

Current Situation and Development Trend of Pre-school Education in Europe

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Abstract: Pre-school education, the phase before primary education, is becoming a significant part of European education system, since the early years are the most formative in a person's life, pre-school lays the foundation for successful lifelong learning. All countries are trying to ensure that school-aged children receive pre-school education and care. Europe is not only the birthplace of modern pre-school education concept and system, but also a continent with the highest participation rate of pre-school education in the world. Based on *European Commission /EACEA/Eurydice, 2019, Eurydice Brief: Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe*, this paper aims to analyze the current situation of pre-school education in Europe from five aspects, including policy support, access, organization and governance, staff, and curriculum. Then draw some pertinent suggestion about the reform and development trends of pre-school education in China.

Keywords: Situation; Development Trend; Pre-school; Europe.

1. Introduction

With the deepening understanding of pre-school education around the world, European countries also regard availability, affordability and quality as the basic direction of pre-school education development. Meanwhile, with the support of relevant policies, European pre-school education has achieved sustainable development, and accumulated considerable experience, recognized that there are still many deficiencies with respect to access, affordability and quality, etc. In August 2019, the European Union (EU) published the report---"*Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe*", which provides us with important information about the latest development of pre-school education in Europe.

2. Current Situation of Pre-school Education in Europe

Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe covers 38 countries and 43 education systems across Europe. In general, there is only one education system in a country, but the United Kingdom is divided into England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, there are four education system in total. Similarly, Belgium is divided into French-speaking, German-speaking and Dutch-speaking regions, so there are three education systems in Belgium. Therefore, the report focuses on 38 European countries, 43 education systems. Education systems worldwide strongly advocate that early childhood education is of great value to every child and should be available to all. Present tendencies have their roots in different national traditions, themselves having their origins in different eras of social and economic development. Therefore, universal access and high quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services have not yet been achieved in many European countries. According to this report, the current situation of pre-school education in Europe can be summarized as follows:

2.1. Policy Support for the Development of Pre-School Education

The support of relevant policies is indispensable for the development of pre-school education. As the core organization of Europe, the EU has been formulating and promulgating relevant policies to provide policy support for the reform of pre-school education in its member states. For example, the European Council set targets for child-care development in the EU at the summit of Barcelona in 2002: in 2010, 33% of children aged from three to obligatory school age must have access to a form of child-care in order to diminish distinctives for women's employment; the *Strategic Framework for Cooperation in Education and Training* issued by the EU in 2009 set the development goals of pre-school education in the EU, namely, at least 95% of children from the age of 4 to the start of primary school would be enrolled in pre-schools by 2020. In 2011, the European Commission issued *Pre-school Education: Create the Best Starting Point for the Future of All Children*, which aims to help member states improve the quantity and quality of pre-school education services. In May 2019, the *Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care*, recognized the proposal by European experts in 2014 ---*Suggestions on Core Principles for Pre-school Education Quality*. This suggestion furtherly enhances the understanding of the concept of "quality" among countries by analyzing from 5 aspects, including the entrance opportunity, teachers, curriculum, supervision and evaluation, management and fund. At the same time, it also puts forward the action guidelines that governments can take according to their own national conditions in the construction of high-quality pre-school education. In general, the focus of European pre-school education has changed from scale expansion to quality improvement, and high-quality has been the core of the pre-school education policy among European countries.

2.2. The Access of Pre-school Education

(1) The means of guaranteeing pre-school education: legal entitlement & compulsory

At present, there are two main means of ensuring universal access to pre-school education in Europe: entitle children the legal right to participate in pre-school education and make it compulsory for children to attend pre-school education. A legal entitlement means a child has a right to ECEC, but when it is compulsory, a child has a legal obligation to attend. Both of them are important approaches for popularizing pre-school education, the main difference is that the former refers to the country's responsibility to provide affordable pre-school education for all children of a certain age, but children's participation is not mandatory. For example, since 2001, the Danish *Child-Care Policies* requires municipalities to ensure pre-school education for all children from 26 weeks old to the age of entering primary school. The latter is mandatory and compulsory by the state, which means that all children must attend compulsory pre-school education when they reach a certain age. Usually, only children who have completed compulsory pre-school education provided by the state are eligible to enter primary school.

(2) Affordability: pre-school is offered free of charge to families of pre-school children increasingly

In Europe, most families have to pay fees for pre-school for the youngest group of children. For children under age 3, average monthly fee is the highest in Ireland, Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The availability of ECEC free of charge increase remarkably at age 3 and this trend continues with each year of age, becoming almost universal across Europe during the last year before compulsory primary school education starts.

To ensure access, the provision of ECEC free of charge has to be accompanied by a place guarantee. Without the supporting of legal framework which enforces the right to ECEC, this provision may be limited and waiting lists may be long with complex priority rules. However, currently only one European country-Latvia-guarantee a free public ECEC place for every child from as early as 1-and-a-half. In the remaining countries, most parents have to pay for ECEC in the earliest years. Average monthly fees are the highest in Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Switzerland. For example, in Ireland, average monthly fees reach 771 Euro. These countries rely on market-driven mechanisms to supply ECEC to children under age 3, although some subsidies for the most disadvantaged may be available.

Many countries carry out policies to offer priority admission and fee reduction to vulnerable children and families. Children living in poverty are the most commonly targeted group. Family income is a widespread criterion, and children of single parents often benefit from targeted policies and measures.

(3) Participation rate of pre-school education: the target set by the EU has been basically achieved

In 2017, 34.2% children under 3-years old in 28 EU countries participated in formal pre-school education. Spain has achieved the goal of providing childcare services to 33% of children under 3-years, but the participation rate of different countries is quite different. Denmark, for example, has a 72% participation rate, while Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Slovakia have a participation rate of less than 10%. Secondly, in terms of the participation rate of children from the age of 4 to the starting age of primary school, 28 EU countries has exceeded 94% since 2013, and has been steadily increasing year by year, reached 95.4% by 2017, which means that the EU as a whole has almost achieved the goal set out by the Commission.

(4) Starting age of universal pre-school education: varies between countries

There are different starting ages of pre-school education in 43 European education systems. On the one hand, 8 education systems such as Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Germany guarantee every child access to state pre-school education soon after birth (6-18 months). On the other hand, 17 education systems, including France, the United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal, Czech Republic, Switzerland and Bulgaria, provide compulsory pre-school education for children of a certain age (generally 4-5 years old). What's more, Children in Europe usually move on to primary school around age 6, but it may be as early as age 4 or as late as age 7.

2.3. Organization and Governance Models of Pre-School

(1) Separate Settings & Unitary Settings

There are two different types of pre-school organization systems in Europe: the separate setting and the unitary setting. The separated pre-school setting divides pre-school education into 2 different stages, where children receive childcare in a nursing institution and then are transferred to an educational institution for kindergarten education, usually at the age of 3. Currently, about 75% of the 43 education systems in Europe offers separate pre-school services, but only 10 systems, including France, Czech Republic and Denmark, have arrangements to facilitate a smooth transition between these two stages. In contrast, the integrated pre-school system is designed with a holistic mode that provides children with a complete and successive care and education services from birth (usually around the age of 1 year old or after parental leave) to the age of entering primary school. For children, they don't need to undergo transitions or interruptions between different types of institutions in learning experiences. About a third of the 43 education systems in Europe offer integrated pre-school services. In addition, 7 countries, including Germany, Spain, Austria and the United Kingdom, established both integrated and separate pre-school education systems.

(2) Single authority model & Dual authority model

There are two different types of pre-school governance models in Europe: the single authority model and the dual authority model, and the governance model is often associated with the pre-school education system. Firstly, among the 43 education systems in Europe, most of the education systems that provide unitary pre-school education services and those that provide both unitary and separated pre-school education services almost adopt the single authority model, that is, entitle the management responsibility of the entire pre-school education to a single authority. Pre-school education is largely the responsibility of education authorities, but in Denmark, Germany and Ireland, it is regulated by authorities responsible for children's services or family affairs. Secondly, the dual management model is prevalent in the education systems that provide separate pre-school education services. The management of pre-school education is carried out by two different departments. The education authority is responsible for pre-school education for children aged 3 years and over, while the "nursing type" pre-school education for children under 3 years is usually the responsibility of the department dealing with children and family affairs. There are some exceptions, such as Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania, which offer separate preschool services, but with a single authority responsible for

the entire preschool period.

2.4. Staff of Pre-school Education

(1) Teacher-student ratio: related to the age of the child

In Europe, teacher-student ratio of pre-school education varies according to the age of the child and varies considerably among the 43 education systems. Overall, the teacher-student ratio tends to be lower for younger children (usually under 3 years) than that for older children (usually 3 years and over). For example, among the 43 education systems in Europe, for children aged 2 years, more than 70% of them show a teacher-child ratio of 1:10 or less, and only 6 show a teacher-child ratio of 1:11 to 1:20. By the time children reach the age of 4, more than 60% of education systems show a teacher-student ratio between 1:11 and 1:30, while only 8 education systems show a teacher-student ratio of 1:10 or less.

(2) Qualification requirement of pre-school teachers: related to the age of the child

In Europe, there are different qualifications for pre-school teachers. In general, the qualification requirements of teachers responsible for children aged 3 years and over are higher than that for teachers responsible for children under 3 years, and there are great differences between countries. For example, among the 43 European education systems, only a third of them require teachers to have a bachelor's degree or higher, and more than half require teachers to have a bachelor's degree or less. About three-quarters of pre-school systems for children aged 3 years and over require teachers to have a bachelor's degree or higher. Eight education systems have a relative lower qualification requirement, such as Czechia, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Austria, Romania, Slovakia, and the United Kingdom (Scotland). In addition, most education systems do not set minimum qualifications for assistant pre-school teachers, also known as childminders or childcare worker. In short, a considerable proportion of staff engaged in daily activities with children are without any formal and professional training.

2.5. Curriculum Formulation and Implementation of Pre-School Education

Curriculum is a key element in guaranteeing high-quality implementation of pre-school education. It is increasingly covering the entire ECEC period. The curriculums of European countries vary but they generally include development or learning goals and age-appropriate activities. First of all, 43 education systems in Europe have developed official educational guidelines for pre-school education to ensure it includes content directed to educational purposes and to guide the implementation of pre-school education. The guidelines generally include the objectives and principles of education, teaching methods, learning range and contents, and assessment methods. Among the 43 education systems in Europe, two-thirds have published educational guidelines covering the entire pre-school period, with the rest providing educational guidelines only for pre-school education for children aged 3 years and over. But in recent years, it has become more common to set educational guidelines for very young children, mainly under 3 years. For example, since 2013, France, Luxembourg and Liechtenstein have issued guidelines for pre-school education for children under 3 years for the first time. Second, pre-school education in Europe mainly focuses on the following range of learning: emotional, personal and social development; physical development and

sports; artistic expression and creativity; language and social skills; worldview; cooperation; health; democracy; numerical and logical reasoning; learning ability; reading; early foreign language learning, etc. However, different education systems have different priorities of these areas. Third, in terms of curriculum implementation and evaluation, European pre-school education usually pays more attention to the value of children's play, and emphasizes the key role of adults in listening to children and encouraging children to think; and encourages parents or families to actively participate in the implementation of pre-school education curriculum. Finally, European pre-school education also pays more attention to the connection between pre-school and primary education, so as to ensure a smooth transition between pre-school and primary education.

3. Development Trends of European Pre-school Education

3.1. Improve the Policy System and Policy Implementation of Pre-School Education

Education policy plays the guiding, controlling and coordinating functions in the process of education implementation. Since the beginning of the new century, the focus of European pre-school education policy has changed from scale expansion to quality improving, guiding European pre-school education practice to develop towards high-quality and high-level. How to realize the early childhood education from quantity to quality, even to seek the transformation of high-quality, policy support and guidance are indispensable. On the one hand, countries should improve pre-school education policy system gradually base on practice. The policy will be gradually and regionally extended from kindergarten education to early education for children aged 0-3 years, and a complete policy system for the education of children aged 0-6 years will be gradually established. At the same time, policies related to children's family education and community education should be introduced to enrich pre-school education policy system from a transverse level. On the other hand, the implementation effect of pre-school education policy will be improved gradually. The effectiveness of policy implementation is closely related to the choice and application of policy tools. The previous and existing pre-school education policies often excessively use command tools, lack of consideration of long-term benefits. Therefore, in the future, choice of preschool education policy tools should match the nature of the policy problems, timely adjust policy tools according to the effect of policy implementation, and rationally use command tools to optimize the resultant force between policy tools.

3.2. Promote the Integration of Child-Care and Education and Attach Greater Importance to the Access and Affordability of ECEC for Children Aged 0-3 Years

From the perspective of the European pre-school education system and governance model, the integration of child-care and education has become an important trend in the development of European pre-school education. To adjust the age of pre-school education children to shortly after birth, and to build an integrated pre-school education system for children aged 0-6 years and a unified management model are becoming more and more important directions of reform in

various countries. However, some underdeveloped European country's current reform of pre-school education mainly focuses on 3-6 years old early childhood education, there are still many problems about the development of 0-3 years old early education, such as the administrative department is not clear, the contradiction between supply and demand, the lack of norms and supervision and so on. Meanwhile, the practice of integrated care and education has been promoted only in a big city. Based on this, on one hand, Europe countries should increase the importance of the early education of 0-3 years old children, make clear the competent departments of early education, shoulder the responsibilities of planning, implementation, supervision of the early education, and ensure that the early education is available, affordable and qualified; On the other hand, they should gradually advance the process of integration by propagating the concept of integration of education and care, pilot some formal institutions which provide integrated education and care, enact and promulgate the pre-school education policy for children from 0 to 6 years old, etc.

As mentioned above, in Europe, most families have to pay fees for pre-school education, especially for the youngest group of children under 3 years. Moreover, currently, only one European country-Latvia-guarantees a free public pre-school place for every child from as early as 1-and-a-half. In the remaining countries, most parents have to pay for pre-school education in the earliest years. In the future, pre-school education and care free of charge will be offered to families of children increasingly.

3.3. Accelerate the Development of Inclusive Pre-School Education and Increase the Participation of Pre-School Education

Europe guarantee children's right to enter kindergarten by legislation, to popularize pre-school education by bring the compulsory education into a certain fixed number of pre-school educations. At present, the participation rate of primary school at the age of 4 to 7 is more than 95% in 28 countries of EU. To ensure that 0-3 years old children's access to general education resources is the future direction of preschool education in Europe. Currently, Europe is also vigorously promoting the construction of inclusive kindergarten, and has made a series of results, but in the implementation process, there still emerge problems, such as the social understanding of "inclusive" is narrow, the governmental implementation is insufficient. Drawing on the experience of developed European countries, the construction of pre-school education can be developed from the following three aspects. First of all, strengthen the understanding of the connotation of "inclusiveness" in all sectors of society, take public kindergartens as the main provider of inclusive preschool education services, and actively support the construction of inclusive private kindergartens. Secondly, continue to promote the legislative process of preschool children's right to kindergarten, gradually reduce the starting age of compulsory education, take the end stage of pre-school education into the category of compulsory education, so as to improve the popularization rate of pre-school education. Finally, focus on the development of inclusive pre-school education in rural and poor areas, so as to reduce the gap between urban and rural areas and promote educational equity.

3.4. Pay Attention to the Training of Pre-School Staff and Raise Their Qualification Requirements

Education staff is an important factor affecting the quality of pre-school education. All European countries regard the training of teachers as an important field of pre-school education reform. They have put forward higher requirements for the quantity and quality of pre-school teachers. From the perspective of quantity demand, colleges and universities still need to stabilize and gradually expand the scale of pre-school teacher training, which not only requires colleges and universities to expand the scale of kindergarten teacher training, but also requires colleges and universities to pay attention to the early education of 0-3 years old children's teacher training, so as to ensure that the teacher-student ratio is kept within a reasonable range consistently. As the focus of pre-school teachers, the improvement of quality not only depends on the pre-service training of teachers, such as promoting the education of pre-school teachers, encouraging undergraduate colleges to set up pre-school education majors, etc., but also the sustainable professional development. On the basis of attaching equal importance to literacy and skills, we should highlight practical knowledge and ability training on-the-job training of teachers, such as encouraging teachers to participate in academic conferences, training, and pair discussions between new and experienced teachers. In addition, the professional quality of childcare workers should be improved. Government and all walks of life have not given due attention to childcare teachers. Therefore, it is necessary to promote the professional development of childcare workers, such as clarify their professional identity, improve the qualification access, and build a sustainable professional development system for them.

3.5. Promote the Reform of Pre-School Education Curriculum and Support Children's Sustainable Development

Curriculum is the core in the development of pre-school education. European countries have taken various measures in the reform of pre-school education curriculum, such as issuing educational guidelines covering children aged 0-6 years and identifying learning areas conducive to the comprehensive development of children. On the basis of previous experience, Europe should take the child-oriented value concept, and steadily promote the curriculum reform of pre-school education. First of all, it is recommended to gradually formulate and introduce a pre-school education outline or guide covering children aged from 0 to 6 years, ensure that the learning areas are conducive to the comprehensive development of children in this age group, and set reasonable and effective educational goals for each learning area, so as to ensure the continuity and integrity of pre-school children's learning experience, and avoid the interruption of learning experience caused by the break between early education and early childhood education; Second, in the process of curriculum implementation, continue to utilize of the value of games, handle the relationship between teaching and games, and make effective use of parents and community resources to facilitate the efficient implementation of the curriculum. Finally, pre-school curricula should also be designed to support a smooth transition to primary school and to support the learning of disadvantaged children. A range of measures can be applied

at the settling level to establish continuity and cooperation with primary schools in order to promote a smooth transition.

4. Summary and Enlightenment

Based on the latest report published by the European Union -- *"Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe"* and the latest data of Eurostat, this paper takes a comprehensive perspective to show the current situation of pre-school education and care in Europe from the aspects of policy support, access, education system and governance, staff, and curriculum and so on. Even though, European countries are still facing some problems in the development of pre-school education and care, they undoubtedly set good examples and provide valuable practical experiences for other countries. Chinese government and workers in the field of pre-school education can draw inspiration from this study to better promote the reform of pre-school education curriculum and support the comprehensive development of children.

European countries attach great importance to pre-school education. From the data analysis, the starting age of preschool education in most European countries is 3 years old, and presents an earlier trend; In Europe, 91% of children of preschool age are enrolled in kindergartens. From 1999 to 2006, the gross enrollment rate increased by 15.4%, and is now on the way to 100% popularization rate. In Europe, the main form of pre-school education is public. About 79% of the children are enrolled in public kindergartens. Although the proportion of private kindergartens has increased slightly in recent years, it has only increased by 1.5% in the past 8 years. The teacher-student ratio is 1:11, which has fluctuated in recent years, but there is no trend change.

The experience of Europe has provided many useful enlightenments for the development of pre-school education in China. Comparing the recent 6 years development of pre-school education in Europe with that in China, the development of pre-school education in China should take the increase of popularization rate as a strategic goal in the near future, and at the same time, a national pre-school education system with basically free or low fee should be gradually established.

(1) A complete universal pre-school education should be listed as the short-term strategic development goal of Chinese pre-school education

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, especially since the reform and opening up, China's pre-school education has made great achievements. In 2010, the gross enrollment rate of pre-school children is 56.6%, and rose to 85.2% in 2020. However, compared with Europe, the gross pre-school education rate is about 10 percentage points lower, such a huge gap arouses our great attention. As we all know, in this era of knowledge-based economy and under the tide of globalization, all international competition is closely related to talent competition, and pre-school education is the basic stage of talent training. Therefore, China must increase the rate of pre-school children in kindergarten as a short-term strategic development goal.

(2) Establish diversified pre-school education institutions to meet the needs of school-age children

For a long time, the institutions of pre-school education in China are single, mainly including 0~3 years children education institutions and 3~6 years kindergarten, and the rate of entering kindergarten is not high. According to the *2020 National Education Development Statistics Bulletin*, there are 291,700 kindergartens in China, with 48.18 million children

entering kindergartens, and the gross enrollment rate of pre-school education is only 85.2%. "Pre-school is the beginning and key period of socialization for every individual", pre-school education plays a key role in children's future personality development, social development and cognitive development. Therefore, under the background of developing pre-school education career, we can draw lessons from European pre-school education institutions, providing various, different forms of practice, setting up a variety of pre-school education institutions, establishing complete and suitable pre-school education in different parts, so as to realize positive interaction between the public and private kindergartens, and gradually standardize the private kindergartens.

(3) Establish a national pre-school education system which is basically free or low-fee quickly

In order to increase the attendance rate of pre-school, the most urgent task is to increase the governmental investment in pre-school education, and establish a national pre-school education system quickly which is basically free or low fee. This is the most important inspiration from the European experience. Pre-school education is an important part of Chinese education system and a basic stage of education. However, in practice, pre-school education is not truly taken consideration into our national education system. For example, there are 56,000 public kindergartens and 62,000 private kindergartens in China, and 48.18 million children are enrolled in public kindergartens, while only 5.84 million are enrolled in private kindergartens. However, the key problem is that at present, public kindergartens in our country are basically non-existent, namely, although there are public institutions, but cannot get governmental funding or a small part of it.

80% of European children attend public kindergartens, and most European countries subsidies private ones, so governmental spending is tremendous. In recent years, Chinese governmental investment in pre-school education is obviously insufficient, and the average funding for pre-school education is only more than 12,954 RMB per year. This is in sharp contrast to the thousands of dollars spent per student in European countries. Certainly, due to differences in wages and prices across countries, the absolute numbers are not very important here, but the relative numbers are reliable. In terms of relative numbers, the governmental investment in the pre-school stage is also significantly insufficient. The budget for pre-school education in China only accounts for 7.93% of the total budget for all levels of education, which is only 1/12 of that in Hungary, 1/10 of Spain and 1/9 of France respectively. At the same time, from the perspective of the proportion of pre-school education cost sharing. In fact, public funding accounts for 88% on average of all pre-school spending across the European Union. Thus, the reason why the participation rate of pre-school education in Europe is significantly higher than that of China, the public expense and complete or basic free of charge are the most key factors. In most European countries, parents pay only 10 % of the kindergarten cost, and there are special benefits for poor families. Therefore, China should popularize pre-school education as soon as possible, learn from the experience of Europe and increase governmental investment quickly. For China, the top priority is to set up a national pre-school education system for the vast rural areas and poor areas, which is basically free or low fees, mainly with public kindergartens.

(4) Increase formal training and raise qualification

requirements of pre-school staff

The professional level of pre-school staff determines the overall level of pre-school education. However, according to the statistics on the website of the Ministry of Education in December 2012, the overall quality of pre-school education teachers in China is worrying. In terms of the professional titles of pre-school teachers, in 2010, only 0.4% of pre-school teachers obtained senior titles of middle schools, 12.8% of pre-school teachers obtained senior titles of primary schools, about 15.6% of pre-school teachers obtained first-level titles of primary schools, and only 5.2% of pre-school teachers were rated second-level titles of primary schools, only 1.0% of pre-school teachers obtained grade 3 titles in primary schools. In addition, about 65.0% of pre-school teachers do not have any professional titles. Therefore, in the process of reform and development of pre-school education, we can learn from Denmark, pay attention to the improvement of pre-school teachers' professional quality, and carry out diversified professional training, such as organizing pre-job training for new teachers and training for all teachers in summer vacation.

(5) Promote communication between families and educational institutions, and provide policy support

It is the shared responsibility of families and pre-school institutions to provide high quality care and education services for children. For example, in Denmark, parents are entitled with parental leave and childcare leave, and "parents are formally included in the participation of educational institutions in the relevant laws of Denmark. They can form a 'parent committee' and participate in the institution's formulation of principles for teaching activities, the formulation of budget and financial management principles, and the selection of representatives to attend the local government's childcare committee.

In China, although the *"Outline of Guidance for Kindergarten Education (Trial)"* stipulates that "kindergarten should work closely with the family and the society to work together to create a good growth environment for children", kindergarten also keep communication with parents in form, but in reality, the two are always a relatively independent

relationship. To facilitate communication between the family and education institution, the kindergartens and families should cooperate to carry out more activities. The government need to shoulder the education expenses with the family within the scope of its economic conditions, and also entitle parents the rights of participating kindergarten education and management, to promote deeper cooperation between education institutions and families, so as to jointly promote the healthy growth of children.

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