



# Problems in child care and feeding practices of normal children in urban India

Dr.Kumari Alpana

B.R.A. Bihar University

Muzaffarpur

## Abstract

Children are the future of our country and hence their health is of prime importance. Mothers have a great responsibility to take care of their child's nutrition and help them grow into a healthy adult. Though, the need for child care starts from the moment a baby is conceived but post delivery, it is even more important to focus on a child's health. Mother's milk is the most nutritious food for infants and that cannot be replaced with any other readymade source. Over the period of time, the importance of breast feeding has declined and mothers are reaching out to well marketed other sources of milk to feed their babies. The style of child care has changed, especially in urban India. In this paper we would talk about the problems in child care and feeding practices in urban India.

**Keywords:** Child care, Urban India, Feeding practices, Nutrition, Paediatrics, Child health

## Introduction

Parenting comes with a huge responsibility and child care during the initial phase of first two years is very important. It is said that a child needs to be given mother's feed within the first hour of its birth. It helps the child in increasing its immunity and protects the child from any infection. Mother feed is considered to be a wholesome nutrition solely responsible for a child's initial growth and development. For the first six months a child is supposed to be exclusively on mother's feed and post that optimal feeding is required at least for two years.

In market, many substitutes are available for mother's milk and are sold as formula food. But researchers claim that it is not as beneficial as mother's feed. Most of the growth and development for a child happens in the first two years. And hence this is the crucial period from nutrition perspective for a child. Use of any substitute can be like a compromise on this important factor for the child's growth. With the progression of society, the old methods of child care have changed a lot and have been replaced as per the convenience to save time and effort. This is also applicable to the states like Bihar and U.P which has been considered to be following the age old customs and traditions. Some of these new methods are beneficial for the child as in this era where all the

knowledge is available with the click of a button; parents are taking informed decisions instead of blindly believing in the traditional methods of child care. [1]

## Child care in urban India

In urban India, mostly nuclear family culture is prevalent. Both the parents are working and children are taken care by the full time nannies or are put in the crèche. The amount of time a mother used to spend earlier with her child has decreased a lot for most of the couples. It has been observed that the personality development of children in case where the mother or the grandparents spend the entire day with child and in cases where the child spends his or her day with the nanny or in crèche is different. A child growing up having no family member around during work hours grows to be an independent child. On the contrary, children growing up with grandparents or mother are very much dependent on their family for their daily needs. [1]

The tips of child care are passed on to the new parents from their elders and some of the tips are included in the current era as well. For example, children need a good body massage and stretching during the initial years of growth for a strong formation of bones and muscles. This practice is still followed but the oil used has been evolved over the period of time. Mustard oil has been replaced by fancy oils made by companies focused on producing child care products. So the concept is same, only the method has changed.

Another example is use of diapers instead of handmade cloths for children. Diapers bring convenience and are a major invention in the child care needs but it comes with its own challenges. Excessive use could bring rashes to the body of child and can cause further problems of infection. However handmade cloths need more attention but it has its advantages and is comfortable for the child. So it can be said that modern way of child care has its benefits but the traditional methods has its own advantages. [2]

## Feeding practices for infants

Mothers' milk is the complete nutrition for a child. A child needs to be fed with mother's milk within the first hour of the birth. The first feed of child is very important and helps in maintaining the body temperature of a child. It protects the child from any infection and builds the immunity. The bonding between a mother and a child is very much dependent on breast feeding. For the six months from the birth, a child needs exclusive feeding which means that mother's milk should be the only source of food for the child as it is considered to have all the health benefits. [3]

Starting from seventh month and up to two years or more, a child is supposed to have optimal feeding which means that a child can supplement his or her diet from external food sources but mother's milk will still be the main source of food in those growing years. Most of the child brain grows in first few years of the life and in that crucial phase it is important for the child to have a complete nutrition. A child who has done optimal breast feeding is found to be less prone to health problems later in the life. Even the mother becomes less prone to cancer related problems. It is a winning idea for the family and it should be given importance.

In modern times, mothers are using tools which can store their milk for the child. They do this mainly when they know that they would not be around their child for the whole day as per the child's feed timings. This is a good invention to balance both the worlds for a woman. This helps them in taking care of their career without compromising on the child's nutrition. As we have progressed with time, basic concepts and values have

remained with changed methods of following it. It is a perfect example of coexistence of modern values with age old benefits. [4]

## Benefits of breast feeding

Breast feeding is known to reduce the infant mortality rate. Early initiation of breast feeding and timely provision of mother's milk to a child has a great impact on reducing the risk of child infection and other immunity related problems. Lets us see the benefits of mothers' feed in detail:

**Strong Immunity:** Mother's milk is full of nutrition and helps the child in fighting the infection during the initial days post birth. A child is protected in mother's womb and as soon as it comes out, the outside environment is very risky for the child. The risk of catching infections increases manifold during that time and hence it is advisable to feed the child within the first hour of its birth. The milk boosts the child's immunity ad fight against various infections. Moreover, when the temperature also changes for the child when it comes out of the mother's womb which is warmer compared to the outside environment.

**Mother-child bonding:** Feeding is known to increase the bonding between mother and a child. The warmth of mother's body makes the child feel the same environment which he or she has been feeling since it started developing inside the mother's body. It helps the child understand the love and affection of a mother and supports the emotional development of the child. [6]

**Growth and development:** Initial years of growth are marked by most of the development in a child's brain. A child learns and develops its cognitive thinking ability in the starting years of the life. This needs complete care and nutrition for the all round development of the child, both physically and mentally. First six months need exclusive feeding of mother's milk followed by the optimal feeding along with complementary feeding up to two years. [7]

## Challenges

All said and done about the importance of child care and feeding, there are many roadblocks which makes majority of children suffer with the lack of proper breast feeding. Let us have a look at those factors:

**Availability of substitutes:** Business thrives on child care products as India has a huge market for it. Indian population is growing and so is the number of children ready to use these products. This makes the child care business profitable with continuous growth. Marketing of formula foods as substitutes for milk is very common and attracts both rural and urban populations. People living in rural India are misguided and consider this replacement to be healthier. Moreover, urban population looking for convenience goes for such substitutes. [7]

**Lack of awareness:** India is still facing the problems of early marriage and motherhood. This leaves young borns in the hands of inexperienced mothers who do not have much knowledge about child care and feeding. Illiteracy is another problem adding to this woe. Uneducated mothers are not aware about the importance of breast feeding and the feeding patterns for their new borns and follow the age old traditions and sometimes experiment with it. There is also inertia amongst these women to change their child care methods as they do not believe anyone else other than their old family members who turn out to be the major influencers.

**Lack of infrastructural support:** In most of the public places, we do not have proper feeding area which leaves the mothers with an option of formula feeds which provides convenience in such cases. Even working mothers do not have provision for feeding their children at the work places and they also resort to the substitutes sometimes during their work hours. [8]

## Conclusion

Child care is very crucial in the initial years of a child's life when most of the growth and development occurs for the child. In that phase feeding is the most important aspect which needs to be taken care of. In cities people are aware and well read about the requirements of a child but rural India is still lacking the knowledge and awareness. Illiteracy is a major concern here in this case as it does not allow the parents to think from a logical perspective and they rely on myths practiced from generations.

Further, the practices in child care have evolved a lot with time but the basic concept has remained the same. Mother's feed is of utmost importance and cannot be replaced from any other formula feed. Modern techniques and tools are being used to feed the child timely with the mother's milk and that is helping the woman in urban India to balance their personal and professional life. The child's health and nutrition cannot be compromised. However, modern way of handling things can help in taking care of the needs for both the mother and the child.

## Future Scope

Awareness needs to be generated on the importance of child's health and nutrition. Mother's feed needs to be highlighted and its importance needs to be told to people who do not have access to information available on internet or other mass media channels. Government initiatives would help in this regard by including rural India in this awareness program. Appropriate infrastructural support and policies need to be made to take care of mothers in offices and public places.

Further, advertisement companies should be given clear guidelines on their marketing strategy so that it does not misguide people on the relevance of formula feed for their children. A healthy child is a promise for a healthy nation and the growth of a country depends heavily on that. Its importance cannot be undermined and ignored. India is a developing nation and this makes it even more important to focus on child care and nutrition for further growth and development of the country. The huge gap in this upbringing and child care in urban and rural India needs to be studied and taken care of for further improvement. The future of our country depends on this. [9]

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