Level 4 Standards

Children, Young People and Families Practitioner

Defining Children and Childhood

Introduction

Children and adolescents are not short adults - they are qualitatively different. They have physical, psychological and social needs that must be met to enable healthy growth and development. The extent to which parents, the family, the community and the society are able to meet these developmental needs (or not) has long-term consequences for the kinds of adults they will become.

Armed conflict, displacement, disruption of normal life, and separation from family and/or community can have powerful, long-lasting effects that need to be compensated for in protection and assistance interventions.

Children and adolescents are not a homogenous group. While they share basic universal needs, the expression of those needs depends on a wide range of personal, social and cultural factors. The protection and assistance interventions of your organisation and its partners are less likely to achieve their intended impact if a population of concern is treated as an undifferentiated group.

To be effective, an understand is necessary, in a given situation, of what differences among gender, age, maturity, social class or caste, cultural or religious background have operational implications. Taking these factors into account is basic to good programming.

Children need the care, protection and guidance which is normally provided by parents or other care-givers, especially during the early years when they are most dependent. While their emerging abilities and capacities change the nature of this vulnerability from infancy through adolescence, their need for attention and guidance at each stage remains. Parents and communities have the primary responsibility for protecting and caring for their children, and initiating them into culturally relevant skills, attitudes and ways of thinking. Interventions by outsiders are significant largely to the extent that they strengthen (or inadvertently undermine) family and community capacities to provide this care and protection.

There are some circumstances where the urgent needs of children or adolescents must be met directly, but maintaining a long-term view is essential to finding ways to enable families and communities to care for and protect their children on an ongoing basis.

Key Concepts

1. There is no universal definition of children or of childhood. Childhood is a cultural and social construction, and not simply a universal stage in the human being's physical and psychological development.

2. Children and adolescents have needs and capacities that are significantly different from those of adults.

3. Although certain general features of child development are predictable, there are significant cultural differences in the ways in which children and adolescents develop, and in the beliefs, goals and expectations and childrearing practices that shape development.

4. Gender differences are especially significant, as are differences related to social status, class/caste and specific needs – e.g. related to disability.

5. It is important to integrate both a child rights and a child development perspective into programme planning.

6. Children and adolescents also have the capacity to be resilient in the face of adversity. The concept of resilience directs attention to those factors within the individual, the family and the wider context which help people to cope with adversity.

7. Strengthening supportive networks may be the most effective way of enabling children and their families to cope with adverse circumstances.

8. In situations in which children's development is under threat because of sudden displacement, a high priority should be given to restoring a sense normality in their lives and by protecting them from further threats to their development.

9. The Best Interests of the child is an important principle in both legal and child development contexts and can be applied to individual children and more generally in programming. But implementing it sometimes requires handling complex and contradictory considerations.

10. As well as being an important legal right, child participation can promote child and adolescent development and can enhance decision-making about young people. Clarity of objectives and methods, a careful consideration of issues of culture, gender and age, and the real commitment by the adults involved will greatly facilitate effective implementation of this important principle.

Definitions

The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines "child" as everyone under the age of 18 unless, under applicable law, majority is attained earlier (Article 1): for most purposes in this Resource Pack, this definition is adopted. However, the concept of childhood is understood differently in different cultural and social contexts.

"Child development", or "child and adolescent development" refer to the process of growth and maturation of the human individual from conception to adulthood.

The term "adolescence" has particular connotations in particular cultural and social contexts. In this resource pack, it is used to describe young people who are in the stage of development that occurs between the beginning of puberty until adulthood, without any implication that this period is characterised by any particular behaviour or attitudes.

However, a distinction between children and adolescents is sometimes necessary in order to highlight the particular issues facing older young people, whose needs can be, and are frequently, overlooked in programming.

Defining Children and Childhood

key learning points

➤ There is no universal definition of who is a child, adolescent or youth. Chronological age is not a sufficient criterion for establishing operational definitions.

➤ Childhood is understood in very different ways in different contexts. Childhood is a social and cultural construction, not merely a stage in physical and psychological development.

➤ Children and adolescents can be especially vulnerable because of their immaturity and dependence, but it is important also to recognise their potential and resilience. A child-centred situation analysis may be important in identifying and assessing the particular needs of children in particular situations.

Although it is common to define children by reference to age and the level of children's biological and psychological development, definitions of children and of childhood are much more complex than this.

Defining Children by Age

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 1) states that "a child means every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier".

While this definition provides a point of common reference for international organisations, NGOs and governments, operational definitions in the field may differ. For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross defines an unaccompanied minor as "below 15 years of age and not being accompanied by an adult".

Childhood as a Social and Cultural Concept

Childhood is neither timeless nor universal: it is not determined only by age, or by biological and psychological factors. Rather childhood is understood by reference to particular cultural and social contexts and to particular periods in history.

Childhood in Mexico is not the same as childhood in Madras or Madrid: childhood at the beginning of the third Millennium in London is not the same as it was two hundred years ago.

In the more developed countries of the north, for example, childhood is now seen as an extended period of economic dependency and protected innocence during which play and schooling are seen as central components: but this is far removed from childhood in many other cultures, where work (whether paid, or work within the household) must take precedence over both schooling and play.

In many countries of the south, the child-rearing environment is characterised by large families and high infant mortality: a heavy emphasis on parents' efforts to ensure the physical survival of their children means that parents must devote much of their time to economic and domestic activity, with many "parenting" tasks delegated to other people, often older children. Western notions of childhood often place an emphasis on children's vulnerability and innocence, but again in other contexts this may be much less appropriate.

Avoiding Assumptions about Vulnerability in Children and Adolescents

Children may be especially vulnerable because of their immaturity and reliance on adults for their care and protection. But it is also important to remember that resilience as well as vulnerability is a characteristic of the growing human organism.

Many different factors, relating to the individual child, the family, the immediate social situation and the wider cultural context may combine to place children in a position of risk of threats to their well-being, development and rights. The capacity to anticipate, acknowledge and assess such factors is fundamental to the effective protection of children.

Introducing Child Development Thinking into Programme Planning

key learning points

- ➤ It is important to integrate both a child rights and a child development perspective into programme planning.

- ➤ Although certain aspects of child development are predictable and universal, there are significant cultural differences in the ways in which children and adolescents develop.

- ➤ The process of child development can be described as transactional: children and adolescents are not the passive subjects of socialisation but play a central role in their own development.

- ➤ Children and adolescents have needs and capacities which are significantly different from those of adults.