

# **A Survey of Caregivers Understanding of Characteristics of Young Children: Implications for Healthy National Development**

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## **Abstract**

*This study investigates a survey of caregivers understanding of characteristics of young children for a Healthy National Development. Five research questions were formulated to guide the study. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The population size of the study was 71 respondents drawn and used for the study using simple random techniques. The instrument for data collection was structure questionnaire developed by the researchers. The reliability co-efficient was found to be 0.91. Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The findings of the study revealed the characteristics of young children. Constraints to understanding characteristics of young children and problems emanating form lack of understanding characteristics of young children, among others were found as major problems. Based on the result, it was recommended that caregivers, including parents should be exposed to study and understand the characteristics of young children for a national development.*

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**Keywords:** Caregivers, Early Childhood, National development, Young Children

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## **Introduction**

Young children are young human beings who are not yet adultt or in their early childhood. Early childhood is the period of a child life from conception to age six (UNICEF, 2001). A child's first 3 years of life are the most crucial for normal physical and mental development. In other words, early childhood years are regarded as the foundation period of life. It is a period that holds the key to the overall maximum development of the potentials especially the brain. it is also most crucial in terms of a child's nutrition and physical growth. Children who falter during this period runs the risk of delayed or debilitated cognitive development.

Early childhood period are known with certain characteristics peculiar to them. A characteristics is a typical or noticeable quality of someone a something (Procter, 1996). Characteristics are signposts or qualities which are manifest in children's behaviour. The characteristics are important in guiding children's development. .in orderwords, children are special individuals with special characteristics as each child is a unique being with an individual temperament, learing style, family background and pattern and timing of growth.

During early childhood period, children are known to be physically active, develop rapidly in the use of motor skills for instance, they can thread large beads, scribble with ease, among others. they run around, kick, jump and climb chairs and other objects. Essa (2007), states that children's running is pleasurable in itself rather than as a means of getting somewhere fast.

In fact, play is a characteristic of this period. Play is work for children as adults are engaged in work. Emenogu (1996), states that a three-year old child which called by her parents told them she was very busy and would not come to eat unless she finishes with what she was busy with. Young children are intellectually curious and explorative in nature. They learn very easily through role memorization and recitation, they have short attention span. They have ability for language and could represent things symbolically. They ask many questions which must be responded to promptly. Children love to talk and to be talked to. They enjoy story telling especially animal stories. Essa (2007) states that three year old engage in more extensive conversations talking with and not just to people, and answer as well as ask questions. In fact, young children are usually full of questions constantly asking 'why' or what for or 'how come'.

They are also morally and emotionally good. They are very truthful and honest as well as not diplomatic in saying the truth. They are literal minded children believe and trust entirely. Their thinking is different from that of adult. They have fleeting emotion and interest. They express their emotions through joy, fear, anger, rage and can be naughty sometimes. They insist on their own ways and when frustrated, they get angry throw things about and show signs of stubbornness. Tantrum is common among young children, reflecting their unlimited verbal skills which are not yet adequately able to express what they want. They do not have the ability to wait for something they want 'right now' (Allen and mortatz, Bredekamp and cople, Trawick-smith in Essa, 2007). It is essential for care givers (parent/teachers) to study and understand those characteristics of young children for healthy development especially in the area of care giving.

### **Concept of Care**

Care is a process that results in the creation of an enabling environment which can support the child's optimal development. Care includes what adult and significant others in the life of a child are able to provide such as a healthy and safe environment, supportive and affectionate interaction, appropriate modeling, stimulation and protection. It occurs as the caregiver, parent and other significant adults interact with the child which also will contribute to the child overall development (Engle and Lhotska, 1997; Ezeanwu 2012; Santrock, 2004). Traditionally, this care was the sole responsibility of the relations and family with the mother at home most of the time but with changing lifestyle, urbanization, migration to the cities and the increasing necessities of mother to work due to economic meltdown this traditional pattern become eroded and came the birth of care giving (Ezeanwu, 2012).

Care giving is a role conceptualized based on coherent view of provision for young children prior to compulsory schooling (Ezirim, 2006). Caregivers refer to people who provide care for children on a long or short term basis (Shelov, 1998). The care giver is the most single factor in the success of preschool children because he or she is the key resource person or a facilitator for learning. Their understanding of children characteristics enhances healthy development in children.

### **Concept of Development**

Development as a concept is a casualty of definitional pluralism. It is a difficult word to define. However, attempts have been made by intellectual scholars to conceptualize development. Some of these definitions will be explored for the purpose of this study. Gboyega (2003) captures development as an idea that embodies all attempts to improve the conditions of human existence in all ramifications. It implies improvement in material well being of all citizens, not the most powerful and rich alone, in a sustainable way such that today's consumption does not imperil the future, it also demands that poverty and inequality of access to the good things of life be removed or drastically reduced. It seeks to improve personal physical security and livelihoods and expansion of life chances (Tolu and Abe, 2011).

Furthermore, development is also associated with modernization, material advancement, industrialization scientific and technological progress, the emergence of nuclear energy, electronic and biological revolution, new knowledge about man and the universe. It means urbanization, socio-cultural transformation, mass literacy, vertical and horizontal mobility, employment opportunities and the emergence of specialized and independent occupational roles (Umuru, 2002). Gboyega (2003) captures development as an idea that embodies all attempts to improve the conditions of human existence in all ramifications. It implies improvement in material well being of all citizens, not the most powerful and rich alone, in a sustainable way such that today's consumption does not imperil the future, it also demands that poverty and inequality of access to the good things of life be removed or drastically reduced. It seeks to improve personal physical security and livelihoods and expansion of life chances.

### **Concept of Healthy Development**

Healthy development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs; which means that one cannot cause irreversible damage to natural capital in the long-term in return for short benefits (Brundtland in Sanuelson and Kaga, 2008). Good health enhances proper growth and development where as poor health retards their growth and development (Santrock, 2007). According to World Health Organization (2015) defined healthy development as the process of constant, progressive enhancement of the health status of a population. The notion of development as a managed process has been derived from work in the field of economic and social development studies, and is now being applied to health systems. In other words, it is the process of continuous, progressive improvement of the health status of individuals and groups in a population

### **Concept of National Development**

National development is the ability of a county or countries to improve the social welfare of the people such as providing social amenities like quality education, potable water, infrastructural facilities, medical care, and so on (Abimbola & Adesote, 2012). This means that national development must involve the aggregation of national resources of the country for the general well being of the citizenry in terms of their social and economic advancement (Abimbola and Adesote, 2012). According to Lawal and Oluwatoyin (2011) national development therefore can be described as the overall development or a collective socio-economic, political as well as religious advancement of a country or nation. This is best achieved through development planning, which can be described as the country's collection of strategies mapped out by the government. To Bawa (2016), the term national development is very comprehensive. It includes all aspects of life of an individual and the nation. It is

holistic in approach. It is a process of reconstruction and development in various dimensions of a nation and development of individuals. In other words, it includes full-growth and expansion of our industries, agriculture, education, social, religious and cultural institutions. Moreover, national development implies development of a nation as a whole. It can be best defined as the all-round and balanced development of different aspects and facets of the nation viz. political, economic, social, cultural, scientific and material (Bawa, 2016).

Sustainable development on the other hand is the development of economic welfare and social justice for all human now and in future within the ecological limits of our Earth (Huckle in Samuel and Kaga, 2008). Sustainable development is meeting child's present natural need of growth and development, helping the child develops optimally and be prepared for future capability to survive well. The foundation for lifelong sustainable development is firmly laid in early childhood stage for character and attitude formation. The caregivers should focus on achieving children's capacity on this development by helping them learn to be, learn to live, learn to take responsibility and take initiative to act for promotion as in Erickson's psychosocial stage "initiative versus guilt" (3-6years) and not over burdening a child with much responsibility.

Good understanding in working with children is a necessary foundation for a sustainable development. It helps parents/teachers establish good and cordial loving relationship with children. It will help caregivers learn spending quality time with children, talking to them and listening to them. It helps caregivers answer children's many questions. It will help parents/teachers plan more effectively based on how children think and feel. Caregivers will develop deep interest in the upbringing of their children. Caregivers will ensure children get all opportunities and maturing they needed and deserved to develop their optimal potentials. Essa (2008), states that teachers/parents who understand children, know their characteristics respond better to them, and know how to challenge them in a supportive manner to contribute to their positive sense of self. In essence, everything caregivers do have an impact on children's self concept. On the other, hand, there are certain dangers of lacking in understanding when working with children. Maduewesi (2005), stated that personnel/caregivers, teachers and workers at early childhood care preschool level were not qualified. She averred that many of them do not have any basic knowledge or quantification in the area of early child hood education. The implication is that people do not help children in development for a better future. Illiterate parents and other adults are ill-informed about characteristics of young children; lack of interest in the study of children, among others. These appear to be serious constraints to understanding characteristics of young children. In effect, these constraints have culminated problems for children for a healthy sustainable development.

Some caregivers have difficulty in communicating with children which often makes the child get frustrated. Children are deprived opportunities to play. Adults state that children's play is a mere waste of time. Children are treated as adults, hurrying them to grow up fast too soon (Elkind, 1987). Caregivers often times neglect the children, all because they do not understand the characteristics of young children hence thinks is disturbance. Some adults expect children to think and behave like adults. Lack of understanding of the characteristics of young children appears to have given rise to lack of good healthcare, and facilities for children, inadequate nutrition and lack of good security for children hence leaving them without their basic needs.

However, when the basic needs are provided for the young children there will be an orderly and durable development in the physical, personal social and cognitive development.

The quality of care children receives affects their development. Research has revealed that children with high quality care have higher cognitive test scores from toddler years to age twenty-one; their academic achievement in both reading and mathematics was higher from the primary grades through adulthood and they completed more years of education and were likely to attend a four year college (Catron, 2003). It has also been proven that quality care from the caregivers affects the school readiness tasks and language skills positively. In fact, a child that is well developed is likely to make a better future.

While children are naturally motivated to explore and attempt to master their environment, those with poor health and or nutrition have reduced motivation to explore and this inhibits learning and development which in turn leads to problems that will directly impact on the children's self esteem. Working for sustainable and healthy development of the children therefore entails total devotion of the caregivers. Adequate care and nutrition from caregiver will lay a solid foundation for proper early childhood development. This is because proper nutrition aids brain growth necessary for intellectual cognitive as well as psych-motor development in the child, whereas The parents plays a vital role in the developmental of the child. According to Esu (2000), insufficiency of maternal care is detrimental to development during the early years as the child grows and most of the damage caused at this stage is irreversible. It is therefore the responsibility of both parents to lead children through the early years, providing them with adequate nutrition, stimulation, good values and good health habits.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The general purpose of the study is to investigate a survey of caregivers understanding of characteristics of young children: Implications for Healthy National Development. Specifically, the study:

1. Ascertain the characteristics of young children.
2. Examine why is it necessary to study and understand characteristic of young children.
3. Ascertain the constraints to the study and understanding characteristics of young children.
4. Examine the problems emanating from lack of understanding characteristics of young children.
5. Ascertain ways to understanding the characteristics of young children been enhanced.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions have been posed to guide this study.

1. What are the characteristics of young children?
2. Why is it necessary to study and understand characteristic of young children?
3. What are the constraints to the study and understanding characteristics of young children?
4. What are the problems emanating from lack of understanding characteristics of young children?
5. What are the ways to understanding the characteristics of young children been enhanced?

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a descriptive survey design. The population of the study comprises seventy-one respondents drawn from Nsukka town in Enugu State of Nigeria. Sampling was carried out using simple random sampling techniques. A fifty-nine (59) item research structured questionnaires titled understanding characteristics of young children's

questionnaire (UCYCQ) was constructed on a four-point scale of strongly agreed (SA) Agree (A) Strongly Disagree (SD) and Disagree (D) with numerical values of 4, 3, 2 and 1, respectively. The instrument was faced validated by three experts from the Faculty of education and Arts, University of Nigerian, Nsukka. The comments and suggestions made by the validators were affected in the final draft of the questionnaire. The internal consistency was determined using Cronbach alpha. It yielded an estimate value of 0.91. The data collated were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. Decision was made that any item whose mean value is 2.5 and above will be regarded as accepted while any below 2.5 was rejected.

## Results

The results of the study are presented in tables according to the research questions. Research question one, what are the characteristics of young children?

**Table 1: mean scores of parents/teachers on the characteristics of young children.**

**Table1:** mean scores of respondents on the characteristics of young children

S/ N	Item Statement	X	SD	Decision
	Physical characteristics			
1	Children are very active, physically (playful, they run around, kick, jump, hop, climb chairs and other objects, among others)	3.80	0.40	A
2	Children's play is a natural activity.	2.69	1.08	*
3	Children have little control with crayons and paint.	2.75	0.98	*
4	Children are very restless and get on adults' nerves.	2.82	1.03	*
5	Children develop rapidly in terms of using their hands (at three, they can hold pencil normally, thread large beads, scribble with ease but cannot copy or draw)	3.15	0.95	*
	<b>INTELLECTUAL CHAREACTERISTICS</b>			
6	Children have rapid development of language ability and the ability to represent things symbolically (could represent a car with steering movement and a sound)	3.24	0.89	*
7	Children learn very easily/rapidly (by rote memorization and can recite relatively).	3.25	0.89	*
8	Children are curious and explorative in nature	3.14	0.76	*
9	Children have short attention and concentration span.	3.13	0.94	*
10	Children try out things and learn from them.	3.18	0.72	*
11	Children as endless questions (he/she cannot pass anything without asking what the name is, what it is used for)	3.65	0.66	*
12	Children are object oriented (they love objects especially colourful ones).	3.30	0.83	*
13	Children's thought pattern appears to be dominated by visual impression.	3.23	0.99	*
14	Children repeat events observed somewhere and imitate adult behaviours at a later time.	3.46	0.56	*
	<b>SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS</b>			
15	Children love to talk (they talk all the time, repeat what they hear).	3.42	0.73	*
16	Children love to be talked to (they enjoy story-telling especially animal stories).	3.49	0.61	*

17	Children rely on adult and need adults' attention in learning the correct actions to take and the best words to say.	3.25	0.75	*
18	Children gradually become less self-centered; (little-by-little) they learn the joys of sharing.	3.45	0.71	*
<b>MORAL CHARACTERISTICS</b>				
19	Children are very truthful and frank (they are not diplomatic in saying the truth).	3.32	0.841	*
20	Children are literal minded.	3.23	0.78	*
21	Children believe and trust entirely	3.52	0.58	*
22	Children can be naughty sometimes	3.13	0.77	*
23	Children insist on their own ways and when frustrated they get angry (throw things about and may show signs of stubbornness and headiness).	3.25	0.69	*
<b>EMOTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS</b>				
24	Children have fleeting emotions and interest	3.41	0.69	*
25	Children express intense joy, fear, anger, rage, (temper tantrums, nails biting, refusal to eat, among others).	3.24	0.78	*
26	Children's thinking is different from that of adult	3.42	0.65	*
27	Children show sympathy or concern for others (by crying with them, or by holding them, cleaning their eyes, saying sorry).	3.55	0.53	*

**Keys:** Agree=A\*

**STRONGLY AGREE= SA**

The result on table 1 showed that parent/teachers agreed that items 1-27 are characteristics of young children as is indicated in the mean scores which were above the criterion mean of 2.50. The mean score range from 2.69-3.80. The standard deviation of other scores indicating that they are not far from their opinions.

### Research question two

Why is it necessary for parents/teachers to study and understand the characteristics of young children?

**Table 2:** mean scores of parents/teachers on the necessity of studying and understanding of the characteristics of young children.

S/N	Item Statement	X	SD	Decision
28	To establish good and cordial, loving relationship. (Children desire love and respect for their self concepts flourish in an environment of respect).	3.48	0.77	A
29	To learn spending quality time with children, talking to them and listening to them.	3.35	0.91	*
30	To learn to answer children's (endless) questions.	3.35	0.63	*
31	To encourage children to find out things and do things and do things themselves	3.14	0.99	*
32	To plan more effectively-knowing how children think and feel and being aware of stages they pass through.	3.45	0.73	*
33	To ensure children get all the opportunities and nurturing they needed and deserved to develop their optimum potentials.	3.30	0.82	*

34	To develop flexibility to be able to deal well with change and unexpected turns, doing what he/she had to for each child.	3.28	0.88	*
35	To develop deep interest I the upbringing of young children.	3.41	0.67	*
36	To have patience dealing and working with children: for good parents/teachers have a long fuse for exasperation, frustration, and anger.	3.24	0.78	*

Data on table 2 indicates that parents/teachers agreed to all the items 28-36 as the necessity for studying and understanding the characteristics of young children. This shown I the means scores which were above 2.50. The standard deviations of the scores of the parents/teachers are small indicating that the scorers of the mean are not far from each other.

Research question three, what are the constraints to the studying and understanding the characteristics of young children?

**Table 3:** Mean score of the respondent on constraints to the study and understanding the characteristics of young children.

S/N	Item Statement	X	SD	Decision
37	Lack of qualified teachers.	3.22	0.89	*
38	Illiterate parents and other adults are ill formed about characteristics of young children	3.13	1.00	*
39	Ignorance has led many persons astray of the importance and value in understanding characteristics of young children	3.18	0.83	*
40	Lack o interest in the study of children	3.18	0.64	*
41	Inadequate supply of qualified teachers	3.18	0.78	*
42	Lack of interest, patience, flexibility, commitment, love, respect, among others on the parts of parents/teachers for children.	3.23	0.85	*

As indicated in table above, the data shows that parents/teachers agreed that items 37-42 are constraints to the study and understanding of characteristics of children with means scorers ranging from 3.14-3.45. The standard deviations from the scores of the parents/teachers responses for the means are small suggesting the means scores did not vary so much.

**Research question four,** what are the problems emanating from lack of understanding the characteristics of young children?

**Table 4:** means scores of parents/teachers respondents on the problems emanating from the characteristics of young children.

S/N	Item Statement	X	SD	Decision
43	Some adults have difficulty in communicating with children which often leads to frustration on the part of the child (expresses various symptoms of anger)	3.17	0.88	*
44	Children are deprived from playing; adults regard children's play as mere waste of time (children can only be allowed to play when they are done with domestic chores).	2.86	0.99	*
45	Children are treated as adults, hurrying them to grow fast	2.85	1.10	*



46	Many parents/teachers do not respond to children's questions (sometimes, children are referred to as talkative).	3.13	0.92	*
47	Some adults expect children to think and behave like adults.	2.90	0.96	*
48	Lack of good healthcare and facilities for children.	3.24	0.85	*
49	Lack of adequate nutrition and food security for children	3.44	0.84	*
50	Child abuse and domestic violence in the upbringing of children	3.31	0.73	*
51	Lack of parents/teachers spending quality time with children and not listening to them.	3.46	0.65	*

Data presented on table 4 shows that parents/teachers agree that items 43-51 are problems emanating from lack of understanding of children's characteristics-as has been seen in their mean score which range from 2.85-3.46. The more so, the standard deviations from the mean scores of each item are small suggesting that the respondents are not far from their opinions.

### Research question five

In what ways can understanding the characteristics of young children be enhanced?

**Table 5:** mean scores of the parents/teachers on ways of enhancing understanding characteristics of young children.

S/n	ITEM STATEMENT	X	SD	Decision
52	Parents/teachers should spend quality time with children, talking to them and listening to them.	3.65	0.54	*
53	Parents/teachers should answer children's (unending) questions promptly, giving them fair response(s)	3.32	0.79	*
54	Parents/teachers should encourage children's curiosity and exploration, by allowing them find out things for themselves.	3.33	0.91	*
55	Parents/teachers should provide all opportunities and nurturing children needed and deserved to develop their full potentials.	3.32	0.89	*
56	Parents/teachers establish good and cordial, loving relationship. (children desire love and respect for their self concepts flourish in an environment of respect).	3.44	0.86	*
57	Parents/teachers should ensure children are provided with nutritious food for proper development.	3.43	0.67	*
58	Parents/teachers should study and understand characteristics of young children as well as apply the principles guiding them in every situation.	3.1	0.60	*
59	Government at all levels, stakeholders, NGOs and other official bodies should endeavor to see that the rights of the child; to life, health education welfare, among others, are implemented to the later.	3.52	0.65	*

Data on table shows that parents/teachers agreed to the 52-59 as ways of enhancing understanding characteristics of young children. This is indicated in the mean scores which range from 3.32-3.64. Also, the mean scores of each score did not vary so much indicate the scores are close to each other.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study show the responses of parents/teachers on table as the characteristics of young children. Parents/teachers believe that studying and understanding young children's characteristics is essential to improve the quality of relationship with children and ensure they (children) get all the opportunities and nurturing they need and deserved for sustainable development. These characteristics include that children are physically active; children's play is a natural activity. Children are intellectually curious, and explorative. Children love to talk. They have fleeting emotions and interest, among others. This agree with Essa (2007), that teachers (parents) who understand children, know their characteristics, respond to them, and know how to challenge them in a supportive manner that contribute to their positive sense of self.

On the necessity or reasons to study and understand the characteristics of young children, the items enumerated on table 2 are necessary or important. This finding is in consonance with the view of Rubottom (2001) that understanding the developmental stages children pass through help characteristics of young children by parents/teachers. These include lack of qualified teachers, lack of interest in the study of children. This is in agreement with Maduwesi (2005) who stated that personnel/caregivers, teachers and workers at ECC preschool level are unqualified. This brings s about lack of understanding of the characteristics of young children.

Result in table 4 reveal problems emanating from lack of understanding characteristics of young children. Parents/teachers suggest these are problems of lack of understanding characteristics of young children. This is a problem. Children are treated like adult supporting this findings, Elkins (1987), states that the condition of such a child, a hurried child, children growing up too fast too soon. Many of such children missed their mark of growing up to their maximum potential. Some became delinquents or misfits.

Results on the ways of enhancing understanding of characteristic of young children, parents/teachers perceived all items enumerated as ways of enhancing understanding characteristics of young children. This includes, spending quality time with children, talking to them and listening to support and encouragement during the early years will be creative, adventurous learner throughout their lives. This positive support will guarantee children a sustainable development throughout life.

Because, it is during these early years that children form attitudes about learning that will last for lifetime.

## **Conclusion**

Through children, humanity transmits it values.that transmission begins with infants through early childhood to preserve moral and social values or to change them for better. This can succesfully be done if caregivers understands their characteristics peculiar to them. Early years are critical and sensitive in the development of self-concept. It is the formative years of guiding a child to develop his/her fulll potentials that would sustain him/her throughout life. Early childhood stage therefore is the foundation for adulthood life. hence, caregivers should be aware of the critical and sensitive periods in a child's development to make out something wonderful and positive for the child's sustainable development by understanding them.

## **Recommendations**

In view of the research findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Parents/teachers should receive in courses in child development and education to have an in-depth knowledge and understanding of children's characteristics.

2. Parents/teachers should provide stimulating environments that would enable young children explore and manipulate objects in their environment.
3. Parents/teachers should encourage children's curiosity and exploration by allowing them find out things for themselves.
4. Parents/teachers should provide all opportunities and nurturing children need for them to develop their full potentials.
5. Parent/teachers should study and understand characteristics of young children as well as apply the principles guiding them in every situation for a sustainable development. This can be done through P.T.A, seminar/workshops, among others.
6. Government at all levels, stakeholders, NGOs and other official bodies should endeavor to see that the rights of the child are implemented to the later.

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