

THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY EDUCATION

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Summary

The focus of this article is early education of children from birth until the age of eight. Goals and objectives of early education are stated, along with its significant role in forming personality. Contemporary education of children is viewed in the framework of modern society's requirements. The main trends in this area of education are reviewed that contribute to the forming of a well-developed personality able to find its way in the constantly changing life of today. The content of early education is associated with the ideas of sustainable development. Much attention is paid to the problem of limitations that urban environments place on children's communication with nature. The role of parents in children's education is an essential aspect of this article. The main educational technologies and methods are given in a historical retrospective, overviewing some of the main pedagogical systems. A brief reference to systems of pre-school education is provided. The democratic model of education is emphasized.

1. What is Early Education?

After the 1992 Conference in Rio de Janeiro, it became evident that societies of the future, especially those concerned with sustainable development, would require a profoundly changed educational system. Such a system should be oriented to new values, based on new approaches towards relationships between humankind and nature. And here the age at which the education of a person starts is of great significance. The

earlier the start, the more effective are the results that can be achieved.

Here are some definitions. Education is the process of upbringing, learning, and development of a child. These are the elements of education that are closely linked in an integrated process, but at specific stages of education some are more dominant than others. One should not forget that the younger a child is, the more attention should be paid to upbringing, while the role of learning becomes more substantial as the child grows.

Early education is considered to be the period from birth until the age of approximately eight years for, in spite of the drastic changes in children's bodies and minds that take place during that time, these eight years constitute a whole (this statement is expanded below). The value of the early period in children's development is acknowledged by scientists all over the world. It is the period when the foundation is laid for personality, social, emotional, intellectual, physical development, and cognition, when basic behavioral patterns are being shaped. The significance of early education can be well illustrated by cases of people who have happened to live among animals from their birth. These people learned with great difficulty, could not master human languages, could not make contact with others, and never became fully human. These horrible examples fully illustrate the extent to which the early period of children's development is significant for their later socialization.

The well-known psychologist L.S. Vygotsky developed the theory that the forming of conscience is the most essential factor for the development of a person. It is conscience that determines the limits for one's perception of outer reality and the possibilities of self-control, especially in the emotional sphere. Unlike those of animals, the higher psychic functions of humans are mediated by the specific "instruments of conscience" that exist in human culture. These stand between human beings and the world and enable discovery of the most essential aspects of conscience.

The essence of children's development is that gradually they are introduced to human culture, mastering the means and developing the abilities to apprehend the world interactively in ways that are tolerated by their culture. Actions that put notions into operation, in which human experience is concentrated, are not equally significant at every age. Thus every age has its own characteristics of development. This becomes manifest not only through the different types of activities specific for a stage of development, but also in the means that children use. It has been discovered that while perception develops children assume certain socially established means and actions. Specialists believe that there are periods in children's growth when certain abilities are trained more effectively than in others. Pre-school age is the time of figurative mental forms, so the basic means that are adopted then are symbolic: sensor analogs, signs, and symbols. At this point, already children have learned to look at the world through the "glasses" of human culture. These are the factors of mental development that help children to form a conscious relation to reality.

Sometimes the period of early childhood is viewed as a preliminary for "adult life" or, in an even narrower way, as preparation for school. However, the period of early childhood is a value by itself. Children enjoy the very moment, which is "now," and not

their possible life in the future. One must not forget that children are not at all “little adults.” The span of childhood implies specific mental characteristics, which should be taken into account in the process of education. At the same time, the period of childhood can be presented as composed of several unique stages.

2. Goals and Objectives of Early Education

Early education is a vital part of every person’s education. It has a crucial meaning for a) formation of personality; b) further education; c) development of society as a whole. At this period the basic features of personality—willful and arbitrary behavior—are formed, through an active process of imagination and the development of creativity.

Goals and objectives of early education can be presented in separate blocks. In order to understand the meaning of early education, one should clarify its contemporary goals and objectives. Shaping requirements to an individual derives from humankind’s desired image of society.

As principles of sustainable development should be embodied in the living texture of social life, new requirements to the process of early education have arisen. First of all, the main issue is the formation of a new set of values, a new behavior with respect to the environment. For a long time, industrial societies lived up to the ideals of prestige-oriented growing consumption. The value of nature by itself was never seriously considered. In short, “Man was the master of nature.” This sort of relationship with nature has a long history. Each individual’s system of values is formed at an early age, so it is vital to abandon the consumer view of nature and rebuild the education system on the new basis that “Humans are a part of nature.” The task is facilitated by the specifics of early childhood: children’s perception of the environment differs greatly from that of adults, for it is holistic. This quality gives one a sense of oneself as part of the world, part of nature, which is crucial for the education of people who may live in a society of sustainable development.

Threats of technological and natural catastrophes are daily present in modern society. For this reason every child should be acquainted with diverse sources of potential danger, understand the necessity of environmental safety rules, and learn proper behavior in dangerous and adverse situations.

3. Children’s Health

The problem of children’s health has become vital in the last few decades all over the world, not only because more attention is being paid to the problem than ever before, but also because of the unsatisfactory state of the environment, the growing use of drugs and alcohol, smoking, and hereditary diseases. Early childhood is an extremely favorable time for the formation of elementary habits of a healthy lifestyle, for understanding causal relationships between children’s behavior, the state of environment, and the state of health. Small children should acquire the necessary skills of personal hygiene, not only as rules, but as actual habits of everyday life. At this age already negative attitude towards drugs and smoking should be formed, together with corresponding behavior.

4. Contemporary Education and Society

Every society has worked out a dominant set of values according to its history, culture, religion, etc. And sustainable development adds new values. It is essential that in every country children at an early age should perceive themselves as a part of nature, care about it, develop environmentally safe habits and environmentally adequate behavior, and consider the impact of their actions upon the environment.

Learning in early childhood is the key to future success. It is important not just to provide children with a certain repertoire of knowledge, but also to teach them how to learn, to form a thirst for new knowledge about the world and their own position in it. Modern societies are changing rapidly, and this generation of teachers can not know what skills and what knowledge will be required in the future when the children of today have become adults. Besides, due to the progress of science and technology, knowledge is “aging” rapidly. Contemporary education of children must be progressive, and ahead of its time.

5. The Priorities of Early Childhood

An advanced civil society ensures that individuals are educated to think independently, creatively, and flexibly, to make personal choices, to find non-standard solutions promptly, and to be responsible for their actions. These are the priorities for shaping thinking people in early childhood.

Early education used to focus on such objectives as learning to read and write, and preparing for school. Modern social trends have set new objectives for teachers. An example of an answer to this challenge is a program called “Philosophy to Children” developed by the well-known U.S. philosopher and teacher Matthew Lipman in the late 1960s. The program is oriented toward children of older pre-school and early school age. It is acknowledged by UNESCO to be the best program in this area. The purpose of the program is training a broad variety of thinking skills, which is achieved by means of what is called the “research community.” This is a sort of intellectual game or collective activity, a result of common efforts in which both children and teacher take part. The aim of the game is not to teach different philosophical systems to small children, but to train them in the thinking skills necessary for creative and critical reflection on the world.

Even at early age, children are still consumers, as all humans are, and the solution of environmental problems is impossible unless a new ethos of consumption evolves. Such a system includes new relationships between individuals and the environment, the basis of which is formed in early childhood. At this age, children should be brought up to understand the need for limiting one’s demands. At this point, environmental education is closely linked to economics education. The economy helps people to realize their general and individual demands, how they can be satisfied, what goods and services are required to do so, what should be produced and for whom. The science of economics tells children what money is for, and how natural resources are used. Children can learn to choose goods with environmental safety marks (recycled, not tested on animals, etc), to save electricity, water, and paper, and to sort waste by type. One economics

education program that is famous all over the world is the Junior Achievement Program, through which several generations have been trained. The program was launched in the USA in 1919. Trainees become involved in the program when they are six years old. Even the younger participants learn in an easy way about such complex matters as buying and selling, consumer's choice, clients, salaries, economic stimuli, demand and supply, accumulation, exchange, the individual, marketing, deficiency, and jobs.

Early childhood is one of the most important stages of children's socialization, a time when the seeds of later civic attitudes are being sown to help them find their way through the intricate environment of modern life, which is changing drastically with every passing day. That is why one of the most important objectives of early education is to train children in the skills of adaptation to complex situations that they might encounter in the future, and to form patterns of answers to potential complications. As educational practice demonstrates, the process of socialization goes much better in small groups than in large ones. Children who study and socialize in small groups become more friendly and are prone to collective activities. At the same time, children brought up in large groups are usually more emotionally unstable, aggressive, and unwilling to communicate.

In early childhood, abilities for creation are immeasurable. Children are like a blank sheet, and their personalities are shaped through constant creative play. The more support an individual has for their creativity in infancy, the more success they can achieve in later life. Creativeness is shown by unexpected ways of using material objects, composing tales and stories, or changing the subject of known ones, and in the vividness of language. In order to develop their creative abilities, children need to have the possibility to transform objects and their environment. The problem of gifted children is closely associated with the development of creativity. Such children need special conditions and training programs to support their diverse demands at an early age. Lacking the support of adults, creative potential is not realized and fades away slowly, which happens too often.

Early childhood is also a period when language is mastered and speech skills acquired. Speech progresses most intensively between the ages of two and three years. Scientific research shows that children's vocabulary peaks at that period: they generally know 270 words at the age of two, 450 words at two and a half, and 800 to 1000 words at the age of three.

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Biographical Sketch

Natalya A. Ryzhova, Ph.D. in pedagogy, D.Biol., graduated from Moscow State University. Since 1986, she has been engaged in environmental education of pre-school children and elementary school children. She holds the following positions: leading scientific worker at the Moscow Pre-School Childhood Center; teacher at Moscow International University's Higher School of Environmental Science; editor of *Obruch*; editorial board member of *Environmental Education*; member of the Strategies for Environmental Education in the Russian Federation workgroup; member of the Coordination Council on Environmental Education with the Moscow Educational Committee. Natalya Ryzhova is also the author of more than 100 scientific research papers, tales and stories for children, handbooks for parents and teachers. She holds regular training seminars for Russian pedagogues. Her program "Our Home is Nature" was supported by Russian Ministry of Education and is widely known in Russia.