

TRANSFORMING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION THROUGH INTEGRATION OF SECURITY EDUCATION

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Abstract

The quality of a nation's educational system is a key determinant of its development, and no nation can rise above the educational capacity of its citizens. Early childhood education (ECE), as the foundational stage of the educational field, plays a critical role in shaping children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. It is at this stage that lifelong habits, values, and learning patterns are formed. As societal threats and security challenges increasingly affect even the youngest populations, there is a pressing need to incorporate security education into early learning environments. Introducing children to age-appropriate concepts of personal safety, environmental awareness, and emergency response can significantly enhance their ability to recognise and respond to potential dangers. This paper explores the imperative of integrating security education into ECE programs as a way of transforming early childhood education, outlines key safety themes suitable for preschool learners, and recommends strategies for embedding security education into the early childhood curriculum. The paper concludes that prioritising security education at the preschool level is essential for fostering a generation of safety-conscious and resilient individuals.

Keywords: Security Education, Preschool, Early Childhood, Safety, Child-centred

Introduction

There is an increasing parental expectation for children to receive high-quality education from the earliest years, with the aim of laying a strong foundation for future academic achievement and lifelong development. The early childhood period is widely recognised as a critical window for brain development, learning, and social formation. Studies indicate that a larger percentage of a child's brain development occurs before the age of five, emphasising the importance of early experiences in shaping cognitive and emotional outcomes (Akpan, 2021; Hirokazu, 2013). As such, the quality and nature of stimulation, care, and learning environments during these formative years significantly influence children's ability to thrive. This growing awareness has heightened demand for early childhood education (ECE) programs that are not only academically enriching but also safe, nurturing, and responsive to the holistic needs of young learners. Amidst growing concerns about child vulnerability and exposure to risks within school and community settings, there is an urgent need to ensure that ECE programs integrate structured and functional security education. Such integration is essential for creating environments where children feel safe, are aware of potential threats, and are equipped with age-appropriate strategies for personal safety. Quality early learning, therefore, must encompass both academic readiness and foundational security awareness to fully support children's well-being and development.

Early childhood education is the education given to children prior to entering primary schools (NPE, 2013). This is also the education given to children between 0 and 5 years. This type of education is given in preschools, which include crèche, playgroups, kindergartens or nursery schools. In fact, the years from birth to age 5 are viewed as a critical period for developing the foundations for thinking, behaving, and emotional well-being. Child development experts indicate it is during these years that children develop linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional, and regulatory skills that predict their later functioning in many domains (Woolfolk & Perry, 2012; Trawick-Smith, 2014). Due to the demands of daily living, parents nowadays seek a safe, secured and

hygienic place to put their children while at work.

In the current socio-political climate, safeguarding children at home and in school has become an increasingly urgent priority. The responsibility for ensuring children's safety rests not only with parents but also with caregivers and educators, who must provide continuous guidance and vigilance (UNICEF, 2020). In Nigeria, the rising incidence of insecurity in educational settings is both alarming and persistent. Notable incidents such as the abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls in 2014, and the subsequent kidnappings in Kankara, Katsina State and Kagara, Niger State. (Human Rights Watch, 2021) The recent Benue massacre reflects a broader trend of targeted violence against children. These high-profile cases are compounded by numerous underreported instances of abuse, including rape, child labour, and physical or emotional maltreatment (National Population Commission & ICF, 2019). Together, these factors create an environment of fear and instability that undermines children's well-being and learning. One strategic response to this growing threat is the integration of security education into the early childhood programs. Introducing young learners to age-appropriate concepts of personal safety, environmental awareness, and risk prevention can empower them to navigate their surroundings more confidently. Anyanwu (2018) noted that fostering safety consciousness from an early age is a critical step towards mitigating the pervasive risks children face today.

Promoting security consciousness in children from an early age is essential for equipping them with the skills and mindset needed to navigate an increasingly complex and insecure world. Security education, when introduced at the foundational stage of learning, fosters a lifelong awareness of personal safety, threat detection, and responsible behaviour (Salau, 2012; Akpan, 2021). The philosophy of "catch them young" emphasises the need to begin this process early, ensuring that children internalise safety practices before harmful habits or vulnerabilities are formed (Longjohn, 2019).

Exposing children to security education in their formative years enables them to develop a sense of responsibility for their own safety and that of others as they grow. Anyanwu (2018) opined that early exposure to security principles, such as recognising suspicious objects or people, interpreting basic road signs, reporting threats to trusted adults, and understanding how to protect personal belongings, lays the groundwork for both immediate protection and future civic responsibility. However, findings from studies that visited several early childhood centres reveal significant gaps in children's security knowledge (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 2014; Livingstone, Mascheroni & Staksrud, 2017; Martínez & Bonilla, 2019). Many preschoolers are unable to identify road safety symbols, making it difficult for them to crossroads safely. Others exhibit limited awareness of how to respond to unfamiliar individuals, dangerous objects, or threatening situations in their environments. Similarly, many children show little understanding of how to care for or safeguard personal items like books, writing tools and bags.

These observations point to a pressing need to integrate structured and developmentally appropriate security education into early childhood programs. Udin (2014) reported that children who are systematically taught safety practices grow with a heightened sense of alertness and resilience. Embedding these concepts into everyday learning experiences not only supports children's immediate well-being but also contributes to long-term behavioural change and a reduction in vulnerability to exploitation, violence, or preventable harm.

What is Security Education?

Security refers to a state of being free from danger, fear, or anxiety, and possessing the confidence that comes with protection and stability. It encompasses measures designed to safeguard individuals, communities, and nations against threats such as crime, violence, loss, or disruption Salau, 2012; (Udin, 2014). posit that security implies the guarantee of safety and freedom from harm that individuals enjoy within a society, enabling them to live, work, and interact without fear or intimidation.

Security education, therefore, can be defined as the structured process of equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills, and awareness necessary to identify, prevent, and respond appropriately to threats or breaches of safety. It fosters a sense of security consciousness among citizens, enabling them to protect themselves, their immediate environments, and the larger society. Akpan (2021) describes security education as a deliberate effort to inculcate in learners the values, behaviours, and practical competencies required to function safely in a world increasingly challenged by insecurity. When introduced early, particularly in childhood education, it forms the

foundation for responsible citizenship and community resilience.

Security education in early childhood is the introduction of children to simple, age-appropriate rules concerning safety, crime prevention, and protection of personal belongings. Concepts such as risk awareness, recognising unsafe objects or strangers, and taking precautionary actions like staying in safe zones or asking for help, become part of what they learn (Martínez & Bonilla, 2019).

Teaching security education in early childhood serves as a foundational strategy for developing long-term security consciousness in individuals. When children are introduced to security principles at an early age, they gradually internalise these values and practices, and these can shape their attitudes and behaviours into adulthood. Early exposure enables them to become more aware of their surroundings, recognise potential threats and adopt preventive measures as part of their daily lives. Security education not only raises awareness of existing and emerging vulnerabilities but also equips children with the skills to protect themselves, their peers, and their possessions. Ultimately, it empowers young learners to anticipate risks, respond appropriately, and contribute to the creation of safer homes, schools, and communities.

The Need for Security Education among Preschoolers

The need for introducing security education at the preschool level cannot be overemphasised. Children are increasingly exposed to various forms of risks, ranging from personal safety threats and unsafe outdoor environments to the growing influence of digital media. However, many preschoolers lack the basic knowledge and skills needed to recognise danger, respond appropriately to unfamiliar situations or seek help when needed. These gaps in safety awareness leave them especially vulnerable in periods where insecurity is widespread or unpredictable.

Integrating structured, age-appropriate security education into early childhood programs is essential for laying a strong foundation for lifelong safety practices. When preschoolers are taught simple but vital concepts such as identifying trusted adults, understanding boundaries, practising road safety, and navigating basic digital interactions, they become more confident and capable of protecting themselves. Therefore, security education should be treated not as an add-on but as a fundamental component of early learning, enabling young children to develop the awareness and resilience necessary to thrive in a complex and often unpredictable world.

Furthermore, introducing security education to children at the preschool level is essential for developing their awareness of personal safety and their role in maintaining a secure environment. Early learners who are guided through foundational concepts of security gain an understanding of how to be mindful of their surroundings, identify familiar and unfamiliar individuals, and recognise behaviours or situations that may pose a threat. Teaching young children how to report concerns to people such as parents, teachers, or caregivers reinforces both responsibility and trust in protective systems.

Safety Themes to Teach in Security Education

1. Awareness of Personal Safety

Children are to know their names, address and home phone numbers. It is important to teach them basic contact details like their names, parents name and contact number. In an emergency, they should be able to share their contact number with someone. Knowledge of where their home is and a description of any nearby landmarks is also important. All these can be taught by memorisation along with regular practice at school and home. Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman (2014) found that many preschool and early grade children were unable to distinguish between safe and unsafe situations and were at a loss as to what to do in that situation.

2. Stranger Safety:

Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman (2014) also found that, mostly, regarding interaction with strangers, recognising dangerous objects, and responding to inappropriate touch, pre-schoolers displayed little or no knowledge to what should be done. The study emphasized the need for early education on safety skills to reduce vulnerability to abuse. Children should not collect or eat things given by strangers. They should be taught that it is dangerous to accept food from anyone. They should learn to politely refuse if a stranger is offering them gifts

or food without their parent's or teacher's consent or in their absence. Preschoolers should be clearly taught never to go anywhere with a stranger, regardless of the reason given. It is crucial that children understand that, in emergencies, only familiar and trusted adults such as parents, guardians, or designated school staff will be responsible for their safety. This lesson can be reinforced through role-playing, safety drills, and discussions about identifying trusted adults. By learning to recognise and avoid potentially dangerous interactions, children are better equipped to maintain their safety in unfamiliar or confusing situations.

3. Outdoor Safety Practices:

Children should be guided on outdoor safety measures to protect themselves while engaging in activities outside the home or school. They should be taught that it is unsafe to leave the home or school environment without adult supervision. Outdoor safety should be a core component of early security education, emphasising that movement beyond designated spaces must always be accompanied by a parent, teacher, or trusted adult. Preschoolers lack the judgment to navigate streets or public areas safely, and unsupervised movement can expose them to various risks, including traffic accidents, abduction, or getting lost. Structured guidance and regular reinforcement through stories, visuals, and supervised routines help children internalise this principle.

Furthermore, they should learn to wear appropriate protective wear, such as helmets, when cycling and to look both ways before crossing the street. These habits help build early traffic awareness and reduce the likelihood of accidents. Through modelling and supervised practice, children develop routine safety behaviours that promote independence while maintaining caution in potentially risky environments (World Health Organisation, 2018; Martínez & Bonilla, 2019).

4. Understanding Personal Boundaries and Body Safety:

Children must be taught to understand bodily autonomy and recognise the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch. Introducing concepts such as safe and unsafe touch through age-appropriate discussions and visuals helps preschoolers build awareness of their rights over their own bodies. Educators and caregivers play a crucial role in reinforcing the idea that any form of touch that makes them feel uncomfortable should be reported immediately to a trusted adult. Teaching children to shout, resist, and report inappropriate contact is a critical step in preventing child abuse and building early self-protection skills (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 2014; UNICEF, 2020).

5. Digital Safety Awareness:

As the world is getting increasingly digitalised, children are not left out from being exposed to online platforms and internet devices. Children should be introduced to foundational internet safety practices, such as not sharing personal information (full name, address, or school) to online predators, avoiding conversations with strangers online, and immediately informing a trusted adult if they encounter anything confusing or uncomfortable. Early digital safety education helps children develop responsible habits for navigating virtual environments and reduces their vulnerability to cyber risks (Livingstone *et al.*, 2017; Akpan, 2021). Livingstone *et al.* (2017) further submitted that preschoolers were found to progressively access digital content, but most lacked basic knowledge about privacy, safe browsing, and the risks of communicating with strangers online. Many were unaware of the consequences of sharing personal information.

6. Protecting Personal Information:

Security education at the early childhood level should include lessons on safeguarding personal information. Children should be discouraged from disclosing their full name, home address, or contact details to strangers, unless under emergency circumstances with guidance from a trusted adult. This practice is vital in preventing abduction, identity misuse, and other forms of child-targeted exploitation (Martínez & Bonilla, 2019; National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children [NCMEC], 2020). Role-playing and repetitive reinforcement help children internalise these safety rules effectively.

7. Listening to their Instincts and Saying No:

It is essential to empower children to trust their instincts and say no when faced with uncomfortable or unsafe situations. Children should be taught that they are not obligated to participate in activities that make them feel anxious or pressured, even if their peers are involved, or the request comes from a familiar adult. Encouraging them to speak up fosters self-confidence, assertiveness, and the development of critical personal boundaries. As Akpan (2021) argues, helping children recognise and respond to uncomfortable feelings is foundational to building lifelong security consciousness.

8. Promoting Home Safety Awareness: Security education at the preschool level must incorporate basic home safety practices. Children should be taught to avoid hazardous behaviours such as playing with electrical outlets, handling sharp objects, or encountering fire or hot appliances. Early guidance in identifying dangerous items within the home environment fosters a proactive sense of caution and helps prevent common accidents. Safety rules can be reinforced through age-appropriate demonstrations, storytelling and visual cues placed in strategic areas of the home or classroom (UNICEF, 2020).

Strategies for Inculcating Security Education into the Early Childhood Curriculum

1. Use of storytelling and picture books
2. Integrating security themes into daily activities
3. Role-play and drama
4. Use of songs, dance, rhymes and visual aids
5. Partnering with parents and caregivers
6. Collaborating with security experts and agencies
7. Training teachers and caregivers
8. Developing and implementing safety policies for children
9. Using technology and media wisely
10. Demonstrating safe behaviours
11. Repeating safety rules consistently
12. Encouraging safe play

Conclusion

The integration of security education into early childhood education (ECE) settings has significant implications for classroom practice. A meaningful and sustainable approach to security education must be holistic, moving beyond isolated lessons to become an integral part of the early learning environment. Educators and caregivers are encouraged to embed safety concepts into core areas of the curriculum. This cross-curricular strategy enables children to encounter and apply security knowledge in a variety of real-life and play-based contexts.

Educators and caregivers must be adequately trained to deliver security content in age-appropriate ways and to respond to children's safety concerns with competence and sensitivity. Additionally, practice must actively involve parents and caregivers through home-school partnerships. Encouraging consistent safety messaging at home reinforces what children learn in the classroom, creating a protective network around the child.

Finally, practitioners should employ child-centred teaching methods to make safety lessons both engaging and accessible. When taught consistently and thoughtfully, security education helps children develop lifelong habits of self-awareness, personal responsibility, and proactive decision-making in relation to their safety. These practices not only contribute to child well-being but also support the broader goals of peace, safety, and resilience in society.

Suggestions

1. Security education should be integrated into the preschool curriculum.
2. Training and retraining of preschool teachers and caregivers for effective delivery of security education content.
3. Use child-centred teaching approaches to teach security education.
4. Teacher education programmes should also include security education topics.
5. Textbooks on security education for preschools need to be developed in line with the new arrangement in the curriculum structure.
6. There is a need for continuous sensitisation of teachers, parents and the general public on security education.
7. Develop and implement school safety policies.
8. Introduce trusted community helpers to children.
9. Children should also be helped with safety precautions when using the internet or online.

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