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What could be more detrimental to a child's growth than denying him/her the opportunity to experience the wonder and joy of the natural world?

Characteristics of a Healthy Environment

By Saima Khalid



A healthy environment is not just one with excellent medical care: in fact it is one that encourages physical activity and social contact and provides healthy air and landscapes.



A broad vision of the health and well-being of children depends on the safety and quality of the environment available to them. The term "environment" has been modified from the traditional definition of a mere physical infrastructure to include all

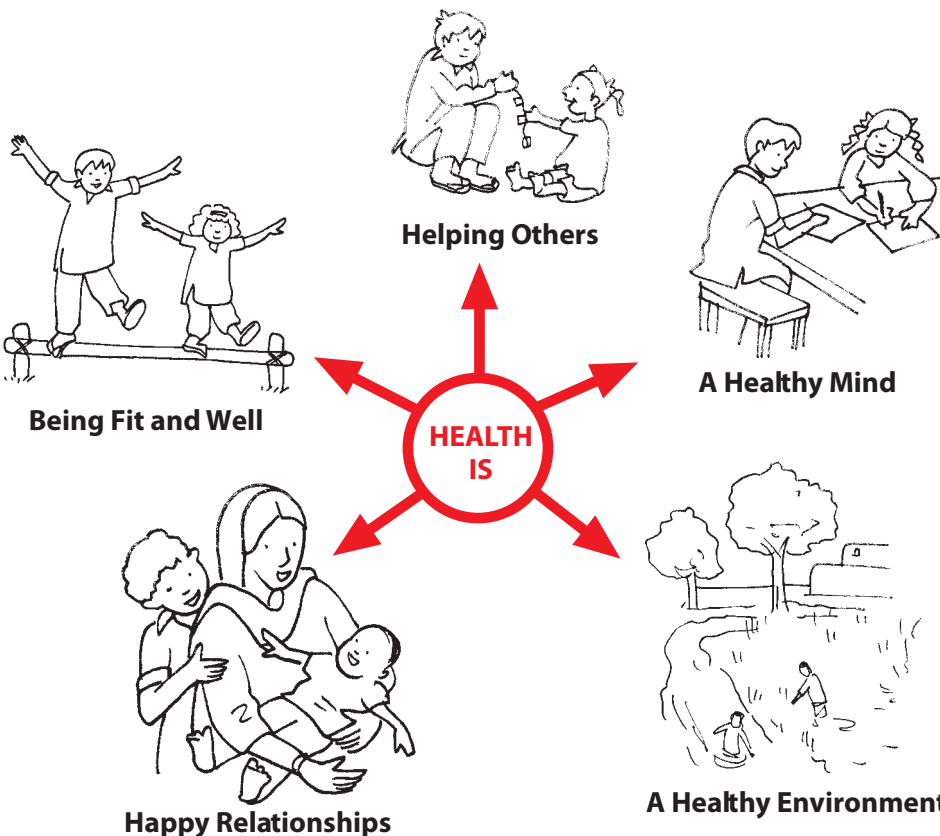
the components that could contribute in the holistic development of the child. These include Physical/Natural Environments, Built Environments and Social Environments – at home, school and in the community. Thus a healthy environment is not just one with excellent medical care: in fact it is one that encourages physical activity and social contact and provides healthy air and landscapes. This is because the environment has a direct bearing on the various developmental domains of the child i.e. his or her physical, mental and social health.

The development of a healthy environment needs to begin since the time of conception. It should include the provision of nutrition as well as a good stimulating and interactive environment (Mustard and Young, 2006). This is because a child's rapid cognitive development begins from the earliest ages i.e. from conception and continues into young adulthood. The child's first interaction with their immediate family members exposes him/ her to different learning processes in a natural way. Unfavourable circumstances from the time of conception, during pregnancy and in the early years can cause high risk for coronary heart disease, hypertension, type II diabetes, mental health problems, and other conditions in adult life, such as disorders of the immune system and behavioural disorders such as 'Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder' (ADHD). Parents and caregivers

have to be particularly mindful of their own relationships with each other and other family members. Negative or severed relationships between elders are emotionally draining for a child and can have serious impact on health. Detrimental community/ societal or personal practices such as discrimination and physical abuse can have serious damaging effects on the health of children.

Young (2002) has stated that the provision of basic health care, nutrition and stimulation in a caring environment foster the child's development and will result in developing good Human Resource for the future. As mentioned by Ramey and Remey (1998, p .5), "When the basic needs are met children can gain improved critical thinking skills, self confidence, problem solving ability and capacity to cooperate with others." It has been further elucidated in Neurosciences that "the effects of early experience on the wiring and sculpting of the brain's billions of neurons last a lifetime" (McCain and Mustard 1999). Since brain development is a continuous process, therefore the experiences provided to the brain at an early age are highly influential in this process of wiring and sculpting the brain. Negative, as well as positive, experiences in early life affect the development of neural circuits that mediate cognitive, linguistic, emotional, and social capacities (Ellis, Jackson, and Boyce 2006).

Children have the right to live and develop to their full potential (CRC, 1992). It is important to realize that child development does not take place in isolation and for the children to develop to their full potential, it is crucial that all their cognitive, physical, emotional, psychological, social, spiritual and health needs should be taken care of together. This would avoid or moderate developmental problems and will bring positive long-term results to individuals and society.



a healthy environment needs very strong social and emotional relationship not only with the family but also outside the family such as in school, community centres and neighbourhood.

Adapted from 'Small is Healthy'

The development of a healthy environment needs to begin from the time of conception.

Developmental Domains & Healthy Environment Provisions	
Physical development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of Basic Health Care <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Prenatal and postnatal care for mother ✓ Nutrition for both mother and child ✓ Immunization ✓ Safe shelter ✓ Clean water, good sanitation and hygiene • Opportunities to develop gross and fine motor skills • Protection from abuse
Cognitive development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of Educational Institutes/Day Care Centre <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Trained staff ✓ Safe and secure surroundings ✓ Child friendly environment • Exposure to activities and stories for exploration • Encouragement for creativity and critical thinking
Social development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Interact with different people ✓ Understand and develop relationships ✓ Contribute to the society & develop an understanding about one's own identity and the society • Protection from abuse
Moral and emotional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities to create an awareness about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Rights and property of others ✓ Having stable relationships, love and affection ✓ Developing positive self image ✓ Developing a sense of security ✓ Belief system of family and society ✓ What is wise and what is not wise

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Ms Saima Khalid is currently an instructor at AKU-IED and carries considerable experience in both academic training and programme administration. She has been involved since 2007 in conducting Certificate in Education (Cert Ed) at AKU-IED in Karachi as well as at its Professional Development Centers in Northern Areas Chitral and Azad Jammu Kashmir.