

TO REDUCE POVERTY, IMPROVE PARENTING

Research is needed to understand how parental practices in the developing world may be inhibiting the development of their children.

 by Linxiu Zhang



Linxiu Zhang, a 2014 TWAS Fellow, is a professor and deputy director at the Center for Chinese Agricultural Policy, Chinese Academy of Sciences. Her research focuses on rural development in China, in particular on poverty alleviation and the economics of rural education and healthcare. She is the recipient of the TWAS-Celso Furtado Prize in Social Sciences (2013), and the Fudan Management Excellence Award (2014).

► The author visits a family in rural China. (Photo courtesy: Linxiu Zhang)

Exposure to risk factors during early childhood will compromise children's development and future human capital. It is estimated that over 200 million children under 5 years old are not fulfilling their development potential because they are exposed to multiple risks. The critical period before age 3 is considered to be a crucial window, during which interventions designed to improve language, cognitive, motor and social emotion development can have significant and lasting effects, even into adulthood. Moreover, investments in human capital accumulation during this period build a foundation for lifetime success.

The proven importance of this early development stage has induced researchers to delve more deeply into the underlying factors that may be associated with cognitive development during this period. As early as the 1990s, the literature had already extensively documented the link between poor nutrition and low levels of cognitive and motor skills among infants and toddlers. More recently, a number of studies have shown that the home learning environment that parents provide for their children is significantly linked with social and cognitive development. Reading, telling stories, and singing songs together have all been linked

to early language acquisition and improved cognitive development.

However, almost all of the work has been done in developed countries, and little is known about the status of the home learning environment in developing nations. Given the absence of a large empirical literature on parenting practices in developing countries, studies to further our understanding of the home environment-based determinants of cognition growth would be useful for several reasons.

We know that the share of children with cognitive delays is higher in developing countries. Additional research could help us to understand what factors might be linked with these delays and the family attitudes or practices that are most in need of improvement. Research in these areas would help improve future interventions.

With the growing awareness of the importance of early childhood intervention for reaching development milestones, developing countries slowly start to take interventions but little is done beyond providing nutritional intervention. Thus, there are urgent needs for research to design and deliver parenting interventions together with nutritional intervention and to search for the best ways to reach a child's developmental potential.



Such efforts are believed to help break intergenerational poverty cycle by addressing the root causes of poverty. It also seems clear that, from a policy perspective, intervention during this time period is the most cost-effective. ■