

Managing Young Children's Health and Safety during the Early Learning Years

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Abstract

Children grow and develop holistically during their early childhood years. Major developmental milestones may be missed when young children grow up in unnurtured homes with inadequate caregiving. Such practices may jeopardize children's development, particularly during the early childhood years while failing to prepare them for formal school. Communicable diseases begin to show during children's early years of life. As a result, the health and safety of young children must be addressed, as several potential health concerns may harm young children because of unhealthy habits and unsafe learning environments. Health, safety, and nutrition should be prioritized to achieve high-quality early childhood education, along with managing resources and safe settings for young children. However, certain observations revealed that the health and safety of young children are badly maintained; so, this paper evaluated the management of young children's health and safety from the selected centers. The paper used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory since it focuses on the significance of different ecosystem layers in children's development. A qualitative method was used, with 10 participants purposively selected from the three ECD centers. The findings found that most of the infrastructure in ECD centers did not comply with the norms and standards of learning for children aged 0 to 4 years. The dilapidated infrastructure posed a risk to children's health and safety. Furthermore, the food provided for the children was unhealthy. The paper recommends ECD educators' capacity building so they can design secure indoor and outdoor settings that support holistic development. Additionally, parents and ECD educators should be given more in-depth information about the need to provide young children with a healthy diet.

Keywords: Holistic Development, Infrastructure, Nutritious Food Value, Obesity, Play-based Learning, Safe Outdoor and Indoor Play, Sustainable Development

1. Introduction

Early childhood years are a time of holistic growth and development for children. Early childhood environments and homes lacking in nurturing and proper caregiving might cause children to miss important developmental milestones. When the environments are not nurtured for young children, these compromise the proper preparation of children for formal education and may endanger their development, especially during the early years. There are infectious diseases that occur during the early childhood years, hence, the health and safety of young children during the early years need to be prioritized. Moreover, unsafe learning environments and bad eating habits can pose several health risks to young children. When managing resources and creating safe environments for young children, health, safety, and nutrition should be given top priority to provide high-quality early childhood education. This paper aims to examine the management of health, safety, and nutrition of young children in the early childhood years. In response to the studied phenomenon, the paper discusses child obesity, children's health and nutrition, safe spaces for young children, and management of children's health, nutrition, and safety.

1.1. Childhood Obesity

Childhood obesity is a serious health concern that occurs when a child carries excess body weight for their age and height. According to WHO (2015), more than 42 million children under five years are obese around the world. Of the 42 million, 35 million of those children are from low-middle-income countries. As mentioned by Mokone, *et al.* (2023) obesity is classified as the fifth leading cause of death especially among children. This means that childhood obesity needs to be prioritized as a public health problem as it involves the high risk of non-communicable diseases that may affect the physical, mental, and health status of children. Several factors contribute to childhood obesity, namely, poor diet, lack of physical activity, genetic factors, environmental factors, and psychosocial factors (Saha, *et al.*, (202). The mentioned factors affect children in various ways and hurt the child's health and well-being. Hence, monitoring is important to ensure that obesity is controlled at an early age for children to live healthily and longer. During the early years, healthy eating habits must be encouraged with an increased physical activity where active play is promoted both from home and school. Parents and early childhood educators need to be educated about the importance of a healthy lifestyle, healthy eating habits, and balanced nutrition for young children. Therefore, childhood obesity requires a more comprehensive and collaborative effort with the engagement of families, community healthcare providers, and any other relevant stakeholders that may be part of this concerted effort to ensure that children are healthy. When healthy habits are promoted by fostering a supportive environment, the risks associated with childhood obesity can be mitigated and children may live longer as they become healthy and active.

1.2. Children's Health and Nutrition

The growth and development of young children is mainly influenced by health and nutrition. Children's health and nutrition need to be encouraged because proper nutrition supports physical development, cognitive development, and immune functioning that helps establish lifelong healthy habits. Hence, Mokone, *et al.* (2023) argue that during the early years, proper nutrition lays the foundation for lifelong health and well-being. In addition, the first 1000 days of a child's life are important for a child's health and nutrition. This is because poor parental health and well-being can have adverse effects on the developing child during these days as this is a period of a child's rapid growth where malnutrition can have long-term consequences in a child's life. Moreover, when children are malnourished, they are likely to delay starting school and repeat grades, and at times they may end up being school dropouts.

On the other hand, children who are adequately nourished are always alert, active, responsive, and demand attention. Hence, from preconception to pregnancy, parents need to be aware of the importance of a healthy lifestyle for the benefit of their unborn babies (Indrio, *et al.*, 2022). This may be achieved through nutrition and physiological support programmes for mothers to understand how to live a healthy life and minimize toxic exposures that may harm a child's life. When children are provided with the best start during their childhood years, they become better people. Hence, it is important to note that this does not only focus on the child's well-being, but this becomes the investment that protects human capital aimed at achieving national development objectives.

As mentioned by Maalouf-Manasseh, *et al.* (2015), chronic malnutrition is a challenge facing developing countries resulting in over 165 million children not reaching their potential. Chronic malnutrition is exacerbated by poverty for children under five years. These are the children that are in the age of early childhood learning. Children's health and adequate nutrition are critical for the child's brain development and play a significant role in the child's holistic development. A child's holistic development is important for early childhood development because it is during the early years that children develop to reach their full potential, while the child's developmental delays can be detected during the early years of a child's life (Hurley, *et al.*, 2016). It is during the early years of a child's life that the best foundations need to be laid through integrated nutrition programmes that may be pioneered by early childhood programmes to ensure that child development and nutritional outcomes are achieved for the benefit of the child and the wider society. The child mortality rate and child obesity may be minimized through the integrated nutrition programme and these need to be proactive endeavors rather than reactive ones. Hence, consistent efforts for a balanced diet create a foundation for a lifetime of healthy eating habits and prevent non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

Health and nutrition are vital for a child's life and this calls for collaboration between the parents, caregivers, and early childhood educators for the benefit of the developing child. Health and nutrition should not only be the priority when children are in early childhood centres, however, but healthy habits also need to be promoted at home as well for the well-being of children. Therefore, homes need to create a supportive home environment where healthy eating consists of education, positive reinforcement, and food with commendable nutritious values. When positive relationships with food are fostered, this may improve a child's overall well-being as lifelong healthy habits are laid. Health and nutrition are indeed important for a developing child's well-being; however, adequate nutrition is not the only aspect that matters in a child's well-being, hence, a stimulating environment and social interaction with attentive caregivers need to be established for children to develop holistically.

1.3. Safety Spaces for Children

It is important to recognize that every child has a right to a safe, secure, and nurturing environment for their optimal development. Children's safety refers to the absence of risk in the child's physical and social environment that may endanger the child or cause bodily harm. As mentioned by Bell, *et al.* (2020), children who have been exposed to optimal physical and social environments during their early years of life grow up to be healthy and happy people. When children have adverse experiences during their early years that may lead to poor health, poor academic achievement, and depression, hence, positive interventions during the early childhood years may mitigate the impact that may be caused by such adverse experiences. It is for that reason that Enskär, *et al.* (2020) acknowledge the impact of the relationship between the child's surroundings and socio-economic status on the child's development to

create safe spaces for children. Therefore, homes and early learning centres need to maintain safe spaces for children when they play (Nitecki and Chung, 2015). This is in sync with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Chapter 5 and 6 that each child must be allowed to grow and develop in a supportive and healthy environment where support from the parents, caregivers, and any other person needs to be provided and sustained as children have the inherent right to life. Hence, even when children are enrolled in early childhood centres, they need to be always under adult supervision to ensure that they are safe. This is because over the years the number of unintentional injuries in early childhood centres has increased for children under the age of five (Ablewhite, *et al.*, 2015).

During the early childhood years, play in early education is a critical component of a child's life as it benefits children from the different aspects of their development. It is through the play-based learning that children develop cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally. Hence, play is often considered a biological, psychological, and social necessity of a developing child as it enhances children's healthy development and well-being. For this to be achieved, creating healthy and safe spaces is essential when children play, whether at home or in early childhood centres to ensure that play as a safe place in a child's mind is not ignored, hence the child's world of play needs to be always protected.

Safe spaces do encourage child development because when children feel safe and protected, they become emotionally balanced children who are healthy and easily socialize with others. This is more important when children have enrolled in early childhood centres because the more significant time is spent there, hence, safe space needs to be ensured. Although is always encouraged during the early learning years, the time for play is diminishing because the focus is usually more on a child's academic readiness, and this compromises children's development. This is despite that maintaining a safe home environment has been seen to be crucial for the well-being and development of children. A safe home is an enabler for providing a firm foundation for children to explore, learn, and grow and this is further advanced when children enroll in early education centres. Therefore, when safe spaces are created for children, there must be ongoing supervision to avoid accidents and injuries that may harm children when they play. A regular assessment of safety measures is important to accommodate children as they grow in meeting their growth needs. It has been mentioned several times that a safe and secure home and early learning environment enhance the development of children as it provides physical and emotional security for children while allowing them to be creative as they explore their surroundings. As mentioned by Senda (2015), safe learning spaces include physical safety where there are age-appropriate toys and equipment available for children to play with to ensure that child injuries are prevented. The play environment needs to adhere to hygiene standards to prevent the spread of germs when children play. This requires an adult to adopt hygiene practices, like washing their hands before and after playing. Bullying may be discouraged among children when playing to promote an inclusive environment where diversity is respected and celebrated to ensure that all children thrive and develop beyond their childhood years regardless of their differences. Managing children's health and safety during the early years is important for any developing child.

1.4. Managing Young Children's Health and Safety

During the early childhood years, the management of young children's health and safety needs to be prioritized as these matters mostly during the early learning years in terms of children's holistic development. Managing children's health during the early years is important because when children are

obese, they are less likely to be physically active, and at times they are ridiculed by their peers and end up not playing with others (Carson, *et al.* 2015). When children are inactive, they resort to watching TV a lot and eating fatty snacks, and in return, their health and well-being are compromised. This must be managed as this may increase childhood obesity, which may result in them developing non-communicable diseases. The prevalence of obesity in South African children is rising and this needs to be managed to ensure that children live longer and healthily (Ogden, *et al.*, 2016). Hence, the Department of Social Development provided menus for implementing nutritional education in early childhood education to prevent serving children with food that lacks nutritional value (Vitrup and McClure, 2018). Hence, in managing children's health, Mokone, *et al.* (2023) a nutrition programme to be developed needs to include a healthy lifestyle strategy for children. Even from the Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3), the promotion of strategies to improve the health and quality of life of infants and young children is encouraged to ensure that children live healthily and longer (Ogden, *et al.*, 2016). As children spend most of their time at school, the daily nutritional programme for preschool children needs to be strengthened to promote healthy eating habits and exercising at a younger age (Symington, *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, early childhood education caregivers need to prepare food that affects children's nutrition by laying the foundations for precise knowledge regarding healthy food, and healthy lifestyle (Ogden, *et al.*, 2016). Children need to be provided with nutritious food to promote their health and physical well-being. When healthy eating habits are promoted for young children, this may manage the problem of childhood obesity for children under five years while preventing the contraction of non-communicable diseases at a younger age.

Managing children's nutrition may be a challenge for developing countries due to poverty, hence, Cooper and Contento (2019) and Nanney, *et al.* (2017) assert that early childhood centres need to make means of providing nutritious meals and beverages for young children while under their care and introduce children to the importance of drinking water. In addition, children need to be encouraged to participate in regular physical activity and playtime so that their overall health and development can be supported. This can be achieved by ensuring that the opportunities for structured and unstructured play are created under adult supervision be it at home or school. This may call for identification and childproofing of areas where children spend most of their time and keeping small objects that can choke children when playing out of reach. Therefore, parents need to understand the importance of physical activity to enhance their children's physical development which serves as an enabler for healthy well-being. The management of children's health also talks to ensuring that children get enough sleep, hence consistent bedtime needs to be established. Management of health and safety in early childhood centres can be achieved through regular communication and collaboration to foster consistency in terms of children's health and safety. This means that parents, caregivers, and early childhood educators need to work together to ensure that this is achieved for children's sake.

1.5. Objectives of the Paper

This paper aims to examine the management of young children's health, safety, and nutrition during the early learning years.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What is the significance of young children's health, safety, and nutrition during the early learning years?
- How do children's health and nutrition contribute to child's development and well-being?

- How important are safe spaces for children's development and well-being?
- What strategies can be adopted to manage young children's health, safety, and nutrition during the early learning years?

2. Theoretical Framework

The paper used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory since it focuses on the significance of different layers of the ecosystem in the development of children (Bronfenbrenner (1979). This theory was chosen because of the role that social surroundings have on the developing child (Rosa and Tudge, 2013) and the role that social engagement plays in one's development and interaction. Hence, Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory recognizes the importance of complex intersections that children have with their environment in terms of influencing their development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) views child development as being influenced by various layers of the environment. These multi-layers play an important role in the management of young children's health, safety, and nutrition during the early learning years. Children typically find themselves ensnared in various ecosystems, from the most intimate home ecological system to the larger school system and then to the most expansive system, which includes society and culture.

The first layer, the microsystem is the innermost circle or space for the child's initial learning, which includes family. The second layer is the mesosystem which involves systems interacting with people in the microsystem such as ECD centres in communities, schools, and playmate settings. The relationship will assist the child to feel safe as it bridges the gap between the home environment and the school environment. The exosystem as the third layer involves layers that do not work directly with children but have some impact on the child's development. These systems include parents' workplaces, family friends, the Department of Social Welfare, the Department of Health, the Department of Education as well as institutions of Higher learning. Fourthly, the macrosystem is a societal blueprint of a particular culture or subculture and comprises values, laws, customs and resources, lifestyles, and opportunity structures (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The chronosystem is a level that refers to the way each level influences the one before and after it in a back-and-forth motion. It also applies to the historical context relating to the time the child is raised. However, from the layers outlined above, this theory emphasizes the importance of collaboration between family and early childhood centres in laying a solid foundation for young children during the early learning years. Each of these ecological systems inevitably interacts with and influences each other in all aspects of the children's lives (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The ecological context has mainly focused on the psychosocial aspects of children's environments, largely ignoring the physical environment and its effect on child development, as the physical environment can influence child development directly and via adult caregivers. Even though many of the underlying processes that connect context to development are similar for physical and psychosocial environmental factors, such as parent-child interaction and other interpersonal processes, self-regulation, physiological adaptations, and control beliefs are altered by the physical environment. A growing body of research documents the significant effects of the physical environment on children's cognitive and socioemotional development (Ferguson, *et al.*, 2013).

3. Methodology

A qualitative research method was chosen for this study, where 10 participants from the three early childhood centres were purposively selected to be part of this study. The qualitative research method was chosen because the selected research participants were studied in their natural contexts (Marshall

and Rossman, 2016). The purposively selected participants were three parents (one from each centre), 6 early childhood educators (2 from each centre) from the selected centres, and one department official responsible for early childhood from the selected Buffalo City Municipality. The selected research participants were identified because they have a deeper knowledge of the phenomenon being studied (Kelly and Codeiro, 2020). For this paper, the data was collected using semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observation. The different tools used to collect data helped with the data triangulation to ensure that the data collected was valid and reliable. The data collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, and documents was analyzed thematically (Creswell, 2014). For consistency and rigor, trustworthiness and credibility were prioritized through participant validation and evidence from verbatim quotations.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings found that most of the time the food provided for the young children in the early learning areas was unhealthy and this compromised children's health and well-being. Again, the infrastructure in ECD centres was not accommodative to the needs of young children aged 0 to 4 years. The dilapidated infrastructure posed a risk to children's health and safety. The findings are further discussed below.

4.1. Young Children's Health and Nutrition

For every child to thrive later in, there is a need for enhanced growth and development to ensure that children live longer and healthier. The data collected showed that although the research participants know about the health and nutrition of young children in their early childhood years, the challenges about children's nutrition still prevail. This is because the food being presented to young children lacks nutritious value resulting in children being susceptible to non-communicable diseases that may result in high child mortality rates. Even Mokone, *et al.* (2023) believe that during early childhood years, young children need to get adequate nutrition for their well-being. This foundation needs to be laid during the early years because it is during these years that positive developmental gains matter the most for long-lasting effects on the child's life even beyond their childhood years. Moreover, when such provisions are made at an early age, childhood obesity which has increased in South Africa among young children may be eliminated. From the interviews, it was evident that most of the children enrolled in early childhood centres are staying with their grandparents who are the beneficiaries of old-age grants, this has been a factor identified in terms of the nutritious food provided to the children. This contributes to malnourishment which harms children's academic attainment as children may not achieve their full potential as asserted by Maalouf-Manasseh, *et al.* (2015). Data collected revealed that parents and early childhood educators were partially aware of the relationship between children's nutritional health and child's brain development. This is despite that the early years of a child's life are perceived as the best years in laying the foundation for a child's development. The departmental official acknowledged the importance of nutrition for children's lives and acknowledged the role that the department needs to play in ensuring that children's nutrition is prioritized for children's benefit.

4.2. Safe Spaces

From the observations made when collecting data regarding the children's safety spaces, although play-based learning is encouraged in early education centres, there are no facilities for engaging children in play activities. The absence of adequate resources compromises the whole notion of introducing play during the early years to enhance children's physical development. The absence of adequate resources for children compromised children's safety in some centres, children were sharing one swing, and they

were pushing each other, while not being patient with taking turns. Again, adult supervision especially for outdoor play was not prioritized. This may be risky for children and the intended outcomes may not be achieved when there are no clear objectives and adult supervision (Ablewhite, *et al.*, 2015). Even though the teaching plans were checked as documents for collecting data, there was no learning programme planned on how early childhood educators plan their activities and which objectives are to be achieved. When children are not afforded opportunities for safe space, they may become reluctant in playing to avoid injuries during play, this implies that children's safety during play is a priority (Nitecki and Chung, 2015). Hence, Bell, *et al.* (2020), advocated for exposing children to physical activities during their early years of life to become healthy people later in life. As there were no dedicated play areas, with some centres having dilapidated structures, the safety of the children was not guaranteed without supervision, as children may be susceptible to injuries. This is despite that Senda (2015) advocates for safe learning spaces where there are age-appropriate toys for children to play with to enhance their development. Although hygiene practices are promoted, from the observations made, some early childhood centres did not have running water, nor ablution services and the early childhood educators with the support of the community received their water from the community. There is no water tank and during scarce rains, educators mentioned that maintenance of hygiene practices is compromised.

4.3. Managing Children's Health and Safety

As mentioned under the health, safety, and nutrition section, the data revealed that there are still some encountered challenges. This section explored how nutrition and safety management can be done in early learning centres. The participants, more especially parents, and early childhood educators showed their willingness to ensure their children receive the best in terms of their well-being for them to reach their full potential and become better people even beyond their childhood years. The departmental official acknowledges that as the department they do have some programmes aimed at enhancing children's development, although their challenge is reaching out to all the centres available in the district as they are under-resourced. Another challenge is the ECD sector that has migrated from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the Department of Basic Education (DBE). This exacerbates the challenge as DBE is still trying to find its feet in terms of ensuring that all the early learning centres are supported. Moreover, another challenge is the issue of unregistered early education centres that are operating while not meeting the DBE registration requirements. This means that even if the department may have the programmes to be rolled out in supporting early childhood centres, challenges will remain as unregistered centres are not beneficiaries of such programmes while having children under their care. According to Carson, *et al.* (2015) management of young children's safety, health, and nutrition needs to be a collaborative effort as parents have an important role to play in managing what children eat at home to prevent obesity. This is because when children are obese, they become inactive and less physically active, and that affects their health and well-being. At times such children may have difficulty socializing with peers as peers may avoid playing with them because of their weight. This is in line with Ogden, *et al.* (2016) that child obesity needs to be managed to ensure that children live healthily and longer to prevent them from contracting non-communicable diseases. Although there were menus containing food with nutritious value for children, the data collected revealed that the menu is not implemented in some pre-schools due to the availability of funds to provide for such meals. Even when children bring food from home, they bring what is available with no consideration of how nutritious the food is. This is despite what was mentioned by Vittrup and McClure, (2018) that early childhood education needs to implement nutrition programmes that promote a balanced diet for children's health

and well-being. Although there seem to be programmes that are readily available as per the data collected from the departmental official, the early childhood educators and parents are not aware of some of the programmes. In some instances, although early childhood educators are aware, the resources are not available for them to do as the department requires. For example, the nutrition of children is still a challenge, this is even worse because the early childhood centres do not even have vegetable gardens that may be the enablers of proper nutrition for children. Again, the spaces are not safe enough, and at times supervision is often difficult when children play. From the observations made, there are no clear plans made in terms of the daily learning programme as a result there is no proper preparation for play-based learning, and this compromised children's holistic development as children learn and develop new skills when learning through play.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Although the health, nutrition, and safety of young children during the early years are of utmost importance, it is evident that there is still a lot that needs to be done in line with the National Norms and Standards for Partial Care to ensure that children reach their full potential. In addition, although there seem to be plans in place in terms of the department to ensure that children develop to become healthy, there are still some areas of concern that need attention. Again, the information about what contributes to children's development is not properly conceptualized by some early childhood educators and parents and this contributes to the children's health and well-being. This paper recommends a more coordinated approach in early childhood education where stakeholders may be capacitated in terms of managing health, safety, and nutrition during the early learning years. This needs to ensure that secure and safe indoor and outdoor settings that support holistic development are developed and maintained. Again, parents and early childhood educators need to collaborate to have deeper information about what needs to be done to manage young children's health and well-being. Intersectoral collaboration needs to strengthen for managing young children's health, safety, and nutrition during the early childhood years. Such collaborations may contribute to the resources unavailable in early childhood centres to enhance children's holistic development.

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