NUTRITION AND HEALTH PRACTICES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: IMPLICATION FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The study focused on the nutrition and health practices in early childhood and its implication for child development. The study was carried out in Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State. Three research questions guided the study. Descriptive survey design was adopted to carry out the study. The population of the study was 82 private schools in Awka South L.G.A with 246 early childhood teachers. Simple random sampling was used to select 137 early childhood teachers from 52 schools randomly selected from the study area. A structured questionnaire titled Nutrition and Health Practices in Early Childhood (NHPEC) was used as the instrument for data collection which contained twenty-three (23) items. The validation of the instrument was done by three experts, two from Early Childhood and Primary Education and one expert from department of educational management and policy. Cronbach alpha was to determine the reliability of the instrument at 0.70. The analysis of the data was done through mean score. Findings revealed that, early childhood caregivers are aware in area of nutrition practices that contributes to child development but lacks programs like seminar that will help them to keep up with new knowledge that concerns nutrition and child development. And ways government is involved in issues concerning nutrition and health practices in early childcare centers is unsatisfactory. Based on the findings, it was recommended, among others, that school children should be fed with a balanced and healthy diet and regular scheduled immunization should be maintained by the government.
Keywords: Early childhood education, Nutrition, Health practices and child development.

Introduction

Early childhood is seen as the bedrock of education because of how crucial the level is for the development of young children. When proper handling is missed at this stage, the effects of the errors are seen at the later years of the children and need much work by caregivers to correct. According to Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2013), early childcare development and education (ECCDE) is the care, protection, stimulation and learning promoted in children from age 0 - 4 years in a crèche or nursery. Early childhood education is a system through which children are made to acquire knowledge which stir up the spirit of creativity, acquisition of skills and enquiry in them and make them understand who they are and what is expected of them (Esimone & Umezinwa, 2013). The important of this type of education for children cannot be neglected. It is a foundation training that offers an opportunity for children's acceleration on all aspect of development. This level of education can be accessed by children within these age limits through

three main categories as identified by the Federal Republic of Nigeria in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013). The categories include: Daycare / crèche (ages 0-2); Pre-nursery / play group (ages 3-4) and Nursery / kindergarten (ages 3- 5).

The objectives of this level of education are focused on the handling, care and education of children within the stipulated age grade. The integrated early childhood development in Minimum Standard for Early Childcare Center in Nigeria (2007) constituted the objectives to deal with providing care and support for children in form of good nutrition and health, healthy and safe environment and protection and security. Among other objective includes inculcating social norms, spirit of enquiry and creativity; ensuring smooth transition from home to school and providing adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work. The first on the objective provisions emphasized on providing care and support for the child through ensuring a good nutrition, good health and a healthy and a safe environment for the proper development of the child. Obiweluozor (2013) opined that the quality of care in these areas mentioned surely determines the level of development the child can attain.

Development is expected from every living being after birth. Development of human is simply the process of growth and change that takes place between birth and maturity (James, 2019). The author sees it as a progressive series of orderly coherent changes. In line with this definition, development implies the improvement in function and behavior of individuals which brings quantitative and qualitative changes in them and, continues throughout life. This however expressed that development is not only about realizing human values but, also about increasing the values and their capacities towards sustaining the improvement of the individual. Child development therefore entails the biological, psychological and emotional changes that occur in human between birth and the conclusion of adolescence as the individual progresses from dependency to increasing autonomy (Toga, Thompson & Sowell, 2019). Every child goes through this process of development. The developmental process continues with a predictable sequence but unique for every child. A child is said to be developing if the child is making progress in what he does with his mind and body (Ewuzie, Nwonye & Ayomah, 2015). Nneji and Nneji (2015) in the same vein stated that the body needs to be taken care of to fulfill its condition in rendering its services for a healthy mind. A child is expected to achieve certain milestone as they go through the predictable sequence and time frame. There are four major domains of development expected

in children. It includes cognitive, social-emotional, physical and language development (Fraser-Thrill, 2019).

However, certain factors may hinder and influence the attainment of these developmental milestones expected from these children and their sequence of development. Such factors include genetic factor (nature) and environmental factor (nurture). The causes of unhealthy development as well as disease, disorders and developmental problems are best viewed as roles played by gene and environment (Unachukwu, Ebenebe & Nwosu, 2019). This is probably the intensions at this level of child education and development where their organ and faculties are needed to be nurtured through proper/adequate nutrition and health practices.

Nutrition during the early years of life is fundamental for child development and good health. Nutrition according to World Health Organization (WHO, 2014) is the intake of food considered in relation to the body's dietary needs. North Virginia Community College (2014) defined nutrition as the science of food, the nutrient in foods and how the body uses those nutrients. Nutrition is the science that interprets the interaction of nutrients and other substances in food in relation to maintenance, growth, reproduction, health and diseases of an organism (Joint Collection Development Policy, 2014). Nutrition involves food intake, digestion, assimilation, metabolism, catabolism and excretion. In line with the above definitions, nutrition is the process of deriving helpful substances from edibles which provides the body with essential nutrients for its maintenance, growth and development. However, nutrition focuses on how diseases, conditions and developmental problems can be prevented or reduced by eating right and healthy dieting.

Healthy diet has been misunderstood by many and mistaken for eating or feeding three times a day or having three square meals a day. Junk foods and many processed foods, mostly taken as snack and in between meals, have also equated and replaced the real idea of food. This has been viewed as nutrition and eating healthy by many individuals that do not know or realize the place of balanced diet in providing the nutrient their body need for proper development. Ensuring that the children get healthy diet through right nutrition is imperative to their overall development. The caregivers and parents in their care need to ensure that they feed well and also source for nutrient in various foods for a balanced diet. Sources for nutrition in children include breast feeding. Breast feeding is recommended for the first three years of life with exclusive breast feeding during the first six months after birth. The exclusive breast feeding for the stipulated six months means no other food or liquid should be given to the child except breast milk (Whitney & Rolfes, 2013).

After that duration, other compliments gotten from other food nutrient can be added to breast feeding to support the feeding of the child. Nutrition can also be gotten from all the classes of food and their combinations. These classes of food include macronutrients (carbohydrate, fat, proteins, fiber and water) and micronutrient (minerals and vitamins).

The nutrients from these classes of food work towards keeping children healthy and sound in both mind and body thereby ensuring a safe development. A Latin phrase, "Men Sana in Copore Sano", which means a healthy mind in a healthy body can be used to specify that: for the mind to be healthy, the body must be healthy as well and any altercation between the mind and the body affects the development of the child involved. This however expresses the position of health in proper child development. Marrian–Webster dictionary (2018) defined health as the general condition of being sound in body, mind or spirit especially freedom from physical disease or pain. In line with this definition, health can be seen as the overall good condition of a human being which enables them to function adequately in their daily activities. This indicates that the concept of being healthy has shifted from being the absent of illness or disease hindering the body to function well to inculcating the wellness of general aspect of human life, which can be maintained by regular health practices.

Health practices cannot be eliminated when proper child development is involved as it helps to maintain in them a healthy mind in a healthy body. According to National Council of Educational Research and Training, India (2017), health practices can be seen as all practices performed in association to the preservation and promotion of health This involves ensuring a safe environment, exercising to maintain physical fitness, sleep and siesta, immunization, medical attention and hygiene. Hygiene among other practices contributes to the health and general wellness of the child. Oswalt, Reiss and Dombeck (2015) stated that promoting good personal hygiene habits does more than protect the children from the threat of germs and diseases but also help to promote their general health and wellbeing. Cambridge dictionary online (2019) also defined hygiene as the degree to which people keep themselves or their environment clean, especially to prevent diseases. It can be infer that, hygiene has broad term and cannot be equated to cleanliness alone. It includes overall cleanliness, health and medicine. The practices of hygiene are adopted as preventive measures in reducing the incidence and spreading of diseases and, such should not be overlooked in early childhood settings. Negligence to these practices and nutrition could implicate the sequence of development which is unique in every child.

Statement of the Problem

Nutrition and health practices play an important role on child development especially at their formative age. The misconception between right feeding and health measures and, what some adults and caregivers have come to believe and view as the right measures in child development have become worrisome as to the damage it may cause to the child's development at this level.in the same vain, the call for early childhood education has been in the increase in both rural and urban areas. The raise in this demand in most rural and urban area have led to the increase of early childhood centers in those area with much attention focused on the gain of such establishment rather than being motivated by the love and care of the young ones, which would see to their proper development.

The establishment of early childhood centers and the growing misconception on nutrition and health practices that aids development in children have raised major concern about the fate of the young ones in the care of such centers. The quality and standard of these established school and, the qualification of the kind of teachers and caregivers employed to handle the affairs of the children has come to be questioned. These have become a big challenge to early childhood care and education and to the overall development of the child.

Hence, the position and attitudes of early childhood centers and the concern of government in childhood education and its standard in private sector was what led to this study. This study therefore investigated the nutrition and health practices in early childhood education and its implication for child development.

Purpose of the Study

The study investigated nutrition and health practices in early childhood education and its implication to child development in Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State. Specifically, the study aims:

1. To determine the awareness of caregivers on nutrition towards proper child development.
2. To determine the health practices caregivers engages in early childhood centers towards effective child development.
3. To determine ways government are involved in maintaining and addressing issues concerning nutrition and health practices.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study

1. What areas of nutrition are caregivers aware for proper child development?
2. What are the health practices that caregivers engage in early childhood education towards maintaining proper child development?
3. What ways are government involved in maintaining and addressing issues concerning nutrition and health practices in ECE centers?

Method

The study was conducted to investigate nutrition and health practices in early childhood and its implication for child development. Three research questions guided the study. Descriptive survey research design was adopted to carry out the study. The population of the study consisted 82 private early childhood centers and 246 early childhood teachers in Awka south local government area of Anambra state. Simple random sampling was used to select 137 early childhood teachers from 52 schools randomly selected from the 82 private schools in the study area. The instrument used for data collection was a 23 item structured questionnaire by the researcher titled Nutrition and Health Practices in Early Childhood (NHPEC). The items are structured on a four (4) point rating scales of Strongly Agree (SA, 4pionts), Agree (A, 3pionts), Disagree (D, 2pionts) and Strongly Disagree (SD, 1piont) and was validated by 2 experts in early childhood and primary education department and one expert from department of educational management and policy.

The reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbach alpha and estimate of 0.70 was obtained which showed its reliability. Mean score was used to analyze the research questions and in taking decision, mean scores above 2.50 were considered as agreed while those below 2.50 were considered as disagreed. One hundred and thirty-seven (137) questionnaires were administered and one hundred and twenty-six (126) questionnaires were returned and analyzed.

Results

Research Question 1: What areas of nutrition are caregivers aware for proper child development?

Table 1: Mean responses of caregivers' awareness on nutrition towards proper child development.

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	X	DECISION
1	Children are to be fed well before coming to school.	41	54	25	6	3.0	Agree
2	Children are to be fed with a well-balanced diet.	31	50	33	12	2.8	Agree
3	Snacks given to children should be more of healthy snacks than junks.	28	40	38	20	2.6	Agree
4	Exposing children to a variety of foods in early life makes it easier for children to enjoy a health promoting diet.	56	35	17	18	3.0	Agree
5	Nutrition awareness seminars are organized for caregivers termly.	22	41	18	45	2.3	Disagree
6	Breast milk contains essential nutrient and antibodies a baby need for proper development.	84	34	-	8	3.5	Agree

The data presented in table 1 above shows that the respondents agreed with five (5) items as areas of nutrition that caregivers are aware for proper child development. These items 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 has means score of 3.0, 2.8, 3.0, 2.3, and 3.5 respectively. Item 5 with mean score of 2.3 was disagreed by the respondents. Table one shows that the respondents agreed with 5 items while 1 item was disagreed based on the mean rating.

Research Question 2: What are the health practices that caregivers engage in early childhood education towards maintaining proper child development?

Table 2: Mean responses of health practices caregivers engage in early childhood education centers in maintaining proper child development.

S/N	Item Statements	SA	A	D	SD	X	DECISION
7	I ensure that the classrooms are cleaned daily before day activities.	90	36	-	-	3.7	Agree
8	I make sure that children make use of educational mat while sitting on the floor.	67	46	13	-	3.3	Agree
9	I ensure that the classrooms are well ventilated and lighted.	72	43	11	-	3.4	Agree
10	I ensure that the children make use of toilet and sanitary facilities available in the school.	75	42	9	-	3.5	Agree
11	I ensure that children's lunch foods are well kept before lunch time.	69	50	7	-	3.4	Agree
12	I ensure that children's feeding area is well arranged and hygienic.	75	51	-	-	3.5	Agree
13	I ensure weekly health inspection of children's personal and oral hygiene.	66	29	17	14	3.1	Agree
14	I practice first aid in time of emergency.	62	48	12	4	3.3	Agree
15	I engage children in daily physical exercise regime/periods.	56	47	13	10	3.1	Agree
16	I ensure provision of clean water in my class.	66	53	7	-	3.4	Agree
17	I made provisions for wash hand basin with soap and water in my class.	59	55	8	4	3.3	Agree
18	I ensure proper hand washing practices in my class after using the toilet, before preparing children's food or serving them, before and after eating food.	77	39	10	-	3.4	Agree
19	I ensure proper disposal of liquid and solid wastes in my class.	74	36	6	10	3.3	Agree
20	I ensure that children make use of their personal cutlery in school.	66	40	6	8	3.3	Agree

Table 2 above shows that, based on the mean ratings, the respondents agreed with the entire item presented as the health practices they engage in proper child development.

Research Question 3: What ways are government involved in maintaining and addressing issues concerning nutrition and health practices in ECE centers?

Table 3: Teachers' Mean Responses on the ways government are involved in maintaining and addressing issues concerning nutrition and health hygiene in ECE.

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	X	DECISION
21	The Home-grown school feeding and health program (HGSFHP) is on-going and effective in the school.	22	11	41	52	2.0	Disagree
22	Government making provision for health workers to visit schools for routine immunization.	74	35	8	9	3.3	Agree
23	The government makes provision for health materials/equipment for school use.	16	20	28	62	1.9	Disagree

In table 3 above, it shows that the respondents disagreed with two (2) items which includes items 21 and 23 with mean scores of 2.0 and 1.9 respectively. Item 22 was agreed by the respondents with mean score of 3.3. Table 3 shows that the respondents disagreed with 4 items while 1 item was agreed based on the mean rating.

Discussion

The findings from Table 1 revealed that caregivers are aware in nutrition areas that are important to child development but lacks program like seminar which will help them to keep up with new knowledge that concerns nutrition and child development. This awareness however will help them in taking proper care of the children under their care as they strive to maintain and inculcate it in their day to day activities while dealing with the children. This is in agreement with the findings of National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM, 2018), who posits that children thrives and develop well when they have positive interactions with adult who are competent in supporting their development and learning.

Findings from Table 2 revealed that teachers in early childhood centers are active in health practices that foster proper child development. The activities of these daily health practices carried out by caregivers are a way of ensuring a healthy mind in a healthy body in children which help them to maintain a proper child development. This is in agreement with Oswalt, Reiss and Dombeck (2015), who posits that promoting good health and personal hygiene habits does more

than protect the children from threat of germs and diseases but also help to promote their general health and development.

Findings from Table 3 showed that the government is involved in maintaining and addressing issues concerning nutrition and health practices in private early childhood centers in Awka South through providing health workers to schools for routined inspection and immunization for children. It revealed also that government involvement are not felt in ways like providing feeding and health equipment/materials to children through the home grown school feeding and health program (HGSFHP). The findings indicate that government roles and involvement in early child care centers in private schools is unsatisfactory. This finding is similar to that of Okoye (2012) which states that government agencies do not effectively carry out their functions in basic education.

It can be inferred from the study that the lack /inadequacy of both nutrition and health practices in early childhood can severe the health and development of young children. In line with this, World Health Organization (2014) reported that 43 million children under age five are overweight or obsessed and 20 million children under age five suffers from acute malnutrition. Implication of neglecting nutrition and health practices in early childhood can be seen on the maladjustment of the child's health and development. According to United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2017), the outcome of insufficient food intake, repeated infectious diseases and under nutrition is one of the world's most serious problem with long-lasting harmful impacts on health and devastating consequences on development of children. This revealed that the misjudgment of nutrition and healthy diet by many have brought about malnutrition, under-nutrition, obesity, overweight and other ailment among young children. In the same vein, United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2011) reported that 101 million children across globe are under weight and one in four children is stunt in growth. These chronic conditions suffered by some unfortunate children are perceived to be caused by neglect, ignorance and poverty thereby severing and jeopardizing their major domain of development. Hence, since the early years of children are seen as their formative age and crucial for their development, proper nutrition through healthy diet and health practices sustains the developmental nature of children at this stage. This indicates that any shaky foundation, based on these factors, will cause retardation in their development and in turn affect their overall developments. Therefore, Health and hygiene practices can be seen as preventive measures in reducing the incidence and spreading of diseases. Since a child needs a

balanced and healthy diet together with health practices to fuel the rate of growth and development that occurs during early childhood, such should not be over looked in early childhood setting.

Conclusion

Proper child development has been pinned on nutrition and health practices as they play a major measure in preventing and reducing the incidences of under development and spreading of disease. As a major factor in child development in the formative age, its importance should be known and practiced by caregivers that work with children and, parents should be involved as well. The nutrition and health practices if not maintained through proper care and attention by caregivers who are aware of the importance of nutrition and health practices will lay a weak foundation for children at this level which will directly implicate their future development. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for every caregiver to make nutrition and health practices their priority and be serious with the attention and care given to children at this level. The outcome of this focused attitudes of caregivers and parent will most likely be seen on their academic and social life which will aid them to contribute to the development of their society and nation at large.

Recommendations

Base on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Caregivers should consider themselves as important stakeholders when it comes to child upbringing and development. They strive to engage them in healthy practices that would see to their proper development.
2. Children should be well fed with a balanced and healthy diet together to supply them with enough nutrients they need to fuel their rate of growth and development.
3. Caregivers should be exposes to new knowledge based on nutrition and health practices through possible seminars to help them keep up with knowledge regarding nutrition and health practices that are important for child development.
4. State government, through her agencies, should support nutrition and health practices in schools by maintaining regular immunization schedules of children and; through their regulatory bodies ensures that early childhood centers have basic requirements in health, hygiene and child protection.

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