

# Focus on social intelligence at pre-schools, says expert

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CHENNAI: More importance must be given to developing social intelligence during the early stages of childhood and it is a crucial part of learning that is being neglected at the pre-school level, opined experts during a discussion on 'Child wellbeing: lessons, issues and challenges from Finnish and Indian pre-school system' here at Loyola College on Thursday.

Aruna Rathnam, Education specialist, UNICEF (Chennai) observed that many caregivers in pre-schools do not recognise the importance of encouraging social interaction among children. She pointed out that the perception of development is so skewed, that a child reciting the alphabet at 2 years or aspiring to be an IAS officer or entering the NASA at age 4 is the definition of being intelligent. Instead, she said that focus should be given to developing social intelligence.

"My grouse with nursery schools is that they don't recognise the potential in children for social interaction under the age of 5 years. The more interaction, the better it is for them. Also, it is less demanding for parents to constantly attend to them," she said.

More than drafting regulations for playschools or training teachers, the focus should be on developing an empathetic approach to learning and curriculum, which is lacking at the pre-school level, she pointed out.

The lack of empathy also extends to designing of spaces for children, be it public spaces or even ICDS centres. "There is a

benign indifference to the function and design aspects of the buildings. Many of the ICDS centres are dark even in the middle of the afternoon," she said.

Rathnam also pointed out that unfortunately, there aren't enough public spaces for children. "Children are inhabiting adult spaces instead. In slum areas especially, there is no space for them to play. Parks are being developed by private agencies to serve more for walking spaces for adults. There is hardly any playing equipment, nor safety guidelines followed for children. Even when there are open grounds in certain posh localities, resident welfare associations want to put it to commercial use," she said.

Girija Kumarababu, Indian Council for Child Welfare (ICCW) Chennai also stressed on the need to specify on the quality of caregivers in pre-schools, as these are the formative years of social and cognitive development. She also encouraged parents to be part of this process and be more involved with preschools and their wards' caregivers.

The discussion was conducted by the Department of Social Work, Loyola College, LSSTAR (Loyola Institute of Social Science Training and Research) and FINDIgATE (Finnish and Indian Wellbeing through Education).