



# Meaningful Parental Contribution to Ensure Children's Freedom of Expression at Early Ages: A Sustainable Development Approach

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The cultural practices of Gilgit-Baltistan appeared to be discouraging children un/consciously<sup>1</sup> in expressing their feelings, emotions, and views freely in front of their parents including other elders that create hindrance for the children to face people and situations even at their later years. Children in such situations may face with developmental delays and speech issues that could lead towards a kind of autism. The purpose of this study was to explore parents' practices and perceptions about their meaningful contribution towards children' freedom of expression and its effects on sustainable development of their societies. The researcher used focus group discussions and in/formal observations as data collection tools within qualitative paradigm to capture experiences and perceptions of 18 parents cum ECD teachers and the practices of nine research participants from three districts. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis approach and emerging themes were recorded. The findings confirmed that the parents who focused on how to enhance their children' freedom of expression in early ages, they could better develop children' complex dimensions of holistic development such as physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual etc. Children from such family backgrounds could better contribute towards sustainable development of

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<sup>1</sup> The use of slash '/' represents dialectical logics mean two sides of the picture. For instance un/consciously means both consciously and unconsciously. The researcher used this logics throughout the paper to represent both side of the case

societies at later stages where they live and work. Whereas parents who could not allow children to express their ideas and feelings they became less confident, poorly performed in their practical lives with poor interactions with others. The study recommends that parents should ensure their meaningful involvement in developing their children's freedom of expression at early ages by creating a friendly yet enabling environment at home and beyond.

## Introduction

“The Convention requires that children be respected as persons in their own right. Young children should be recognized as active members of families, communities and societies with their own concerns, interests and points of view.” (para. 5, to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (2005)). Helping children to express their ideas freely or share their “point of view” is one of the most important aspects of early life developmental areas if neglected the child may become victim of autism (Waters, Amerine Dickens, Thurston, Lu & Smith, 2020; Mohammadi, Rakhshan, Molazem, Zareh & Gillespie, 2020). Children with developmental delays, expression and communication problems, and lack of confidence etc. as few of the serious developmental disorders could be developed as a result of poor parental involvement, discouraging children to share their views and neglecting children in the early ages (Waters et al., 2020). Thus, being very conscious and be well aware about child development in a holistic manner help all those who are engaged with a child to shape his/her life for a society with notions of sustainable development (SD) (Giddings, Hopwood & O'Brien, 2002; Hedlund-de Witt, 2014). Now, the challenge is how to develop a sustainable society with people who are developed holistically in their early years. To this end, investing in early years, to ensure the holistic development of the children, is vital because “children who have a good start in life are less likely to be poor as adults” (Hayes, 2008, p.8).

It is believed that child development starts even before birth till eight years (Arnett, Maynard, Brownlow, Chapin, & Machin, 2020) and providing an enabling environment to children at their early ages contributes towards their freedom of expression, one of the fundamental rights of children (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2018; Collins, 2017; De Figueiredo & Dias, 2012; Sabol, 2018). Thus, protecting all rights of children, including freedom of expression, enables parents, teachers and other care givers to understand concepts related to holistic development. Moreover, focusing on holistic development, of children in early years is considered to be one of the contributing factors for SD of societies in the long run.

So, acknowledging children' fundamental rights and educating individuals (i.e. parents and other caregivers etc.) and institutions (i.e. schools, day care centres and other organizations including policy making bodies etc.) to ensure the holistic development can be a good start in the life a child in order to ensure SD. However, it seems to be one of the challenges in the context of developing countries including GB, Pakistan. Thus it is important to know what is

development and which are the factors contributing holistic development of children at individual level before thinking about SD at society level.

The term ‘development’ in early years refers to the process in which a child learns to master difficult levels of physical growth, moving, thinking, feeling and interacting etc. (Tertoolen, Geldens, Van-Oers & Popeijus, 2017; Yoleri, 2014). Thus, the development of children at their early ages is influenced by and highly dependent upon the meaningful parental contributions in addition to the interactions with other caregivers and objects in their surroundings (Coleman, 2019). Meaningful parental contribution means the involvement of parents with children, especially in the early ages, to ensure holistic development of children. Holistic development of children depends upon what kind of environment is created at home, how food and nutrition, health and education related care is given to child that in/directly influence the development of a child in different areas such as physical, cognitive, emotional, social and ethical and spiritual etc.

In simple words, meaningful parental contribution is about all possible support and care (i.e., necessary for children to ensure their holistic development) that parents without excluding others provide to children of the early age. The early age of a child is the time when child starts to learn new knowledge (e.g. through multiple senses), develops different skills, adopts habits, and attaches with certain contextual values etc., by observing, experiencing, and testing (Lasi, et al., 2007). The children then like to express their views about all these exposures freely at personal level if the conditions are favourable at home, Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres and within a society in which the children live.

ECD, according to Kamerman (2006), is the basic characteristics of the life that even starts before birth. So, being very conscious about the importance of ECD indeed helps teachers, parents and other care givers to focus on the dimensions of holistic development of children including developing children’ freedom of expression. Holistic development means focusing on almost all dimensions of development of a child such as physical, cognitive, psychological, spiritual, social, cultural and emotional including freedom of expression etc. and focusing on how the child is developing with the passage of time in all these developmental areas (Urban, Cardini, Guevara, Okengo & Flórez Romero, 2019; Sailakumar & Naachimuthu, 2017).

Children’ freedom of expression (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2017) is considered to be the most important aspects of holistic development that is embedded within the fulfilment of child rights (Collins, 2017). They argued that providing highest level of freedom of expression helps children in their early ages to develop holistically. Because, when a child is supported and encouraged to express his/her emotions, thoughts, feelings and starts interacting with others within a sociocultural settings with highest level of freedom the child expands all dimensions of the development. Moreover, it is believed that working on holistic development of children especially in their early ages highly contributes towards SD of



societies (Makarewicz-Marcinkiewicz, 2015; Figure 1). It is also believed that a child who gets more care in early years with reference to his/her freedom of expression, one of the contributing areas of the holistic development, later on as an adult, can better contribute to the society for its SD. However, far less is known about the implications of freedom of expression as one of the key yet linking aspect of holistic development in children in order to ensure SD of societies in general and societies in developing countries in particular.

Studies argued that new-borns have only limited expressions of feeling signals and with the passage of the child's growth, it improves depending upon the level and quality of nurturing and support is given (Tonon, 2020). The child shows clear expressions of joy and sadness/anger, surprise and interest, comfort and physical pain in the environment where the child is exposed (Sabol, 2018). However, studies also explained that several youngsters acquire their 1<sup>st</sup> feeling-state words at around 18-20 months (Caldwell, Shaver, Li & Minzenberg, 2011) and by twenty-eight months, most kids start expressing about feeling states, know themselves and masses (Bai, Repetti & Sperling, 2016; Dunn, et al., 1987).

Critically reflecting on the situation reveals that parents and other care givers in the early stages of children need an environmental adoption for the child. When parents become conscious about the role of environment they can better help the child to grow and develop holistically. Wood (2014) argued that children should be given more conducive environment that nurtures freedom to enable them to exercise agency, self-regulation, ownership, and management, and to direct towards their own learning. To this end, beyond child-centred education, an education that is embedded within the philosophical underpinnings of "critical-creative pedagogies" (Author, 2016, p.237) supported with skilfully integrated technologies including effective use of mobile phones (Sabit et al., 2020) can provide opportunities such as freedom of expression, communication and socialization, environmental adaptation, and acquire creative and critical thinking skills etc. in children (Denham, Bassett & Wyatt, 2014; Author & Poudel, 2014; Author, 2017;). However, all this highly depends upon the exposure of all those who are directly (i.e. parents, caregivers, schools, teachers and others etc.) or indirectly (i.e. policy makers, societies and agents of child protection etc.) involved in dealing with child development (Eldridge, 2002).

Similarly, Sewani (2012) supports the view that mother-child interaction is the first socializing relationship that most children experience because the early experience of mother-child interaction shapes the practices and perceptions of children about the world and later patterns of behaviors. Effective involvement of parents, or a meaningful parental contribution (Eldridge, 2002) develops better relationship with parents, children and beyond. Thus, relationship with parents and siblings, treatment and training obtained at home highly influence children's attitude toward outsiders, elderly and others (Tertoolen et al., 2017; Widen & Russell, 2015). The family environment makes children better ready for social adaptation such as socially active, volunteering self, helping others and extroverted in nature etc. (Sabol, 2018; Horelli, 2007). This is because of the fact that kids copy the behaviour of

their parents, imitate from the customs and develop their vocabulary, start thinking about things and situations and learn un/consciously as a result of their interactions with parents and family members (Ahmad, 2002; Tertoolen et al., 2017).

Thus, to explore an in-depth understanding of the phenomena, meaningful parental contribution (Mawere, Thomas & Nyaruwata, 2015) in developing children's freedom of expression at early ages so as to contribute towards their holistic development that further adds its value in SD of societies, this study was conducted in three districts of GB. To achieve this objective, the researcher<sup>2</sup> framed the following research questions:

1. In what ways meaningful parental contribution facilitates freedom of expression at early ages?
2. Why freedom of expression is important at early ages of children and in what ways it can contribute towards SD of societies?
3. What are the challenges that parents face to develop a culture of sharing ideas at home freely that fosters freedom of expression?

## **Materials and Methods**

### ***Theoretical Framework***

The seminal work of Horelli (2007), "Constructing a theoretical framework for environmental child-friendliness" published from the journal of *Children Youth and Environments* provides the basis for the researcher to understand the importance of child-friendly environment everywhere including at home during early ages. Creating a child-friendly environment enables children to adopt themselves comfortably within that environmental settings and such a friendly environment helps the children develop holistically. Moreover, Chau (2017)' doctoral dissertation on "*Discovering the participation rights of children in Sweden and Vietnam: a study about Vietnamese parents' perspectives towards influencing factors on children's participation rights practices in the families*" helped me to think about the importance of meaningful parental involvement in terms of their awareness and education about child rights i.e., to enable children to express whatever they feel, think, encounter and observe in their lives. However, very little is known about meaningful parental contributions (Mawere et al., 2015) in creating a culture at home that protects their rights and helps to understand how child-friendly environment at the early ages of a child can impact on rest of his/her life in a very positively manner. Therefore, I used this framework as a theoretical referent to understand the importance of child-friendliness and its benefits for children at home, school, society, and beyond.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the paper I used the term 'the researcher', 'me' or 'I' interchangeably for the same meaning.

To this, end the researcher has developed a cultural-contextual framework to support the ideas related to freedom of expression that can be nurtured in a child-friendly environment at home and beyond. Thus, for children to express freely without any restrictions, fear and control of the parents, teachers and society need to develop a culture that highly value child-friendly environment everywhere especially in the very early years of a child. The researcher believes that freedom of expression highly influences five key domains of holistic development, which is necessary for SD of societies (Figure 1). The five essential components of holistic development that give rise to SD are as under:

1) physical development needs a caring child-friendly environment at home (Horelli, 2007; Scoullos, 1995), 2) Cognitive development needs an exposure to diverse range of learning material and support (Zhang & Morrison, 2020; Urban et al., 2019); 3) Social development needs to expose children with events, places and people etc. in/dependently (Miller, 2013); 4) Emotional development needs parental attention and wisely use of selected technological devices etc. (Duerager & Livingstone, 2012); and 5) finally, training of parents, teachers and other stakeholders who in/directly contribute toward children' freedom of expression that leads towards holistic development of children (Lasi, Jiwan, Batool, Dhanani & Shrestha, 2017; Chau, 2017).

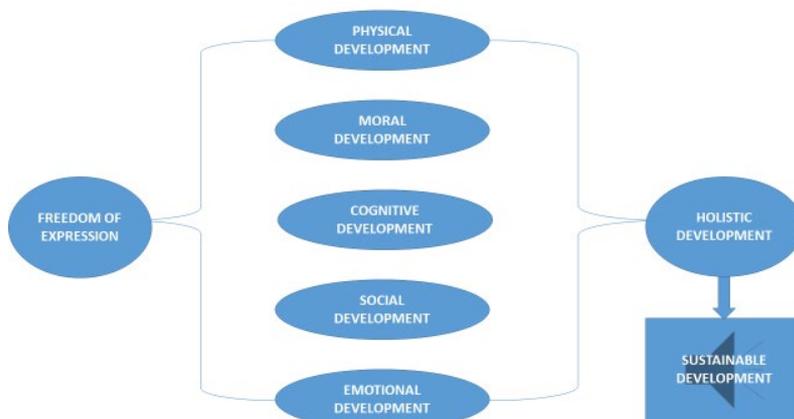


Figure 1. A theoretical framework for freedom of expression that contributes towards SD

## Methodology

The purpose of this descriptive and exploratory research, using a qualitative case study approach, through the lens of 'holistic in-depth investigation' (Zainal, 2007, p. 1), is to explore the perceptions of three purposefully selected groups of parents (i.e., six parents in each group) in the context of GB. The qualitative research design is applied within the



interpretivist paradigm to explore the meanings and understandings of the people/parents (Saldana, 2015; McMillan, 2012). Epistemologically, the nature of interpretivist research paradigm is more appropriate to explore personal views such as the practices and perceptions of parents regarding their children's freedom of expression at early ages (Taylor, 2008). Thus, employing interpretivism in this case study enabled me to explore in-depth personal as well as collective views of parents about their role in developing freedom of expression (Creswell, 2009; Saldana, 2015).

The researcher used case study research as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 1994, p.23). This is one of the key characteristics of the case study research that enhances data credibility (Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, 2019; Yin, 2003). In this particular context, among many other strategies, case study appears to be the most appropriate strategy for an in-depth study of a phenomena (i.e. exploring perception of parents about their children's freedom of expression at their early ages). Because case study enables researcher to “make meaning of what people say and do in a real situation” with reference to the perceived views of parents about their role in developing freedom of expression of their children at early ages (Author & Poudel, 2014, p.9).

Moreover, the selection of the case study as a strategy is also more appropriate to explore a unit of study as a bounded system in terms of people, place and time (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2015). Thus, the bounded unit of the study was the exploration of the practices and perceptions of three purposefully selected focus group discussions of parents about their role in developing their children' freedom of expression within a given time period which were necessary for in-depth understanding of the case (McMillan, 2012). However, the selection of a strategy for data collection and analysis does not matter what the “label” is given to that particular strategy, the most important thing is to see whether the strategy is “appropriate for your particular research” (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2000, p. 92) linking to the questions developed for data collection from research participants.

### **Selection of Research Sites and Participants**

In district Gilgit there are 32 ECD centers in addition to 80 schools which claim to provide early childhood education to the children coming from this cosmopolitan city. Whereas in Hunza and Ghizer there are 35 and 86 ECD centers and schools respectively. The parents have to rely on these formal education institutions for their children. Thus, the researcher purposefully selected three groups, one from each district, (i.e. through a criterion-sampling technique) for focused group discussions (FGDs) to seek their views about their role in developing their children's freedom of express at early ages (Obeidat & AlKhaza'leh, 2019).

The use of criterion-sampling technique enabled me to identify three different groups for FGDs and select parents who were aware of the importance of their children's freedom of expression and its effects on SD of their society (Obeidat & AlKhaza'leh, 2019). The

researcher' rationale for employing a purposive criterion-sampling technique was to find research sites where the case exists and research participants (i.e. six parents) who were also teachers of one of the ECD centers (within their residential districts) with an understanding of the case i.e., the importance of freedom of expression and its implications at large (Creswell, 2009). So, the researcher selected three different districts for data collection using FGDs of parents as research participants who were aware of: (a) the freedom of children' expression at home and beyond, (b) the implications of freedom of expression in their children' lives and for the society in which they live and work, and (c) their willingness to participate in the study.

### **Focus Group Discussion**

I used FGDs to explore the views about meaningful parental contributions to enhance freedom of expression of their children as an approach to SD of societies (Creswell, 2009). In this context, I selected three different districts purposefully to collect data from each group consist of six members selected by using purposeful sampling technique (Table 1). In each group it was ensured that every member must be a parent of a child in ECD and the parent must be an ECD teacher as well. The purpose of FGDs was to gain a collective view of each group (from three districts) about meaningful parental contributions to enhance freedom of expression of their children as an approach to SD of societies (Cohen et al., 2011). In these FGDs the participants interacted with each other, thus allowing their views to emerge without the researcher's domination in the situation (Cohen et al., 2011). The group (six purposefully selected parents who were teachers of ECD as well) was very focused on meaningful parental involvement to enhance freedom of expression of their children as an approach to SD of societies, allowing rich data to emerge.

The FGDs brought data out in ways that a one-on-one interview may not bring to the surface (Cohen et al., 2011). The questions were open ended, and ordered in a way that allowed smooth flow of conversation (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). The FGDs continued for one and half hour discussion with a ten minute serving tea break, which was helpful in gathering rich data.

### **Non participant observation**

The researcher used non participant observations of purposefully selected three families one from each district and spent three to five days with these families. In Hunza I spent five days, in Ghizer three days and in Gilgit four days to observe informally in what ways parents remained involved with their children and encouraged them to express their views and ideas in their families and beyond (Table 1). This informal observation enabled me to capture lived experiences of both parents and children to make better meaning of their actions in real life situations.



### **Trustworthiness, Reliability and Transferability**

The construct of trustworthiness in interpretive research (Rose & Johnson, 2020; see also, Johnson & Parry, 2015a, Johnson & Parry, 2015b), in which the researcher can make meaning of freedom of expression and effective parental involvement (Campbell, 2011; Mawere et al., 2015), which refers to validity and reliability concerns. Using a qualitative interpretivist lens certain techniques are employed to establish the 'trustworthiness' of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1999). For instance, member checking was undertaken by sharing transcribed data and initial analysis of data with the participants for their consensus (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I also generated rich data for thick description of the research contexts and research participants' i.e., three purposefully selected parents to explore their views about how do they play their role in developing their children's freedom of expression and what are the cultural barriers that restrict them to allow their children express freely (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). According to Cohen et al. (2011) awareness or personal views of parents is a social function which is derived from the interpretations of the individual as a result of cultural and social understanding. Therefore, the research finding cannot be generalized to the whole population of GB parents. However, the research findings are applicable to research contexts where condition and situations are same. Therefore, the findings of this study would be transferable to similar conditions in similar contexts especially in the mountainous areas of Asian countries context.

The reliability of the findings was addressed by giving research participants opportunity to read their transcripts and make any changes. This allowed participants to draw on their constructions of reality and ensure trustworthiness while clarifying any misinterpretations what they had expressed during their FGDs and how the researcher has interpreted in their own words. However, trustworthiness could be further enhanced in future studies through triangulation while using multiple data collection tools and comparing data from at least three sources to get perspectives from other sources as well as to confirm evidence (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtler, 2010).

**Table 1: Details of Research Participants**

S. No	Name of Districts	Data Collection Tools	No of Participants	Criteria (selection of Research Participant – RP)
1	District A	Focus Group Discussion 1	6 (5 female 1 male)	RP must be: 1) a parent of ECD children; 2) also a teacher, teaching in a ECD center
		Non participant observation of family A for five days	3	At least one child in ECD having both mother and father remained involved (i.e. 3members of the family)
2	District B	Focus Group Discussion 2	6 (4 female 2 male)	RP must be: 1) a parent of ECD children; 2) also a teacher, teaching in a ECD center
		Non participant observation of family B for three days	3	At least one child in ECD having both mother and father remained involved (i.e. 3members of the family)
3	District C	Focus Group Discussion 3	6 (4 female 2 male)	RP must be: 1) a parent of ECD children; 2) also a teacher, teaching in a ECD center
		Non participant observation of family C for four days	3	At least one child in ECD having both mother and father remained involved (i.e. 3members of the family)
Total No. of participants			27	

### Data Familiarization and Analysis Procedure

As data analysis is not an isolated process rather it is linked to the theoretical framework with which the researcher develops the approach to the phenomenon being studied. Looking at the nature of case study research, the process of data collection and analysis is carried out by using some appropriate techniques to reach at interpretations. There are some approaches such as five techniques of Yin (2003, P.1) pattern matching; 2) linking data to propositions; 3) explanation building; 4) time-series analysis; 5) logic models and cross-case synthesis’, and ‘categorical aggregation and direct interpretation’ techniques of Stake (1995) are the most commonly used ones. Likewise, Rowley (2002, p.9) used three principles of analysis: “use of all of the relevant evidence; exploration of major rival interpretations; and addressing significant aspects of case study” in a systematic manner to reach at interpretation through thematic analysis. However, for this study I used a theoretical framework that guided the analytical process for answering the stated research question (Hasslöf, 2015).

The theoretical framework provided the lens with which I analyzed the data and identified themes that relate to different themes emerged. Following the frame proposed by Schutt (2011) I followed the following steps of qualitative data analysis. Firstly, the data were read and transcribed. Secondly the data were coded. Thirdly the data were categorized into concepts. The concepts then further thematized in light of (a) participants’ awareness about their role in developing children’s freedom of expression, (b) the importance and implications of freedom of expression with reference to SD of children. The process of sorting sub-

categories into broader category and splitting the broader category into sub-categories and themes occurred many times till the emergence of final themes and patterns (Engel & Schutt, 2016). Data analysis, as a process of drawing meanings, and making sense of the meanings from the data was carried out in a systematic way using the principles of analysis to interpret the findings on parents practices and perceptions of their children' freedom of expression at their early ages.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I shared the purpose and procedures of the study with the concerned parents and gained written permission for seeking their permission for data collection and their techniques. I negotiated time and procedure of their participation in FGDs and I assured the research participants that the data would only be used for academic purposes. The real name of the research site and all the research participants were replaced by pseudonyms (Gay, 2003; Pring, 2004). The participants were selected on a voluntary basis and all the data generation process and schedule were decided on their own convenience. The researcher ensured that the data generation process does not affect the institutional routine work environment and the routine of the participants.

### **Results and Discussion**

The study came up with the following key findings after analyzing the collected data through four research questions.

#### **Meaningful Parental Contributions and Freedom of Expression**

During FGDs in district A, one of the participant expressed that “it is difficult to explain meaningful parental contribution, but to me, it is about the involvement of a parent in a supportive manner ... regarding all kind of needs of a child ... in education, socialization and communication, nutrition etc.” she further explained that “... such kind of positive engagement of parents helps children to speak whatever the child wants to say... this further creates opportunities for both parents and children to develop an environment of trust between them... children in such situations feel more comfortable to express freely with confidence”. I found parents keep their children with them while they are engaged in everyday activities such as having food, watching TV, passing family time together, discussing issues, plans and other family matters etc. In family ‘A’ a father was found in a dialogical engagement on a TV show and seemed encouraging his child to argue whatever he could... This was an interesting yet very meaningful involvement of parents to boost up not only the confidence but also political and social consciousness in the child through the early ages.

Whereas in district B, a member of FGDs explained meaningful parental contribution and its effects on children' freedom of expression in these words, “I think we as parents must

develop our understanding about what is meaningful parental contribution ... then we can better help our children to express themselves in front of their parents, grant parents and other members of our family and outside family circle...”. She further explained that “it is about positive role of parents... helping children to speak what is in their mind... share our ideas with children and seek their views...”

However, I did not find parents that much positive role in practice whatever they seemed to claim in FGDs. One of the parents were not that much aware of her actions ... un/knowingly the mother of a class two was found to be more dictating to her child while her child was doing her homework ... rather than listening to the child’ views and building on that... at some point she said, “you baby... listen to me first... and then you can better understand the topic ... before you do your homework... to avoid mistakes”. Perhaps it is not the meaningful contribution of the parents that seems missing in this particular situation.

Whereas in district C, a participant explained that “it is important for our children to encourage ... it is also their right. It develops feeling of a valued member of the society. Reaching at the age of adult they can work and add their share in a positive manner for development ...” He further added that “if a child is valued an important segment of society and he/she is developed holistically ... the child can contribute multiple times more for the development of the society”. The observation of family “C” enabled me to find how do parents deal with their children, provide support and contribute in everyday lifeworld of the children. I noticed that parents were supportive in terms of helping them to express their ideas not only regarding educational but everyday life related matters. Mother “C” called her child and asked, “Do you need my help in your homework... I want to know how do you do it...” The child replied, “Thanks mom I have already done it... but I would also like to share my ideas the way I do it...” Mom appreciates the child “I am proud of you my son, yes, I would love to hear from you ... perhaps I would learn from you...”

Reflecting on the views of the research participants and the researcher’ personal observation of cultural contextual practices of parental engagement with their children, I came to realize that in the context of GB, parents have somehow a sense of meaningful parental contribution. This shows that most of the educated parents (especially who are teachers ... and know the importance of parental involvement) are realizing what kind of roles as parents they should play at their home in order to contribute in very positive manner in terms of helping their children to become very confident and more expressive in whatever situations and conditions may arise in their lives. The researcher noticed during the FGDs that they, however, believe that they need to develop better understanding of the term ‘meaningful involvement’ of parents in the affairs of children and in so doing, they can better contribute towards improving children’ freedom of expression. Moreover, observations show that majority of parents encourage children to express freely whatever comes to their mind. They also engage with their children to support in their homework, family discussions and assist them in exploring their views about socio-political views etc. However, still there are few parents

who un/consciously, within their cultural context, appear to discourage their children to express freely. On the other hand, literature supports the views that parents must be well aware of the implications of their involvement in children's everyday lifeworld. They need to provide all possible support to children to express themselves and share their views and how to find solutions of the problems they face (Sheridan, Witte, Bhatia & Coutts, 2015). Thus, paying attention to children's needs and fulfilling their aspirations can empower them and children without any hesitation can speak whatever comes to their mind. In so doing, both parents and children can enhance their power relations in order to improve children's confidence (Percy-Smith, 2011; Sabol, 2018) that may help them to be more fruitful member of the society in which they live and work.

### **Importance of Freedom of Expression at ECD Level and SD**

Research supported the idea that freedom of expression in early ages enable children to reflect, judge, understand others point of view as they grow up (Bai et al., 2016; De & Dias, 2012). During the FGDs, a participant shared her views about the importance of freedom of expression and its possible contributions for a sustainable society. She was giving an example to explain her views that how a confident and more expressive child can contribute towards the development of the society and remain a useful human resource (i.e., a lifelong learner with notions of improving life standards) for its sustainability. She explained that "I think freedom of expression is very important ... it let the child feel that his/her voice is heard in the family and is respected... that sort of feeling enables a child to become more confident and can handle any sort of challenge in a society. ...". She further explained that "children' holistic development (i.e., in physical, mental, social, moral and spiritual and cultural ...) from the very early ages can later on better contribute towards SD of society". Moreover, yet another participant added in these words, " SD to me, is a development that is conscious... and it should focus on economic, health and educational development ... that all together raise awareness about sociocultural and environmental protection... that can ensure sustainability of a society".

I observed that the children in the family "A" were participating in story telling with grant parents, in cooking with parents and other family members, in managing things at home and in prayers within their community centers etc. I came to know that children love to participate in all these everyday life activities in their flexi time (i.e., the time after their studies...). More interestingly the mother "A" found monitoring their children especially during their homework activities so as to provide possible support to the children. Mother of a child "A" said in a family get-together in the presence of her child, "I am confident of my child ... she is good at speaking ... she is a good thinker and can explain things very clearly". The researcher noticed the feelings of the child and it was really empowering statement of the mother that gave a lot of confidence to her child. Thus, the practices of parents by involving their children in the matters of family life and parents' encouragement, perhaps, give children a diverse range of opportunities for development at different levels. The practices of parents

in family “A” show that they give importance to physical, cognitive, moral and spiritual and socio-cultural development of children.

Exploring the views about the 2<sup>nd</sup> question from FGDs in district B, a participant reflected on the discussions on the topic in the group in these words, “I think we all do agree with the idea that SD of our society highly depends upon effective role of human capital in our society...and this can be ensured through empowering our children to develop holistically”. The participant further added that “a child who develops holistically... reaching at the age of an adult can be one of highly contributing human resource for the SD of the society in which he/she works and lives”. Another member further explained her views in these words, “I think we need to focus on our children first to enable them to speak boldly in front of everyone they encounter... this capability only comes through powerful education from early ages.” She further explained that “a capable child means a child who is developed physically, mentally, socially, emotionally, and spiritually etc. and helping a child to develop holistically is ... child right”. On further probing, she was this to say “developing a child holistically means you are basically working towards SD of the society in which the child will have to become a responsible adult... contributor of the society”.

However, observation of family “B” provides some different picture. Parents appear to be less sensitive about what they were saying in FGDs. I did not find parents supportive to children in their freedom of expression. They did not contribute towards holistic development of children. The father “B” found very strict in his behavior towards his children. Once he warned his daughter why she was discussing unnecessary things ... and not focusing on her readings and writings.... I observed the child then frightened and avoided to come in front of her father. She remained silent. This means that the parents do not give importance to freedom of expression and that might effect on holistic development of their children. Perhaps these children when grow as adults they may not be that much confident enough to contribute in SD of their society.

While exploring the views of the FGDs in district C, one of the members of the group expressed his views that, “no doubt, freedom of expression is important for our children to develop them fully... who can face any challenge in their lives... it gives confidence to tell what they have in their head...”. He further explained that ‘freedom of expression is one of the basic rights of children and parents should protect child rights at home first’. Yet another member added its effect on SD in these words, “I believe that a child who is nurtured fully from basic [early ages]...keeping in view that the child will become a fully aware parent ... can effectively participate in SD of the society”.

Data from observation of family “C” revealed that parents were to a great extent very sensitive about protecting their children from every kind of harmful things. The researcher found that parents were taking care of children’s nutrition and both father and mother at evening time used to ask their children at dinner about the whole day food intake ... and

telling their children that you have taken this much of food to ensure your balance diet for a healthy physical growth. There was a balance diet chart in the dining hall. It was really an interesting observation about the focus of parent related to physical development of children. Similarly, the parents were also conscious about other domains of child development including language, oral presentations, and competitions among siblings on topics of the day. Parents selected a topic and children were given ten minutes to think about and prepare to speak about their views. Perhaps, this was an interesting activity to enhance freedom of express. However, the researcher found parents un/consciously found to be restricting their children during all these activities by saying “no you should do this... you should do that .... Stop it, you are wrong... etc.” Perhaps, these kinds of words that parents use may discourage their freedom of expression.

Reflecting on the views of research participants regarding importance of freedom of children’s expression and its implications for SD of societies in which they live and work, I came to realized that providing an education (Eldridge, 2002) that values freedom of expression, one of the basic rights of children. It addresses all five dimensions of holistic development (Zhang & Morrison, 2020; Urban et al., 2019) can effectively contribute, at later stage of children’s life as adults, to SD of their societies (Tertoolen et al., 2017; Walter, 2014).

### **The Challenges that Parents Face to Develop a Culture of Sharing Ideas at Home Freely**

While discussing on the challenges that parents face in developing a culture of sharing at home that encourage children to express their ideas freely, one of the participants expressed his views in these words.

In our culture we do not like children to participate or involve in matters when elders are discussing things... and sometimes I scold my kids if they add their views in between our discussions... by saying its none of your business... just stop it and go to do some school work... Now I feel that one of my children is very shy, slow in picking ideas and having communication problems ... with low confidence...I am afraid he would not be that much beneficial to the society as other competent children may do... I must admit that it may be because of my poor contribution at his early ages...

In the same FDGs in district A, yet another participant shared her views that “we have some rigid cultural norms which do not allow us to encourage our children to speak whatever they think and feel... I think this is one of the challenges that we face....”

Observation data reveled that parents frequently appeared to be stopping their children... while we (in case of observation we mean the parents, other family members and the researcher) were discussing some social issues in family “A”. Once a father in case ‘A’ scolded his seven years boy for speaking loudly while we were engaged in some discussions... and told to play with his siblings.

Likewise, in district B, a participant of FGDs expressed similar views, “we live in a joint family where grand parents and other family members are living together... children speaking in front of grand parents especially, is considered to be a kind of disrespect ... so, we usually discourage our children to speak”. Moreover, yet another participant further added her views about the implications of cultural barriers. She shares one of her life experiences in her family. She was sharing that scolding children at early ages cannot develop them as a confident, self-reliant and independent in decision making even at adulthood. She explained the example that,

It may be one of the reasons that some of our children in our family who have been victim of such cultural norms [restricting children to speak in front of elders...] could not speak confidently in job interviews at later ages... and remained behind from others... and we can realize that they are less productive for the society ... but at the same time we have some family members who never bother themselves about these cultural norms and let their children free from the early ages and provided all possible support by sending in good schools spending more money on their holistic development at home and in the society... now they are at good positions and also work for social organizations in a voluntary capacity... this means that they are contributing for SD of our society ...

I spent three days with the family to explore socio-cultural practices of the family and found that parents somehow remained helpful by encouraging their children to participate in events and in open discussion. Open discussion means general talk at home within family circle and with close relatives (sometimes guests from the family or friends circle etc.). Mother ‘B’ encouraged her six years child to sing a song ... and at her performance she praised her in the public (i.e., family and other members of the village who visited the family for greetings on the occasion of newly born baby boy of a couple in the extended family). It is observed that encouraging children in public at their performance boost up their confidence.

However, one of the members of the FGDs, in district C expressed his views in these words. “One of the challenges is that we are mostly out of our home for earning...and we cannot even give enough time to our children to know what are their desires and views and what they want to share with us....” He further added that “due to poverty we cannot even provide basic needs like food, clothing and schooling if we do not go to work... but the absence of parental involvement with children is a hindrance towards their freedom of expression”.

Family C provided an opportunity to explore their cultural practices. Perhaps, those practices pose a barrier to children’ freedom of expression un/consciously. One of the siblings in the family started a discussion while having dinner together and ... the mother stopped her then and there by saying it is good to listen elders rather interfering in the matters of elders. I observed that the child felt depressed.

Reflection on participants views regarding the challenges that parents face to develop a culture of sharing ideas at home freely with meaningful parental involvement and looking at the existing literature, I came to realize that the research participants have clear knowledge of the concept about the challenges that parents face to develop a culture of sharing ideas at

home freely. However, some parents are found to be very sensitive in protecting rights of children and help their children to express freely in front of family and beyond, whereas some of the parents who un/knowingly remained under the influence of these cultural barriers. This shows that there is a clear line between freedom of expression and disrespect, however, as a parent it sometimes found to be difficult to maintain it. Children want more time to spend together with parents and want to share their views but parent's lack of time yet another barrier for them to create a culture of sharing ideas at home that may restrict children to develop their freedom of expression.

On the other hand, the results of poor parental contributions (e.g., lack of due attention towards children at early ages, neglecting, scolding, and providing less care etc.) may lead children with developmental delays, a kind of autism (Waters et al., 2020). Thus, such kind of children at their later stages of their lives would not be able to contribute towards SD of societies. This shows that the absence of meaningful parental involvement (Campbell, 2011) is one of the most serious issues related to enhance freedom of expression of their children at home, which ultimately effect on their holistic development of children. Children nurturing within such backgrounds would not be that much beneficial for SD of societies in which they raised and contribute in different capacities as adults at their later stage of their lives (Giddings et al., 2002; Hedlund-de Witt, 2014).

## **Conclusions**

The study on meaningful parental contribution to ensure children's freedom of expression at early ages and its effects for a SD of their societies provides an opportunity for parents, teachers and other stakeholder of the society to think about their role. The study revealed that parents need to reflect on their ways of interactions with their children and also need to reflect on their cultural barriers which un/consciously restrict them to support their children to express freely at home and beyond. Purposefully selected members of the three FGDs and three families one in each district provided multiple windows to know contextual realities about the importance of meaningful parental involvement, the challenges that parents face to enhance freedom of expression and its role in developing a sustainable development of their society (Table 1). Freedom of expression as a basis of child right that plays an interesting role in holistic development of children because when children are protected fully taking care of their due rights that can lead them to develop in all areas such as physical, moral, social, cultural, emotional and spiritual etc. Thus, freedom of expression is one of the most influencing areas of child development that has multiple effects on other areas of development. Therefore, providing an environment very conducive for child holistic development builds the basis for SD of the society in which these children at their later ages start contributing as adults. However, some the challenges that parents face in the context of GB may restrict parents to enhance freedom of expression because of many factors. For instance, how parents encourage or discourage their children when they share their views with them highly depends upon the environment provided at home. In the context of GB it

was found that some of the children live in joint family setup and elders especially grand parents sometimes do not like their grand children to express their views freely. Children speaking in front of their parents considered as disrespect culturally. So, it appears to be one of the challenges for parents to break this myth and encourage their children to express freely in front of elders at home. Perhaps, such kind of barriers create obstacles on way to develop confidence in children, which is the most influencing factor to develop holistically. Moreover, some of the parents have limited time for their children due to job pressure to face challenges of poverty, which ultimately led them to contribute poorly. However, looking at the ground realities, and that is the importance of children' freedom of expression in order to increase holistic development of children that ultimately play a contributing role for the sustainability of the societies in which these individuals live and work at later stages of their lives.

### **Recommendations**

The findings of this research revealed that freedom of expression, as one of the fundamental rights of children, helps children to develop their confidence and to this end, meaningful parental involvement is required.

- Parents should be well aware of the importance of freedom of expression so as to better help their children at their early ages;
- Parents need to create an environment of care, encouragement and support at home and beyond to help children to be more expressive openly that builds the basis for holistic development of children; and
- Parents should not restrict their children, due to their cultural or any other barriers, to express in front of others that may cause developmental delays. Rather parents should encourage them to share their views to boost up their confidence.

### **Data Availability**

As the data on literature is available in folders which can easily be accessed from the references. However, other data that is collected through observations and focused grouped discussions, other than key findings, can be accessed in the form of word files.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## **Supplementary Materials**

Supplementary Materials can be provided if required, because of qualitative analysis of data these material are very huge in size in terms of coding, interviews recorded on papers, translations from local language to English etc.



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