

PORTAGE GUIDE TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Handling children during their early years continues to challenge caregivers across all countries. Earlier notions viewed children as miniature adults. It was thought that they required no special understanding or treatments during their growth or development. They could be pushed, pulled, punished or reared in any way so long as they got shaped into responsible adults. These ancient notions on child psychology are now challenged and changed. Children are now viewed on a life cycle approach as passing through early developmental stages characterized by unique needs, abilities, progressive tasks, critical events and age graded activities. Many times the completion of activities at a lower level is seen as mandatory to successfully negotiate next oncoming ones.

Based on the above preamble, and guided by a strong understanding that very young children require functional, informal, play based, activity oriented and individualized education in place of formal, classroom based, didactic, curriculum based teaching; several proponents have carved guidelines, programs, packages or modules on these lines. Examples are the Headstart Preschool Program (2008), Denver Preschool Program (2006), Colorado Preschool Program (2005), California State Preschool Program (2006), Perry Preschool Program (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1988), Home Preschool Program (1979), Abbot Preschool Program (2009), Kidcrafters Preschool Program (2006), Berry Best Preschool Program (2005), Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards (2008), etc. The list can be endless. There are also such programs tailored for children with special needs.

THE PORTAGE GUIDE

The Portage Guide to Early Education (originally started as a demonstration project funded by the U.S.

Department of Education in 1969) was pioneered as a home based parent empowering developmental stimulation program. David E. Shearer was in the Chair along with several associates at that time for the program. Since then, the Portage Guide has undergone several reviews and re-revisions until its last and latest electronic version made available in 2003. The kit covers developmental areas: communication/ language/ literacy, social emotional development, exploration approaches to learning, purposeful motor activity, and sensory organization. The portage package includes training manuals and materials, family services and even online updates. These materials have now been translated and validated across several countries or cultures (Alan and Oakland, 2001; Cameron, 1997; Oakland, 1997; Sturmet et al, 1992; Thorburn, 1992).

INDIAN SCENE

A comprehensive review on available look alike of Portage Guide in India includes the Madras Developmental Programming System (MDPS) (Jeyachandran and Vimla, 2000), Behavior Assessment Scales for Indian Children with Mental Retardation (BASIC-MR) (Peshawaria and Venkatesan, 1992), Assessment of Mentally Retarded Individuals for Grouping & Teaching (NIMH, 1995), Functional Assessment Tools, Curriculum Guidelines for Schools for Children with Mental Retardation (NASEOH, 1995), the Activity Checklist for Preschool Children with Developmental Disabilities (ACPC-DD) (Venkatesan, 2004). An earlier version of Indian adaptation of the Portage was carried out by Kohli (1987) on north Indian rural children.

Notwithstanding all of this, the presently 'authored' book tabled as an official document of the CBR Network (South Asia) is simply a reprint of the original and international 'Portage Guide' already available in the international market. The book can

be commended, if at all, for the low cost print; and probably, for being made available at an affordable yet not printed price to the poor Indian rural masses. However, unfortunately, the copyright details are blatantly missing in the usual third page details of the book.

Another positive feature of this book, unlike its original clone from the Portage Team of 1992, is the addition of low cost black and white photographs with seemingly half visible south Indian mothers and their children in this edition. Wherever, for certain activities, no matching photographs were probably available; the publishers have opted for drawings by black Indian ink. However, there are also many pages without illustrations.

The behavioral domains and individual items under them are exact replicas of the original portage. At least, the authors could have modified items to make them appropriate for the local culture and practice. It makes no sense to expect a typical rural Indian child to 'reach or operate spoons, knives or forks', 'put on zipped shoes, boots and zippers', or 'scooping with fork', 'puts on mittens', 'using knife for spreading soft topping on toast', 'preparing own sandwich', etc. If this version is to be credited as an appropriate cultural adaptation, the only common sense window dressing changes that have been made are related to changing a 'penny, nickel or dime' to 'two rupee, one rupee and fifty paise coins'. This is also in spite of the fact that even the last currency is currently out of circulation! A card-by-card comparison of contents between the original Portage and those printed in the book under review shows several goof-ups. For example, item C-104 has swapped place with item C-105. It is not clear whether such changes are intentional or unintended.

On the whole and in short, the whole exercise of publishing this book is to be taken as a low cost paper back cheaper edition of a monumental and copyrighted original work already carried out in the west several decades ago.

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