

Early Childhood Education: *Is there more to it than YouTube?*

The NSNA Education Committee presented its inaugural webinar on June 7, 2020. This interview-format webinar presented insights for parents, grand-parents, and parents-to-be on the educational needs of children in their formative, preschool years (i.e., ages extending up to 5). The event featured two panelists in Meyyappan Arunachalam and Parvathy Alagappan, who have nearly two decades of experience between them in diverse settings that include both Traditional and Montessori based early childhood programs, and was moderated by Soundhra Lakshmanan, a certified public accountant with past experience and a Master's degree in higher education.

The event was impactful and generated a number of thought-provoking questions from the audience. While the panel unfortunately did not have an opportunity to address all of these audience questions during the live event, these were presented to Paru and Meyyappan offline for their insights. These responses are summarized in the transcribed segment that follows.

1. Are you able to share pointers for setting a schedule, which would help parents best engage preschool aged children during the current stay-at-home period?

Paru Alagappan: Schedules can look different depending on needs / convenience and most importantly, these have to work for the family. Our typical schedule looks different during summer and winter, and is also influenced by the weather on a given day. Now during summer, once breakfast is done we try to go for a quick walk or explore nature since it gets really hot after that. After that, we try to do all the learning activities in the morning. Afternoons usually involve either nap time or quiet time and evenings involve outdoor play, games, arts and crafts, story-time, unstructured playtime, classes, and/or family calls. For a preschooler, I think what is very important is sticking to a basic routine where the child knows what happens during a certain time and what activity follows next.

2. How can we help children extend their attention span during the pursuit of age-appropriate activities?

Meyyappan Arunachalam: One of the key ways to build attention span is to find ~~out~~ activities that a child is interested in. For example, activities such as playing with water or transferring beads from one pan to another. These would allow your child to mess things up but, at the same time not hurt oneself and would not require parental involvement. Once you identify what your child likes, allow him / her to work and play on it for long periods of time without interruption. Start with a shorter duration of say, 5 minutes and then extend it progressively by additional blocks of similar times. Some tasks may be messy, but allow them the space and time. Constant interruption by the parent to correct the work or activity is actually detrimental to what they want to do because the focus then shifts to "am I doing stuff right?", as opposed to "this is what I enjoy doing".

Progressively increasing the time in small increments also allows the child to focus and enjoy what he / she does, which greatly improves the ability to concentrate on the task at hand.

Paru: Additionally, along with what Annan mentioned, I have used visual timers both in classrooms as well as with my children to extend attention span. Children can visually see the time that they need to work on something. It takes a little while to get used to, however as they practice using the timer their minds will adjust to the fact that until the timer gets done they need to be focused on the given activity. And as they settle into that routine, then you can increase the amount of time on the timer to improve attention span.

3. Historically, Nagarathars have lived in a joint family which provided the benefit of multi-generational interactions. What recommendations do you have to keep up these connections when grand-parents and pre-school aged grandchildren don't live in the same house or same country?

Meyyappan: This is super tough as you cannot recreate that joint family environment. Small things that we have done include leaving children with their grandparents for up to a year when they are younger. This helped them to love, trust, and build relationships with someone other than parents. We also travel almost every year to India during summer (which has become quite expensive now). All of this helps children bond with the grandparents. Other practices such as wishing grandparents during birthdays or during festivals adds up. We have also been using Zoom calls at this time to ~~continue staying~~ connected ~~during these times~~. It is not as effective as in-person visits, but is better than nothing. Another idea to simulate the joint family atmosphere involves building good relationships with friends around us. Gathering together for activities, celebrations, and vacations helps build relationships outside of parents and gives a feeling of oneness with the broader community.

Paru: We have tried our best to bridge this gap by meeting and spending time with immediate family members who live in the country, at least twice or thrice a year and whenever such opportunities arise. During this time when travel has been impossible, we have tried our best to stay connected by doing video calls with the entire family, including with all cousins. Along with this, we have made interactions with grandparents as an important part of our routine. Ideas for such interactions may include reading to the children, telling them stories and playing online games.

4. Are you able to recommend supplemental online resources for parents who are interested in learning more about early childhood education?

The panel has grouped these resources into two categories: (a) resources on early childhood education, and (b) content & resources to educate children during these years.

5. It is a common practice in some of our families to help children eat better during meal-times by diverting their attention to screen-enabled content. Would you suggest alternative avenues to this practice?

Meyyappan: In the Montessori philosophy of education, the children are encouraged to eat by themselves. Initially, the children may not eat well and may lose weight. However, nothing teaches you like hunger. After an initial period of difficulty, you will notice that the children begin eating better because they now know that if they don't eat during meal time, there will be no food to junk on later. Now, this is harder to implement at home, and we as parents may feel bad and want to feed them. But, this practice is actually counterproductive, since the child will then rely on you for a good meal and go hungry otherwise. So, teaching kids to eat by themselves is very important as it not only puts the onus on them to eat well but, also relieves your burden. Also when children eat, it is very important to focus on the food and chew. If a child is watching TV, then they are not chewing properly and not focusing on the food, which means the food will not be digested well.

Content & resources to Educate Children

Paru: Online digital library - <https://www.getepic.com/>

Program for Math - <https://www.mathusee.com/>

A Resource that I use to help teach reading: https://www.amazon.com/Alpha-Phonics-Beginning-Samuel-L-Blumenfeld-ebook/dp/B001TH8YA6/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=alphaphonics&qid=1591889353&sr=8-1

<https://www.learningresources.com/> - Learning resources has a number of educational, hands-on toys and games that allow for exploration and discovery. I use them quite often at home with my children. During this stay at home period, they have also allowed free downloads of their learning activities.

Resources on Early Childhood Education

Meyyapan: Here are the links for program accreditation:

<https://www.naeyc.org/accreditation>

<https://www.advanc-ed.org/services/accreditation>

<https://amshq.org/Educators/Montessori-Schools/AMS-Accreditation>

One of the books that influenced me:

“The Absorbent Mind by Maria Montessori”

<https://www.amazon.com/Absorbent-Mind-Maria-Montessori/dp/0805041567>

Another great book:

“The Science behind the Genius”

https://www.amazon.com/Montessori-Science-Angeline-Stoll-Lillard/dp/0199981523/ref=as_li_ss_tl?crid=3OTGFJ923T026&keywords=the+science+behind+the+genius&qid=1580947543&prefix=the+science+behind+t,aps,208&sr=8-1&linkCode=s11&tag=montikids-20&linkId=e327896851a34ec14d363a1843d425b0&language=en_US

Paru: The authors that I like reading:

- Kevin Henkes (Character Traits) <https://kevinhenkes.com/>
- Eric Carle - <https://eric-carle.com/>
- Mo Willems