradition and the beliefs of the family and community significantly affect health. Inheritance plays a core part in determining lifespan considering healthiness and the likelihood of developing certain illnesses. Person's behaviour

and coping skills, balanced eating, keeping active, avoid smoking and drinking, and how we deal with life's stresses and challenges with all affect health. Accessibility to health services, prevention and treatment of diseases on healthy lifestyles and the continuous use of recreational activities have significant impact on health level. Gender, type of diseases at different ages, income level, social status are all linked to better health level (Wass, 1995).

It has been observed that the linkage between healthy lifestyle and different factors including environments, health care organization and health policy are significant determinants (Lanlode, 1974). Emphasis on individual lifestyle as determinant of health can be seen in most policies and strategies and this aspect of health related behaviours and conditions entails an element of personal action and can be observed at the individual level (Mayo Clinic, 2016). It is therefore strongly associated with the possibility of individual choice and the triumph of self-control over self indulgence.

The main subject matter to be addressed on children health concerns includes adequate balanced diet, abuse of harmful substances, physical exercises, sexual activity, exposure to ultra-violet rays of the sun and the non-use of seat belts or child car seat. Experience has shown that if children and other adults focus on healthy behaviour by eating a little less, take more physical exercises, less consumption of harmful substances, safe sex, then, there would be reduced risk of long-term health problems such as heart disease or cirrhosis, obesity and less likely become infected with HIV or other sexually transmitted infections (WHO, 2015). Thus, individual behaviour can play an important role in wellness level and maintain a healthy lifestyle by self-control of the children.

Factors Influencing Children's Health

The Children's immediate and long-term health are affected by the mother's personal health and unhealthy behaviours and daily practices, unbalanced diet, consumption of harmful substances and certain medications, routine prenatal care and exposure to certain communicable diseases. Mothers who ignore healthy practices during pregnancies are more likely to give birth to infants who are born prematurely, have low birth weight, or experience a low range of special needs (Polakowski, Akinbami & Mendola, 2009). These children also face a significantly higher risk of lifelong health problems and possible early mortality rate. In contrast, a child who is born healthy, grow up in a nurturing family, consume a nutritious diet, live in a safe environment, and has numerous opportunity for learning and recreation is more likely to enjoy a healthy lifestyle.

Since health is an interactive and continuous change state, the major factor influencing the children's health include heredity at the time of

conception (Kaplan, Seeman, Cohen & Guralnik, 1987). This set the limits for growth, development and health potential. This explains in parts the genetic materials and characteristics from biological parents at the time of conception. Understanding how heredity influences health can also be useful for predicting an inherited predisposition to certain health problems such as heart disease, deafness, cancer, diabetes obesity, allergies or mental health disorders. Many healthy lifestyle factors including physical activity, diet, sleep, and stress levels interact with genetic materials (genes) to determine whether a child may ultimately develop chronic health condition or not.

Environment encompasses a combination of physical, psychological, social, economic and cultural factors that collectively influence the way individuals especially children perceive and respond to their surroundings (United States central Intelligence Agency, 2011). This plays an equal important role in providing the basic building materials that predetermine the limit of one's health. Examples of environmental factors that promote healthy lifestyle outcome among children, adolescents and older adults specifically include a nutritious diet, participating in daily recreational activities, getting adequate rest, having access to medical and dental care, reduce stress, residing in good homes, child care facilities, schools, and workplaces that are clean and safe and having opportunities to form stable human relationship. There are also many environmental factors with negative effects on health such as exposure to chemicals, pollution, sedentary lifestyles or inactivity, harmful substances, illness, obesity, prenatal alcohol, poverty, stress, insecurity, violence, or unhealthy dietary choices can interfere with children's optimal growth and development (James, 2014).

Protecting children's safety requires a keen awareness of their skills and abilities at each developmental stage (Allen & Marotz, 2010). Safety as one of the factors influencing health is related to the behaviour and practices that protect children and adults from unnecessary harm. Young children are at especially high risk for sustaining serious injuries because their developmental skills are not well developed. Thus, every adult who work with, or care for young children has a significant responsibility to maintain the highest standards of supervision and environmental safety (Mytton et al, 2009). For example, knowing that an infant enjoys hand-to-mouth activities should alert teachers and parents to continuously monitor the environment for small objects or poisonous substances that could be ingested.

The chemical substances in food called nutrients have a direct effect on a child's nutritional status, behaviour, prevalence of disease, health, growth and development. They play critical roles in a variety of vital body functions including supplying

energy, improving resistance to illness and infection and building and repair of body tissues (Mayo clinic, 2016). Meeting the body's need for essential nutrients depends on consuming a wide variety of foods in recommended amounts. However, environmental and family factors such as financial resources, transportation, geographical location, cultural preferences, convenience and nutrition knowledge can also influence a child's dietary quality.

Promoting a Healthy Lifestyle among Children

Today, concern for children's health and welfare is a shared vision. Changes in current lifestyles family structures, cultural diversity, trends, and expectations have shifted some responsibilities for children's health to the collaborative efforts of families, teachers, and service care providers. Communities are also valued members of this partnership and must assume a proactive role in creating environments that are safe, enriching and healthy places for children to live a healthy lifestyle. Healthy children are more likely to exhibit healthy characteristics behaviours and developmental skills appropriate for their age. They tend to be well nourished, have energy to play, experience continued growth, and have fewer illnesses. Developmental norms are also useful for anticipating and addressing children's special needs, including injury prevention, posture moderation and physical activity, oral and mental health (United Nations, 2015).

An understanding of normal growth and development is also useful when planning for children's safety. Unintentional injuries, especially those involving motor vehicles, pose the greatest threat to the lives of young children (Rowe & Maugham, 2009). Their inability to accurately judge time, distance and speed with problem-solving abilities contributes to many injuries, especially those resulting from falls, as a pedestrian, or while riding on a bike (Hotz, 2009). Thus, adults have an obligation to provide continuous supervision and to maintain safe environment for all children for healthy lifestyle.

Correct posture balance and proper body alignment are necessary for many physical activities that children engage in, such as walking, jumping, running, skipping, standing and sitting. Teaching and modeling appropriate body mechanisms enable children avoid problem related to poor posture that may develop later in life. Early recognition and treatment of ear infection is also important to be considered because they can affect children's balance and coordination. However, there are several conditions that warrant early diagnosis and treatment of orthopedic problem among children. This include birth injury such as hip dislocation, fractured collarbone, abnormal or unusual walking patterns such as limp or walking pigeon-toed, bowed leg, knock knees, flat feet, unusual curvature

of the spine and unequal length of extremities (arms and legs) (Hoppenfeld, 2012; James, 2014).

Dental problems can also affect children's general health, development, appearance, and self esteem in addition to causing considerable pain and expenses (Coyle, 2009). Many children seldom visit dentists because their families cannot afford dental insurance or costly dental preventive care especially children from low-income and minority groups. Neglected dental care may result in painful cavities and infected children's teeth behaviour, and interfere with concentration and academic performance. There are many adults who erroneously believe that deciduous teeth do not require treatment because they will eventually fall out (Levine, 2008). Thus, dental oral hygiene practice implemented early in children's lives promotes healthy tooth development towards healthy lifestyle. It appears that chewing in the temporary teeth and the spacing of permanent teeth influences the shape of the jaw bone and the development of speech. Proper dental care should be practiced from birth with special attention given to diet, the excessive consumption of highly refined and sticky carbohydrates (e.g. candies, gums, soft drinks and sweetened cereals and dried fruits), hygienic practices (e.g. tooth brushing, flossing) and dental examination schedule at recommended intervals and prompt treatment of dental problems (Ni, 2006).

The wellness model recognizes a close relationship between children's emotional and physical well-being (Healthy People, 2010). How children viewed themselves and the way they believe others perceive them form the basis of self-concept (WHO, 2009). Young children typically define themselves strictly in terms of physical qualities, such as having brown hairs, blue eyes, or being able to run fast. However, children concept of who they are and how they fit in gradually broadens with experience. Children self-image is formed and continuously redefined by the way in which they are addressed and treated. In turn, these collective experiences influences children's sense of worth or self esteem and form the basis of self- concept (Szente, 2014). Therefore, families and teacher need to play a major role in shaping children's self esteem. They improve children's chances for achieving success by acknowledging and building on their developmental strength. Failure and mistakes of the children must be accepted as part of the learning process and should be viewed as occasions for offering guidance and positive support.

It has been observed that classroom climate has a significant impact on children's social-emotional development (Maxwell & Chmielewski, 2011). A teacher's communication style and understanding of cultural differences also affects the emotional climate of the classroom. Some children may be reluctant to participate in group activities or to answer a teacher's question because of the way they have been nurtured. Unless the teachers

understand these cultural differences, such behaviours could easily be interpreted as deviance or inattention. Teacher makes effort to learn about individual children, curriculum planning and implementation, supports learning and healthy-social emotional development (United Nations, 2015). Children's chances for improving success are improved when learning activities are developmentally appropriate and matched to children's individual need and interest (Hoogeveen, vanHell & Verhoeven, 2012).

Prolonged stress in children's lives will also affect their emotion and physical well-being of their healthy lifestyle. Stressful situations, such as abusive treatment, poverty, unrealistic adult demands, chronic illness, unsafe neighborhoods, being left alone for long periods or natural disasters (floods, fires, earthquakes, and tornadoes) can have a serious impact on children's emotional state (Fairbank & Fairbank, 2013). Poverty, food security, material depression and parental substance abuse are also correlated with an increase to children's mental health problems (Evan & Schaumburg, 2009). Some children experience undue stress and anxiety in response to everyday events such as separation from family, new experiences (birth of a sibling, mother going to work, enrolment in a new early programme, having a new teacher), chronic illness and hospitalization and divorce of parents. Other significant stress experiences include death of a pet, family members or close friend, conflict of ideas, confrontation with family, friends or teachers, overstimulation due to hectic schedules, participation in numerous extra-curriculum activities immature coping mechanism, temperament and learning problems. Signs may range from less serious behaviours of children such as nail biting, hair twisting, excessive fear, prolong sadness, anxiety that are of significant concern (repeated aggressiveness, destructiveness, withdrawal, depression, nightmares, psychosomatic illnesses or poor performance in schools).

It appears that children today live in a world where daily exposure to violence is not uncommon. The incidence of crime (raping, sex abuse child trafficking), harmful substance abuse, gang activities and access to guns) is often greater in neighbourhoods and may result in unhealthy urban environments and risk of children's personal safety. Children living in these settings are also more likely to become victims of child abuse or domestic violence. The families of children exhibiting a higher rate of dysfunctional parenting skills, are often less responsive and nurturing, and use discipline that is either lacking inconsistent, or punitive and harsh (Owen, 2014) Parents are also less likely to be supportive of children education or to assume an active role in school activities. Thus, many children grow up in poverty and non-informed are at greater risk of experiencing unhealthy lifestyles, learning problems, becoming

violence adults and developing serious mental health disorders (Whiting, 2009).

Children face many challenges while growing up in this complex world such as additional source of extreme stress, violence, uncertainty, and negative encounters are everywhere due to genetic predispositions, malnutrition, prenatal exposures to harmful substances. Others significant issues related to unhealthy lifestyles among children include poor attachment to primary caregivers, physical or learning disabilities and irritable personality and death in movies, video games, cartoons, television films and the internet (Huesmann, 2007). These really affected home environment and parenting lifestyles that make it difficult for some children to achieve normal developmental tasks and positive self-esteem.

However, some children appear to be more resilient in the face of adversity because of several important protective factors which include having certain personal characteristics (such as above-average intelligence, positive self-esteem, and effective social and problem-solving skills), having a strong and dependable relationship with parents and social support network outside of one immediate family such as a church group, local recreation centre, organized sports and youth recreation clubs.

Conclusion

It is increasingly recognized that health is maintained and improved through the efforts and intelligent lifestyle choices of the individual children and society. The main determinants of healthy lifestyle of children include the social and economic environment, the physical environment the person's individual characteristics and behaviour of their caregivers. Specifically, the key factors that have been found to influence children's health or unhealthy behaviours include income and social status, social support network, education and literacy, employment/working conditions, physical and social environments of their parents. Other significant determinants include their personal health practices and coping skills, healthy child development, biology and genetics, health care services, gender and culture.

Promoting healthy lifestyles of children within the concept of preventive health care recognizes that healthy attitudes and practice are learned behaviours especially among children. This encourages them to assume an active role in developing and maintaining practices that promote healthy lifestyles among children. Thus, childhood is an important time when positive health behaviours and habits are being established for growth and development. A child health is determined by the interplay of genetic makeup and environment. Thus, children growth and development potentials are influenced by the interactions of health, safety and nutrition towards

lifestyle decisions. Health promotion and wellness begins with a sound understanding of children's growth and development. The aspect of children's health for healthy lifestyles requires special adult attention to include safety and injury prevention, posture and physical activity, dental and mental health towards fostering self-esteem, social-emotional competence and resilience.

Recommendations

Toward promoting healthy lifestyles and health concern among children, the following recommendations were made:

1. Competent parenting is necessary for helping children manage adversity and avoid its potentially damaging consequences.
2. Teachers should help children who are experiencing stress by showing additional patience, understanding and support.
3. Adults as role models should always check their personal health behaviours, attitudes and respond healthy lifestyles for young children.
4. Proper dental care should be practiced from birth with special attention to diet, hygienic practices and prompt treatment of dental practices.
5. Vigorous physical activity with careful injury prevention and less fatigue should be an essential part of every child's day.
6. Members of the families should be encouraged to limit children's media viewing, closely monitor what they are watching, and help children to understand that media is a form of creative entertainment and not reality.

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