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MOTHER-CHILD INTERACTION AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF A CHILD: EXPLORING THE CONNECTIONS

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Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of mothers (working and stay-at-home) about their role in the emotional development of their children in early years (4-6 years). It also explores the impeding factors in mother-child interaction during the emotional development in early years of the children. The qualitative design was used to explore the effects of stay-at-home and working mothers' interaction on their children's early year (focusing 4-6 years) emotional growth and development. Through a purposive sampling, four participants (two working and two stay-at-home mothers) were selected whose children were 4-6 years of age and were enrolled in Kindergarten I and II. The data was generated through semi-structured interviews. The study concludes by presenting implications and recommendations for parents, teachers, teacher educators, early childhood educational institutions based on the children's emotional development particularly focusing on early years.

Background of the Study

The past array of experience as a Montessori teacher and then Directress in a private Early Child Development (ECD) school in Karachi gave me an in-depth insight that early years play an important role in the holistic development of children.

UNICEF (2006) state the term ECD to refer to the processes by which children grow and thrive, physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively during this time period. During these years the growth and development occurs very rapidly in children's life and lays the foundation stone of well-being. Riley (2007) and Mustard (2002) state in their studies that poor development during early years affects key aspects of brain development; it affects all body tissues and the immune system. Besides, it also influences cognition, imagination, behaviour and skills of children. The attention children receive during these years is irreplaceable and influences their direction in life. It is also evident from Richter's (2004) study, where he describes that young children develop primarily through their relationships with the important people in their lives such as parents and caregivers.

Rational of the Study

My personal experience as a Montessori Directress gave me an in-depth insight that most of the children had learned and adopted many values of their parents, particularly of their mothers. I noticed that children would come to school with the stories of their parents, particularly of their mothers. For instance; *"my mother said this; my mother did that, etc."* I assumed that mothers had a great influence on children's daily routine and development.

Mother-child interaction has been acknowledged as an important element of early development (Bromwich, 1990; Morisset et al., 1990) not only because it is the first socializing relationship that most children encounter with, but also because the early experience of mother-child interaction shapes the perceptions of children about world and

their later patterns of behaviours (Barnard & Kelly 1990). Mothers have great influence on children's emotional development. In early years, mothers' interaction and closer bond help in children's holistic development, particularly, emotional development. It is assumed that working mothers are unable to provide quality time to their children due to workload as compared to stay-at home mothers. My personal and professional experience indicates that even minor incidents occurred in these formative years leave the imprint on children's mind and those inscriptions remain with them throughout their lives.

While working as a teacher with young children (4-6 years), I observed that children were different from each other in all domains - physical, cognitive, social and emotional. For example, some children were very confident, social and cooperative; while others were very shy, reserved, and used to take more time to socialize with children of their age. They mostly appeared disinterested in their surroundings. As a Montessori Directress, I started wondering about the reasons and asked myself this question several times why some children were so different from others.

To investigate the reasons, I reviewed literature and discovered that home environment especially parents play a vital role in children's upbringing. It affects the emotional development of children both positively as well as negatively. Safdar (2006), states that the role of parents is seen as an important force in their children's holistic growth. Particularly, mothers have more influence on their children as compared to their fathers. According to (Essortment, 2002), the connection of children with their mothers at a young age allows a close bond. This makes the communication between mothers and children easier especially during the middle school and high years to foster and grow.

There are many studies conducted in South Asian context (Avan, 2008; Basu & Basu, 1999; Hunzai, 2007) on social and physical development of children in early years; but my literature search did not provide me with any research from Pakistani context that has tried to explore the impact of emotional development in early years on children's holistic development. Particularly, role of mother-child interaction in children's emotional development in early years seems to be an untouched area.

After getting in-depth insight from different studies (Ahmad, 2002; McIntosh & Bauer, 2006; Chase-Lansdale, Michael & Desai, 1991; Rajwani, 2010), including my own personal and professional experiences, my interest developed to explore impeding factors involved in mother child interaction in early (4-6) years. The research question that focused and guided research is as follows:

Q. What are the factors that hinder mother-child interaction in early years emotional development of a child?

Methodology

This study was conducted in the qualitative research paradigm which guided the study design. In line with Merriam (1998) and Creswell (1998), who view qualitative research helpful to draw, understand or explain the meaning of the social setting by using the naturalistic approach; I found qualitative research best fit for my research which aimed to investigate the impeding factors in mother-child interaction in early years emotional development of a child. Qualitative research method helped me to obtain complicated details such as; feelings, thoughts processes of mothers and their children in detail (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002). Furthermore, another reason for selecting qualitative research methods was that I intended to explore the 'what', 'how', 'why' questions throughout the study.

Research Sample

The research was conducted in a Karachi, Sindh. According to the need of the study; a private ECD school was approached. The purpose to select a school as base of the study was to reach out to the required sample for the study, because due to time constraint it was difficult for me to approach the participants who matched the set criterion for sample.

Through purposeful sampling four research participants were selected for this study (2 full-time working and 2 stay-at-home mothers) whose children ranged from 4-6 years age. The purpose to select working and stay-at-home mothers was to analyse the similarities and differences of the level of interaction between both groups of mothers. The rationale to select this age group was that by this age children develop holistically and learn and adopt many habits from their surrounding environment. I intended to explore that what are the factors that impede interaction between mother and a child in these formative years, particularly focusing their emotional development.

Data Generation Process

Data was generated through in-depth interviews and field notes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with research-participants mothers that enabled me to explore interviewees' perceptions and experiences about different hindering factors in a mother-child interaction in children's early years emotional development without prior limitations and constraints. Each interview was of 40 to 50 minutes and was audio tape recorded with prior permission of the participant. I maintained a diary to record field notes of research data. I took notes while interacting with my research participants. This exercise helped me to note the environment, impressions or other body gestures of the interviewee that could not be highlighted in audio taping.

Data Analysis

The gathered data was full of field notes and transcribed interviews. To make proper sense and draw the meaning from the data, I read it thoroughly. After reading each line, the accurate and relevant data was sorted out and was analyzed by its thematic analysis, a process that involves coding and then segregating the data by codes into data clumps for further analysis and description (Glesne, 1999). I gave a different coding to the transcribed data by different color indication. It helped me in making connection between various themes. I used my research questions as a framework for analyzing the data that helped me to see whether the data was relevant or not. Research findings were shared and confirmed with the research participants in order to make sure that the information was not harmful to them in any way; it also ensured that the data reported was reliable.

Findings and Discussion

The following major findings are drawn from the comparative analysis on working and stay-at-home mothers' views about impeding factors of mother-child interaction in early years. The data revealed that both groups of mothers had similar views about impeding factors in the emotional development of the children. They considered stress, anger, quarrelling, and lack of attention, improper upbringing, punishment, mockery, scolding and restrictions as main factors which impede mother-child interaction.

Stress and Frustration

Both working mothers described that a mother's level of stress and frustration are the main factors which halts mother-child interaction. Amina (working mother) shared that it is her own observation that whenever she is stressed due to marital conflict or household workload she becomes irritable and usually avoids her daughter. In response, her daughter immediately changes her facial expression and throws tantrums. She further illustrated:

My own stressfulness impedes my daughter's behaviour. Due to lack of time I cannot give much attention to her school work. Many a times, I take out my anger and frustration on her. Sometimes, I start beating her on very minor mistakes, so she usually stops interacting/responding for certain durations. (Interview, 16 February, 2011)

Parveen (stay-at-home) stated that when she has office workload stress or a fight with her husband then she takes out all frustration on her daughter. As a result, her daughter gets annoyed and avoids talking to her for a while. Parveen further added that when her anger subsides, she apologises from her daughter and takes her for an outing.

The data analysis shows that both groups of mothers were suffering from some stressors which were resulting negatively on their children's physical and mental health. Past studies (Antoni & Lutendorf, 2007) indicate that persistent psychological stress from the mother, manifested in anxiety, depressed mood, anger, and irritability, which is associated with a variety of health difficulties in children from infancy to adulthood.

Quarrel/Fights

Both working and stay-at-home mothers highlighted the fact that Quarrelling has a negative impact on children. Quarrel between husband and wife or among family members negatively affects a child's mental and physical health. Amina reported that her daughter has an asthma problem. She often gets Asthma attack while finding her parents fighting and it takes long time for her to recover. Fariha (stay-at-home mother) shared that whenever her daughter sees her (Fariha) beaten by her husband, she often shivers and vomits. Then, she prefers living in isolation.

The data analysis depicts that mothers who suffer from marital discord resulting in more quarrels and fights between spouses directly and indirectly affects the holistic development particularly emotional development of their children. It was evident from the responses of all mothers that whenever there was any quarrel in their homes, children felt dejected for certain time periods. Hay et al., (2003) also state that when a marriage is tense and hostile, parents are likely to express anger, criticize and punish their children. They further assert that children who experience these maladaptive parenting practices often withdraw into a depressed mood themselves; others, mimicking their parent's anger, become impulsive and aggressive.

Anger leads towards physical punishment

Both the working mothers identified anger as the extreme factor which weakens mother-child interaction. Fariha also shared that especially she gets angry when her daughter does not concentrate in studies. Then she starts beating and scolding her. In response, her daughter immediately gets scared and her voice starts quivering and she starts crying.

Damani (working mother) reported that whenever she takes out her anger on her son, he often passes urine in his pants and stops interaction for long hours. It also affects his social life. For instance, at school he becomes more aggressive. His teacher complains about his rude behaviour and harsh treatment with other children.

I heard almost similar response from all mothers that physical punishment creates a communication gap and hostility for a certain time between mother and child. Avan (2008) also describes that the punishment creates hostility in children and it badly affects the socio-emotional and physical development of a child.

Lack of time and attention

Parveen highlighted that a child needs full support, time and attention of mother. She shared that her daughter always seeks her full attention and tries to grab her. Her ignorance is painful for her daughter which halts their interaction. For instance,

If I am giving more attention to her elder sister then she cries and makes her mood off. Those things make her hyper and stubborn. In order to get my attention, most of the times she pushes my younger daughter who is 2 years old. (Interview, February 17, 2011)

Data reveal that the time factor contributes to the aggressive attitude in children and it impedes mother-child interaction. Damani explained that a child feels at uneasy and insecure when mother interacts with him/her on an occasional base. She further added that she was disappointed with her role as a mother as she could not spend much time with her child.

Responding to the same question, Amina became emotional and said that she is playing with the life of her daughter. She shared, that due to tough nature of her job she sometimes fails to give time to her daughter that makes her daughter reclusive.

Data analysis reveals that children are attention seekers. If they get less attention and time, they may turn into a negative thinker, which may lead them to become a pessimist individual. It is also evident from Berk (2009) that the depressed mother appears overwhelmed and unresponsive to her children. If her disengagement continues, the child is likely to become negative and irritable and, eventually withdrawn.

Conclusion

This study viewed different impeding factors in mother-child interaction in the emotional development of children. Comparative analysis of working and stay-at-home mothers explored that mother-child interaction is affected by different elements. The study draws the conclusion that a mother's close and friendly bond positively impact on her children's emotional development and helps them in developing emotionally and socially. Positive interaction with mothers provides children confidence, trust, openness and sense of socialization.

Inadequate time, lack of quality interaction, quarrels between husband and wife and mothers' stress and frustration have negative impacts on children's emotional development in terms of lack of confidence, trust, reluctance, detachment from their surroundings and resentment. The study recommends awareness programmes for both working and stay-at-home mothers based on children's emotional development especially focusing on the early years. These programmes will keep them informed about the changing emotional reactions of children and the ways to deal with those reactions and will facilitate them in upbringing their children emotionally. These programmes will also help working mothers in keeping balance between their personal and professional life and spending quality time with their children.

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