

# It's never too early to learn

Boris Nikitin

*Boris Nikitin is a Soviet engineer who has written widely on questions relating to the education of young children. He and his wife Yelena, a librarian, are co-authors of a study based on their experiences in bringing up their own family. These views of Nikitin's life with his family are from an article in the May 1978 issue of the Unesco Courier.*

When our first child, Alyosha, was born 17 years ago, our primary concern — like that of parents everywhere — was that he should grow up into a capable, good-hearted and healthy adult. But how could we make sure that he would turn out like this?

We read the biographies of talented individuals of the past — poets and writers like Pushkin and Lermontov musicians like Mozart, inventors like Edison — and were struck by the early age at which their creativity became apparent . . . .

We began to collect facts, and to study the history of education. One of the first things we discovered was that in the 18th century, children learned to read and write at the age of 14 or 15; since then these skills have been taught at an increasingly early age. Two centuries later we ourselves started school at the age of eight, whereas our children would do so at seven. We discovered that in 58 countries schooling began at the age of six, and at five in a number of others, and that educational specialists in some parts of the world were asking whether it should not begin at the age of four. How, we asked ourselves, could this trend be explained? What is the best age to start school?

While we were busy puzzling over this question, Alyosha was growing. One day when he was one and a half years old, someone gave him a set of cubes with letters of the alphabet printed on them. "The letters won't mean anything to him yet", we said to ourselves, but we let him play with the cubes all the same.

Three months or so later, we were more than a little surprised to discover that Alyosha could already recognize a dozen letters. By the time he was two and a half, he knew all 26 letters of the Russian alphabet. Two months later, without any prompting, he read out his first word. This was an eye-opener for us. If our child could read at such an early age, how soon could he acquire other skills?

At first, we relied entirely on intuition in determining Alyosha's capacities and limitations. We were very careful, when we played with him, not to apply pressure or impose lessons. If he did something successfully, we were pleased; if he failed, we simply waited until he tried again.

At one-and-a-half or two-year intervals, other little brothers or sisters arrived and we ourselves gained experience and became bolder in our approach. The family's stock of educational toys and equipment for physical exercise steadily increased, and we even invented materials and games ourselves.

In addition to the lettered cubes, we had a board on the wall with letters made of bent wire or cut out of linoleum, a blackboard, chalks, pencils and paper, reading books and copy-books. When one of the little ones found a ring one day he ran up to us, shouting delightedly, "Lock, Mummy, an 'O'!"

We played trains with the letters, joining them up to form "M-A-M-A", "P-A-P-A", "M-O-L-K-O" (milk)



and other familiar words. Our second son, Anton, began to read at three years and three months; the girls all began between the ages of three and four.

Our general approach was based on the fact that, to teach a child to speak, adults talk to it as soon as it is born; in other words the child is placed in conditions of oral communication long before it begins to speak itself. Why not provide the same conditions for the development of other faculties? And this is, as far as we were able, what we did: we tried to place our children in an environment that would stimulate the development of the greatest possible variety of activities.

We didn't hesitate to introduce into the children's immediate surroundings a large number of things from the world of grown-ups. As well as the usual toys, dolls and children's books, we provided a wide range of educational objects and materials, such



The seven children of librarian Yelena Nikitin and her engineer husband Boris are all two or three years a head of other children of their own age. Alyosha, the eldest, is already, at the age of 17, working as a senior technician in a research institute. Anton, the second, has just graduated—at thirteen and a half—from a secondary school specializing in mathematics. The other children are still at school, and are all two or three years younger than their classmates. How is it that they have developed so early? Boris Nikitin explains in this article.

— Soviet engineer Boris Nikitin and his family are firm believers in the precept that a sound mind should go together with a sound body. Physical exercise and outdoor recreation are the order of the day for the Nikitin children, come rain, wind, or even snow . . .

. . . with dad gamely joining in.

(A more complete survey of the "Patterns of Growth in Children in Sri Lanka" by Drs. Beatrice V. de Mel and Kamalika Abeyratne setting out the whole nutrition situation in perspective, has been held over due to lack of space. This study will appear in our next issue of April 1979.)

The early years of childhood, are certainly crucial in both the physical and mental development of an individual. The

as maps and globes, mathematical tables and textbooks, and a whole series of educational games invented by the family.

Games begin with very simple tasks like copying patterns, pictures or shapes, and lead to more creative activities involving the invention of new patterns, models and constructions. These activities are quite informal. They are not "lessons" in the sense that the adult teaches and the child assimilates, but playful contests in



— A family get-together on a sunny day. Informal discussion is an essential part of the upbringing that has helped all the Nikitin children to develop earlier than their contemporaries.

which the grown-ups are participants as well as referees, and which often involve problems like "how can we share 25 walnuts between nine people"? or "how can we divide three apples into 10 equal parts"?

We encourage the children to work the answer out for themselves, and never hurry them however long they take. We believe that it is better to wait patiently and to study their own process of reasoning; we don't even intervene when they're on the wrong

health and education systems of all countries recognise this, though in several of these countries the child begins his formal learning only from the age of five or six when he enters primary school. Yet, it is an established fact that from birth to the age of six the child's development is far more rapid, than in any other period, both physically and psychologically; and the boxes on "Learning—Why start Early" and "It's never too early to learn" on pages (10, 11, 12 and 13) well illustrate this. But as we emphasise there are many opportunities including that of "learning" which are beyond the reach of many children for the simple reason that they are born into deprived circumstances.

## EDUCATION

Free health and hospital services, subsidised food, and free education

track; we leave them to find that out for themselves too. What we are looking for is originality, and the ability to argue a case and defend a point of view.

We allow our children plenty of freedom in choosing their occupations and working out their own time-table. Since we believe that this gives them the opportunity to discover and express their different interests,



— The two eldest Nikitins put their theoretical knowledge to the test in the family workshop.

We know that children are often more interested in playing a game if adults, and especially their parents, also join in enthusiastically. Grown-up should not remain on the side-lines, as impartial observers or dutiful in-

from primary school to the University are among the major institutions of social welfare which the people of Sri Lanka have achieved in recent decades. In education, substantial government funding over the last 30 years has resulted in a rapid expansion of schooling facilities and offered an increasing share of the population of school-going age, in all parts of the country, the opportunities for formal learning. The share of educational expenditures in the government budget has remained at a consistently high level over the last three decades, averaging around 15 percent of budgetary allocations. No doubt literacy rates have improved during this period and attendance in educational institutions increased since this 1950s. The overall averages, however, obscure to an extent the level to which educational expenditures reach down and the impact of their benefits on various segments of the country's children.

structors, but should participate wholeheartedly. And this is what we do; we are just as excited as they are when someone is successful, and just as disappointed when someone makes a mess of things.

Our children each have very different characters and interests but they share the same curiosity, attentiveness and ability to memorize. They easily recall what they have read, think originally, seek their own solutions and enjoy tasks that sharpen their wits. Academician Nikolai Amosov considers that they are not so much "eggheads" as "problem-solvers". They like to invent and act out situations, writing and performing playlets in which they are "in the Revolution", "in prehistoric times", "at the zoo" or "at the theatre".

If the development of the child starts earlier, at a more favourable period of his life, he will not be overburdened with work later on at school and consequently will not drop behind. All our children get good marks at school, but the most important thing is the excellent way in which each one has developed his creative capacities.

Our main conclusion, after 15 years of practical and theoretical enquiry in our own family, is that all children can develop in this way and can do even better—if the necessary conditions are provided at the right time.

# LEARNING - WHY START EARLY

BEFORE WE ARE SIX

Henri Dieuzeide

In most countries, formal education systems recognize the child only from the age of 5 to 6, when compulsory schooling normally begins. Yet from birth to the age of 6 the child's development is much more rapid than at any other period, both psychologically and physically. From the age of 2 or 3, though still largely dependent upon adults and under their guidance, the child begins to establish relationships outside the immediate family and becomes capable of developing certain forms of independent behaviour. A process of assimilation begins through which the child learns to live.

The concept of pre-school education, as we know and accept it today, is the culmination of a long international effort representing a century and a half of research, experiment and achievement.

The principles on which pre-school institutions operate are everywhere more or less the same. The children regularly attend these institutions where they are helped to express themselves better in their own language, to pick up the elementary rules of hygiene and good health, to discover rhythmical self-expression, to dance, sing and draw, to mould sand and model clay, to make objects, to observe nature, to respect the plants and animals around them, to sort and classify objects by type and by shape, and above all to live together and become responsible.

All child psychologists, moreover, now agree on the enormous bearing that the first four to five years of a child's life have on the formation of its personality, as regards both the development of logical, and linguistic skills, emotional balance, and ability to establish social relationships.

Purely from the point of view of intellectual development, recent research seems to indicate that some 50 percent of the knowledge which goes to make up a general intelligence level by the age of seventeen is already acquired by the age of four, while the following 30 percent is acquired, between the ages of four and eight. Most of the time spent in school by pupils between eight and seventeen is therefore devoted to acquiring the remaining 20 per cent, which suggests that the way resources are currently being allocated to each type of school needs to be reviewed.

Some economists even go so far as to claim that if the educational authorities systematically channelled the appropriate funds into pre-schooling they would make a substantial saving on subsequent educational expenditure. However that may be, it is now clear that, so long as its cost can be kept within reasonable bounds pre-primary education could be a decisive factor in bringing about greater justice and in offering all pupils a better chance of succeeding in life, precisely because it would help alleviate the social and cultural handicaps affecting many children

(inability to handle language or abstractions, malnutrition, lack of medical care, the failure to detect physical handicaps, and so on.).

But the task ahead is a daunting one, if only because of the sheer scale of the problem. There are at present 765 million children under six in the world and in ten years time there will be nearly 900 million. This means that of ten children aged between three and six only one now enjoys any kind of organized pre-schooling.

Furthermore, certain types of pre-schooling are over-compartmentalized or excessively oriented merely towards preparation for primary school instead of being conceived as the first phase in a long process of continuing and all-embracing education.

Lastly, there are certain limitations to the formulae that have been adopted, possibly because researchers have failed to examine closely enough whether the various systems now being used are not too rigidly linked to a particular cultural

pattern, i.e. that of the Western world. The educational authorities of the developing countries, who are keen to develop children capable of adjusting to rapid change and displaying flexible and creative behavioural patterns, are faced with the problem of how best to achieve a smooth transition between a child's original culture and the constantly changing modern culture in which he will have to live.

It has only now become obvious that the pre-schooling system in its present form cannot be extended to all three to six-year-olds in countries with limited resources due to the tremendous cost involved. Although no one would dispute that pre-schooling is now a reasonable necessity, not a luxury, and although educationalists are more or less agreed on the intellectual and moral principles on which it should be based, fresh approaches and ingenious new systems still need to be defined almost everywhere if pre-primary education is to be more closely geared to the social and cultural environment as a whole.

Source : *UNESCO Courier*, May 1978.

## The Need for Pre-school Education in the Underprivileged Areas of Colombo

Pre-school education on a large scale is an urgent need in these areas. There is a wide measure of agreement among informed observers that nursery provision on a substantial scale is desirable, not only on educational grounds but also for social, health and welfare consideration. The case, we believe, is a strong one. Very few children, have a stable home background, companionship with their parents and their brothers and sisters. The 'extended family' with cousins, aunts and grandparents close at hand provides a national bridge between the intimacy of life at home and life with strangers in the wider world of school. But there are no extended families because they are migrants. Mothers have less spare time as they have to assist in the family economy and in going to the local fair etc. Absenteeism from school is very often associated with this factor. The older siblings are kept at home to care for the younger children. The issue is not whether he should be 'educated' as he reaches school age, because that is happening anyway. What has to be decided is whether his education is to take place in increasing association with other children and under supervision of skilled people, as well as of parents, in the right condition.

Now it has been realised that without a very effective pre-school programme it is difficult to lay the foundation for the later intellectual developments of children. The most formative stage of an individual is the stage of life up to age 6. The quality of the foundation laid during this period decides the future development of the child. If a child's intelligence is not catered for during this period it is not possible to develop it at a later stage. This is the period when intelligence and

interests develop. It is an age of limitless physical energy, expressed in the form of play. This interest and energy of the child should be fully developed and utilized. His interests should be met with equally challenging educative experiences. Then only will his knowledge be reinforced. What is most necessary is the directive function of education by the adult. If the child is allowed to develop on his own he will develop as a laissez-faire individual. Most of these children (98 per cent) spend their pre-school period idling at home. And in most homes the child is not guided by an adult at most times of the day. It is the pre-school child's education and first-hand experience that goes by default in most families. In the meantime no proper pre-school education programme for the country was attempted during the last few years. So there have sprung up like mushrooms uneducational pre-schools of the most appalling conditions. These schools are not conducted by teachers with proper or adequate training. Uneducative experiences are imparted to the child. As a result irreparable psychological damage is caused to the child. A child is forced to learn the 3Rs by incompetent teachers who judge these children by their own standards. This results in the inhibition of the brain. The enormous drop-out of children in Grade I may be attributed to this. Lack of interest, lack of concentration, inhibitive behaviour of children as shown in this survey can be the results of it.

Source : *A study of early school drop-outs in the secondary schools of underprivileged areas in the city of Colombo (Sri Lanka)*.

## THE PRE-SCHOOL SYSTEM

Liliane Lurcat

During the first months of life, children are subject to the influence of their family. The family environment passes on values peculiar to each family as well as national, regional and class characteristics. Religious beliefs are also imparted by the family. Children absorb this family culture, adopting a variety of habits, for example, of feeding, expressing, amusing or occupying themselves. They adopt certain attitudes when faced with change; depending on the nature of the family, they adjust with varying degrees of ease or difficulty to other environments. This does not mean that the family standardizes reactions. Differences between individuals also play their part.

The period between the ages of three and six is a personality-forming phase typified by great sensitivity to surroundings. It is also the period of pre-schooling, the influence of which can have lasting effects which may tally with family influences or else run counter to them.

It has been pointed out that the essential function of pre-schooling is to introduce children to life in society. This "socialization" has two aspects. On the one hand, it clearly teaches them how to live collectively, with children who are not their parents and who will fulfil specific functions. Children adjust to the group, and to the rhythm and activities of school. They learn to obey adults and to accept discipline, and cultural norms.

The other less obvious aspect of this socialization is that it has the effect of producing a certain uniformity in children's reactions. The most basic and widely accepted moral notions are inculcated in young children; they learn for instance that they ought not take home or break toys belonging to others, that they ought not fight. And these prohibitions are not just an abstract set of rules. It is the action of the children themselves which is commended or criticized. The child gradually learns how to distinguish between what is thought to be positive and what is regarded as negative in what he or other children do.

Moreover, the children in the group participate and react collectively along the same lines as the adult, with the result that approval or disapproval becomes a universal reaction. When, for instance, a three-year-old girl refuses to put away the crayons and the school mistress calls her "a naughty girl", many of the children of the same age in her class will repeat: "Yes, she's naughty, she's not nice". They adopt the adults' opinion. This standardization of reactions has been called "ideological pattern-forming".

The socialization of children at school is something that takes place throughout the day and in the course of their various activities. Thus it is not so much a particular field of teaching as a lifestyle to which the child gradually becomes accustomed.

Source: *UNESCO Courier*, May 1978.



Lack of food permanently affects the growth of the child. The two pictures on this page illustrate this quite clearly. Both these children in the picture above are 27 months old, but the girl on the left has not been given enough food.

A significant feature of growth failure is the lack of nutrients in children. Their mental and physical development cannot be separated. The result of such deprivation is that they are unable to develop themselves in the most crucial stage of their lives.



The two babies in the picture above are 2-year old twins, both raised at home in South India. The difference in their condition is entirely due to the fact that the boy (on the right) was always nursed first and is always fed first while his little sister gets what is left over. Even in the clinic (where this photograph was taken), the mother and elder brother were responding to the cries of the better-nourished, more alert and more demanding boy whilst the malnourished girl sat listless, apathetic, undemanding and unnoticed. This case seems to illustrate the contention that malnourished children do not develop mentally to their full potential not only because of malnutrition itself. It could also be because the listlessness and apathy which result from malnutrition, that the young child does not demand, and does not receive, the attention and stimulating inter-reaction with adults which is also vital for mental growth.

Viewing the developing countries as a whole we observe that almost as extensive as ill-health and malnutrition are illiteracy and the lack of educational opportunities. UNESCO estimated in 1975 that only 62 percent of the children in these countries, between the ages of 6 and 11, were in primary schools and well over half were expected to drop out. As we said earlier, the problem arises from the lack of opportunities and facilities for most of these children. For instance, the distances they have to travel, their low conditions of health, or that their services are needed to supplement family income are barriers to their availing of these facilities. For children in such deprived circumstances, even if the best of educational facilities were available they would not be in a position to get the benefits of such facilities.

In Sri Lanka a complex and controversial issue raised by various scientists and educationists, has been whether the nearly 1.5 million children who enter school really benefit from the education they receive before leaving. The clearest sign of the deficiencies in the system itself is manifested in the high level of school drop-outs and repeaters.

This increasing number of school drop-outs or early school leavers has been the cause for growing concern in recent years. Some leading educationists are of the view that this phenomenon is an indication of the steep decline in educational quality and effectiveness. Others view it as a natural outcome of the depressed socio-economic conditions of the families to which these children are born and brought up in.

A report on "A Study of Early School Drop-outs in the Secondary Schools of Underprivileged Areas in the City of Colombo", using data extracted from official records of the Ministry of Education, shows that there was a marked increase of drop-outs in the period 1973 to 1975. The report states that more than 60 percent who entered these schools in 1968 had dropped out of school by 1975. The figure of drop-outs vary

between estimates in research studies such as this and the official estimate of the Department of Census and Statistics which places the overall school attendance ratio in 1976 at 82 percent (See table).

School Attendance of the Population Aged 6-14 Years 1976

Age	(a)	(b)	(c)
6 ..	342	249	72.8
7 ..	341	277	81.2
8 ..	339	278	82.0
9 ..	337	258	76.5
10 ..	335	252	75.2
11 ..	333	232	69.7
12 ..	330	213	64.5
13 ..	326	194	59.5
14 ..	322	165	51.2
Total 6-14	2,706	2,118	80.9

Source: Department of Census & Statistics

#### NOTES

(a) Obtained from the projected census population by 5-year age groups.

(b) School census, 1976.

(c) School attendance ratio =  
Number of children of a given  
age attending school

-----x100  
Total number of children of the  
same age

The stark fact remains, however, that by 1970 nearly Rs. 500 million was being spent on education and about 1.4 million children were enrolling at the primary stage but by 1975 the numbers enrolling had fallen and finally only about 4000 or less than 1 percent of those who started off at the primary stage were having the opportunity of moving upto the level of universities or technical college. The question that arises here is whether the Rs. 500 million spent on education in 1970 or Rs. 1,000/- million in 1978, was going mostly to ultimately turn out each year the 5000 odd "higher-educated" who have the opportunity of enrolling with the higher institutes of learning. If it is so the conclusion is clear that the system favours a small minority at the expense of a large majority.

Fears have been expressed that providing educational facilities at such vast expense in this manner almost amounts to a waste of funds and limits the use of scarce financial resource for the other aspects of national development. This problem has been dealt with by many specialists and (as referred to earlier) this question of early school drop-outs, particularly in the underprivileged areas

of Colombo city. In a report on these findings Dr. Mrs. T. Kariyawasam commented "one can only be amazed at the disproportionate results achieved after immense educational efforts of the last few years".

Commenting on data extracted from official records of the Ministry of Education the report states: "researches have shown that on the average an individual requires a minimum of three to four years of education before he attains functional literacy. This implies that for many drop-outs, the years in school are a complete educational wastage. For most Government-sponsored jobs at unskilled level the minimum qualification is Grade 7. Thus, it indicates the low productivity of the educational system. Some pupils do not even attain functional literacy before leaving.

"This complex problem of drop-outs affects the universalisation of primary education in Sri Lanka. It indirectly rebounds to the detriment of the development of the country. High rates of early school-leaving and repetition are responsible for making the ratio of the primary stage to the junior secondary so high in Sri Lanka. Thus an astonishing proportion of precious educational resources and efforts is being poured into, not educating youngsters, but producing high statistics of drop-outs. As a result education becomes a disinvestment."

"In Sri Lanka in 1975 the number who successfully completed the sixth grade was only 32.8 percent of the number that had begun schooling 6 years earlier. Assuming that the drop-out rate was constant throughout the course, this implies that more than double the years of education were invested for completing the six year course. Thus if wastage were eliminated the same number of primary school children will be educated at less than half the cost. This does not mean that the number of years of education received by the drop-outs is not part of the possible output of primary schooling.

Primary schooling is a prerequisite for success in any kind of employment. Hence, if nearly 60 percent of the children entering the primary stage drop-out at the end, it poses a very serious problem for the country. Illiteracy can be a barrier to development at all levels. This constitutes educational deprivation in one of its most acute forms. A high proportion of drop-outs reflects that the family, community, economy and value systems are not developing in harmony with the educational system".

The report goes on to point out that "the schools from which there are large drop-outs are in rural areas and in the poorly developed urban areas; this is indeed easily explained by the fact that almost 50 percent of the primary schools are in a poor state. The finances and resources have been concentrated on a very few schools in an ad hoc way without an eye for overall, general development. So the disparity between the "haves" and "have-nots" is very visibly large. It is the have-nots who, neglected as they are, will continue to produce the drop-outs and the repeaters".

Regional imbalances in provision of educational services and achievement of results are generally overshadowed by the national averages. While there exists a wide network of schools in the island approximately 55 percent of the schools have a pupil enrolment of less than 200 and approximately 40 percent of the schools, which are in educationally backward areas, have been classified as "small" schools, in which facilities are at a minimum. In 1977, the number of 'deprived' schools, mostly situated in inaccessible areas was estimated to be about 3,900 out of a total of about 8,900 schools. The bias against rural areas in the allocation of national resources is apparent in its most acute form in the schools system; and the "small" school, particularly the village school is the symbol of this bias. Such regional imbalances according to Professor Swarna Jayaweera reflect and reinforce unequal levels of socio-economic changes in different parts of the island. She argues that a repetition rate of 20 percent of Grades 1 and 2 in several educational districts can be attributed only to the effect of non-educational determinants of learning in economically underprivileged areas.

Among the other anomalies in the educational system which Professor Jayaweera draws attention to are that:

The Socio-economic Survey of 1969/70 showed that there was a difference of 20 percent, particularly between the proportion of 5 to 15-year old children from the highest and lowest income groups in attendance in schools. The proportion of 15 to 19 year-old children in schools from the higher income groups was double that of the lowest income groups, while in the case of the 20 to 24-year old age group it was treble.

The literacy rates of 10 to 14-year age groups have registered a decline in the inter-census period of 1963 and 1971.

Statistics show that over 20 percent of the six year-olds were not enrolled in schools at the beginning of school-life. A large number of children below the age of compulsory education (i.e. 14 years) do not attend schools because of poverty and other causes.

It is estimated that in 1976 about 25 percent of the children in the age group between 6-14 years i.e. about 655,000 did not attend schools and nearly about half this number have had no schooling at all. Associated with the question of school enrolment is the illusion that there is statutory provision in Sri Lanka for compulsory education till the age of 14. Regulations have never been formulated under the 1939 Education Ordinance to enforce compulsory attendance throughout the country. The irregular pattern of enrolment over the years indicates that social demand is no longer a sufficient imperative for school attendance.

Overemphasis on formal education has led us to ignore the needs of (a) the large number of out-of-school children and the drop-outs who must be provided with opportunities for re-entry at some point if they are to find a place in the sun and (b) the school leavers or "push-outs" and left-outs, approximately 100,000, have no access to senior secondary education or vocational education and 50,000 A.L. leavers are denied access to university or other forms of tertiary education. Apprenticeship, part-time and distance education courses have yet to reach the majority of these groups.

Poverty and other material aspects of the environment have been found, through many research studies, to be determining factors in school success or failure. Research has also highlighted the relationship between school achievement and home environment. For instance, there was found to be a consistent link between the occupation of the father and the child's achievement at school. The study on "Early School Drop-outs" also maintains that the home background of students plays a significant role in determining their attendance in school. It is the motivating factor of the homes, the interests that parents take in their children's education, and the aspirations that they have for their future that are more important than material circumstances.

This study established the close relationship between early school leaving and the social class of parents

(which was assessed by their occupation, monthly incomes, education and overcrowding of schools). Expectations of parents and teachers and student interest appear to be strong determining factors for early school-leaving. It was clear that for most of these underprivileged children primary psychological needs were inadequate and intellectual development has therefore been difficult.

Most of these underprivileged children had distorted relationships with their parents and had shown little interest in learning. All teachers agreed that these children lacked powers of concentration, and inattentiveness among them was very common. Most of these children came to school with attitudes detrimental to education.

The study showed that 92.6 percent of parents had no knowledge of the value of education and also a complete lack of aspirations for their children. One reason why so many of them dropped out of school so early, was that their education offered very few of the skills of production which their parents would wish them to learn. They therefore did not see much point in book learning. These children viewed their schooling period as a brief prelude to finding some work. Among the other disturbing views of children that came through in this study of early school drop-outs were that:

98.4 percent of them thought there was nothing interesting going on in school and that teachers failed to take much interest in them.

94.5 percent thought that most of what was taught in school was not of much use to them: they despised going to school.

89.7 percent showed a dislike for most subjects, which they thought were irrelevant, illogical and not related to their future development.

The total expenditure on education in 1976 was 55 percent more than for 1970. But even in 1976 nearly 99.8 percent of the students were ending their educational careers with only a secondary education. In 1975 1.4 million enrolled at the primary stage, while enrolment at the secondary stage was 1 million; and at the tertiary level only 3,794 entered the Universities or Technical Colleges. At the very young age of

15-plus a large number of these children appeared lost to the world. They had no avenues open to them; their knowledge was impoverished, without attaining any skill; and the labour market would not absorb intellectually starved, technically unskilled, immature, undisciplined products. The crux of the problem lay here—it seems a colossal wastage of money and effort. And the system itself, in favouring an insignificant minority at the expense of all others, seemed to promote competition and breed individualism and class-consciousness. In such circumstances education could no longer be regarded as the well-spring of development for the nation as a whole.

### A Programme of Action

It is with the intention of drawing attention to a situation such as this and initiating remedies that an IYC was launched. A primary objective of the International Year of the Child is to focus worldwide attention on the welfare and needs of children in every country. Its ultimate aim is to attempt "to raise significantly the level of services benefitting children on a permanent basis." Sceptics, as the adjoining box illustrates, have asked how much hope "years" such as this could offer the child in deprived circumstances.

In Sri Lanka too there is a comprehensive programme of activities connected with the IYC. As we have maintained, however, the improvement of the condition of children can only come about with the improvement of the entire environment which includes the conditions of adults as well. Programmes such as these may not alter the situation but still provide the stimulus to initiating action and finding a remedy. What the IYC programme in Sri Lanka should therefore be able to do is to raise consciousness among people that the need to do something, particularly for the deprived child, is indeed urgent.

Thus in Sri Lanka the activities in connection with the IYC are being coordinated by a Secretariat located in the Ministry of Plan Implementation. This Secretariat, which draws on the resources of government and non-governmental personnel with expertise in various specialised fields, and also numerous national and international agencies, is committed

## WELFARE SERVICES FOR DEPRIVED CHILDREN

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The main objective of the IYC programme is quoted as "to raise significantly the level of services benefitting children on a permanent basis". Hence a reappraisal of the existing welfare policies and programme for our deprived children is most opportune during this year. These children may be categorised as socially, mentally and physically handicapped children. Welfare services for socially handicapped—i.e. orphaned, abandoned and destitute children and children in need of care or rehabilitation come under the purview of the Department of Probation and Child Care Services, whilst physically and mentally handicapped children come under the purview of the Department of Social Services. Services are offered almost entirely through institutions run by either these two Departments or through voluntary agencies with Departmental assistance. A few non-institutional services include the appointment of fit persons to take care of children with problems, foster care, child adoption, vocational training of handicapped through artisans or tradesmen in the community and payment of Public Assistance etc. Institutional services include, Children's Homes for Orphaned, Abandoned and Destitute Children; Children's Remand Homes, Homes for Mentally Retarded Children; Residential Hostels for Schools for Deaf and Blind and Beggar Children; Institutions for Unmarried Mothers; Creches to provide day-care facilities for children of low-income working parents. Statistics on some of the institutional services supported by the government are given below:

	<i>Number of children's institutions</i>	<i>Approximate number of children served</i>	<i>Number of direct service staff engaged</i>
Children's Homes	149	5,200	595
Creches (run by voluntary bodies)	165	5,958	379
Institutions for handicapped children	27	1,849	196

The origin of most of the above services, can be traced to the influence or transference of similar welfare services that prevailed in the West, particularly U.K.

The need for a separate governmental organization for child-care work was recognized about 2 decades ago, with the creation of the Department of Probation and Child-Care Services. Apparently it was felt that there was not sufficient justification for a separate Department for Child Care work at that time, and a new Department was created by combining Probation work with Child-Care work in 1957.

Hence all probation work relating to offenders of all ages, welfare work for orphans; institutional correctional services for juvenile offenders, Children's Remand Homes etc. all came under the

purview of that Department, which came to be under the Ministry in charge of Social Services. An essential part of Child Care work, the caring for destitute children, unmarried mothers, creches for children of low-income working mothers and services for handicapped children continued to be with the Department of Social Services. Since it was argued that all child-care work should be under the Department of Probation and Child Care Services, all work relating to Homes for Destitute Children and Creches too were transferred to that Department by 1975.

With the rapid increase of the child-population and unemployment in the country the number of deprived children too increased. The number of those who had to be provided with institutional services therefore increased. Although the needed services expanded, the service organization was not flexible enough to provide the deeper and concerned attention that a better quality of child-care services needed. Children's institutions continued to be started and run on varied standards. The Department of Probation and Child-Care Services pays a maintenance grant of Rs. 50/- per child per month in the children's home and Rs. 1/- per child in the Creches run by voluntary bodies. Ad-hoc grants for buildings etc. were also given. Although it was expected that they should supplement this grant by mobilizing community support, some voluntary bodies tried their best to manage with the State subsidy grant only, thereby weakening the standards of services provided. They do not have the proper guidance or capacity to embark on programs to mobilize community or

outside support. Hence the voluntary Child-Care institutions suffered due to lack of adequate support and guidance. Further some voluntary bodies tried to cover the funds required for payments to staff also through the State subsidy grant meant for maintenance of children. As a result, the voluntary Child-Care institutions, have come to be staffed by very inadequately paid workers. The average monthly payment to a full-time Child-Care Worker is less than Rs. 100/-, with food and lodging provided. They work on a full time, non-shift basis. A minimum number of staff is hired. Payments to workers in Creches are much less. It often ranges around Rs. 50/- per month.

The State Receiving Homes for Children, which are situated in Kandy, Bandarawela, Galle, Jaffna, Dehiwala, Panadura and Anuradhapura are run

directly as government institutions, subject to various rules and regulations that apply to the public service. The Child-Care staff works on a shift basis. The proportion of workers to children is very high compared to that of Voluntary homes. The maintenance cost of one child in a State Receiving Home is many times higher, than that of a voluntary Home.

Creches which are essentially meant to enable "working mothers to leave their children when they are away at work", are mostly located in rural areas, where the mothers are not away at work full-time. They may often need part-time day care for children. But the regulations for assistance for creches stipulate that children should be cared for in creches until 4.30 p.m. and for a minimum number of days. For the seasons and areas where day-care of children is really needed, for example, chena cultivation seasons or seasons when migratory agricultural labour come into the dry zone areas, there are no systems of seasonal creches or mobile creches. Hence existing rural creches run by voluntary bodies often serve as mere pre-schools, where children are fed free.

Services for deprived children should also be at grass roots or community based. Personal attention should be a prime-feature. Providing institutions is an important aspect; although it is only one approach. Another aspect should be the care of the deprived whilst being placed in the community, with a parent or foster parent or relative.

During the IYC it is most important to consider the need for a separate organizational set-up to develop policies and implement programmes pertaining to Child-Care work, under the Ministry of Social Services. It could be a separate Bureau, an Authority, a Board or as a last choice, a Government Department. This organization could develop policies and implement programmes to provide inter-service coordination in all matters pertaining to child development in general and those in need of welfare in particular. The child welfare and development activities that should come under such a new organization include: beggar children, orphans and destitute and abandoned children, handicapped children, adoptions, children having problems with the law, early school drop-outs, day-care facilities for children, unmarried mothers and parent counselling and education, pre-schools, nutrition intervention and children's recreation. This would also enable a better utilization of the local and foreign resources available for child development.

The creation of such an organization dedicated to the care and welfare of children in need can be a lasting monument for the International Year of the Child. This will be one way or "raising significantly the level of services, benefitting children on a permanent basis".

## YEAR OF THE CHILD — HOW MUCH HOPE

Many Indian journals have devoted much space to the IYC. Very few of them have not been sceptical. Typical of this attitude is the fortnightly "India Today" which in its titled sections on the 'Year of the Child'—"A Brief Awakening?". It refers to the UNICEF Executive Director's answer to why an IYC was declared. In his words "I am often asked: why a year for the child? My answer is: for 2,000 million reasons, most of them under 10 years of age". 'India Today' goes on to comment however, "But for a majority of those 2,000 million reasons scattered across the globe, will the dawning of a year dedicated to them prove to be a false dawn?"

"Within the cavernous of the United Nations headquarters hundreds of similar, pious declarations have been aired only to crumble into dust once they come in contact with the harsh realities of the world outside. A world where political priorities have overridden moral ones ever since the Romans nailed a man called Jesus Christ to a wooden cross on a mountain top, 1,978 years ago.

"Barely three years ago, the UN declared an International Women's Year, supposedly dedicated to the emancipation of women all over the world. Apart from a host of conferences and seminars in exotic parts of the globe, the status of women, at least in the Third

World, has remained unchanged from what it was in 1976. Women, however, are quite capable of battling for their own rights; children unfortunately, are not.

Still another Indian Journal comments on these same lines that declaring an "International Year" alone would not much later the system. This Indian viewpoint which could be applicable to most developing countries, including that of Sri Lanka, states that: "The Year of the Child should also be the Year of the Mother. An ignorant, semi-starved, diseased mother dooms a child from its very birth. Make the mother healthy, happy and the children will be all right.

"To ignore this truth and make a song and dance about the child for one year, just one year, and then go back to business as usual is a cruel joke—but that precisely is what one may expect. We take to these formalised years and centenary celebrations like ducks to water. No matter what, celebrate we must.

"Didn't we make much of the Women's Year, hold many seminars, appoint several committees—what more do you want for a Year? If the women of India are where they are, so will the children of India be after the tamasha is over. Millions of them will continue to cry of hunger, cold and the pain of disease as their parents struggle for the bare survival of the family".

The various Ministries concerned with the education of a child are co-operating in the programme for children not attending school and attempting to ensure that these children receive at least primary education. Other Ministries such as the Ministry of Social Services has intensified its programmes for Child Care, handicapped children, rehabilitation of public assistance recipients being dependent children and providing those in welfare institutions with vocational training. The Ministry of Local Government, Housing and Construction is taking steps to revitalise its community centre movement and also undertake slum upgrading projects with the hope of improving conditions of large numbers of children living within this environment.

All this activity brings into focus the growing realisation that economic growth alone, will not automatically bring with it all the benefits of development. It is evident that there is now a recognition that development is a social as well as an economic process. Greater priority is therefore being given to strategies for investment in human resources; and what could be of greater importance in human investment than expenditure on children and on the basic financial and social security needs of those who provide for them. It is now accepted that a keener appreciation of the socio-economic aspects of development, as opposed to strictly economic considerations, are helping governments of developing countries to increase their awareness of the issues that face their children.

There is a greater recognition in these countries that economic growth should be a means towards the eradication of hunger, illiteracy, and disease, and toward the reduction of existing social and economic inequalities, including unemployment and underemployment. The national plans and programmes of these countries are emphasizing today the need to obtain a higher standard of living for their people and to spread more widely the benefits of development. But, it is one thing to recognise the situation and quite another to act by this recognition. The future of tomorrow's generation will depend on the extent to which such action is taken.

to "a programme of concentrating resources on the unmet prime physical or material needs of children of the lower income groups. The final goals of this programme are a permanently higher budget for basic services for children and an increase of the standards of these services. The Secretariat has set out as a task of high priority the co-ordination of existing programmes and resources and the pooling and harnessing of all existing resources in the field of children's affairs". (The need for a permanent coordinating body for providing welfare services to children is dealt with by the Head of the School of Social Studies in the box on page 16).

The Central Committee of the local IYC Secretariat found that several Ministries have projects and programmes specially meant to benefit children and rather than allow them to work in isolation it has been able to co-ordinate these programmes. There were also numerous voluntary organisations and non-governmental organisations actively involved in programmes and services for children. The IYC Secretariat has been able to co-

ordinate these services too and out of this has evolved an action programme for implementation over the next three years.

The plans and proposals of various Ministries connected with children's activities which are coordinated within this single action programme include a Parent's Charter to be issued by the Ministry of Education; a Children's Charter to be issued by the Ministry of Social Services; while the Ministry of Justice is taking preliminary steps to draft a Consolidated Children's Law; and the Ministry of Social Services is proceeding with plans for residential training centres for Child-Care workers; the Ministry of Local Government, Housing and Construction will undertake at least two slum upgrading projects during the IYC programme with a view to improving the conditions of a large number of children in deprived circumstances.

The Education Ministry has plans for improving the 2500 "small" deprived schools in the island and with UNICEF assistance is supplying certain basic necessities to such schools.