

Early Learning for Development in Bangladesh

KEY STATISTICS

	Total	
Preschool age population, (3-5 years old) ¹	11,198,179	
Percentage of total population who are of preschool age	7%	
Percentage of under-5 children in a household in which members are engaged in activities that promote learning and school readiness (reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with children, taking children outside home) ³	47.45%	
	2006	2009
Percentage of children aged 3-5 years attending early childhood education ²	14.6%	22.9%

Source: ¹ UIS Global Education Database 2008

² UNICEF/BBS, Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2009, Bangladesh 2010

³ UNICEF/BBS, Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2006, Bangladesh 2007

BACKGROUND

Comprehensive early childhood care provides a strong foundation for good health, growth, and success in education, according to global evidence. Preschool education is important for early learning and to prepare children for primary school. Research and experience in Bangladesh and abroad show that quality preschool education has multiple benefits for children. It motivates and prepares children to attend primary school, provides parents with information about new approaches to education and prepares them to support their children's schooling experience. Preschool attendance improves children's enrolment and retention rates and academic performance in primary school and beyond. Comprehensive early childhood care and education is also an agreed component of the Dakar Education for All (EFA) goals of 2000.

ISSUES

Many parents and caregivers, particularly those in extreme poverty or geographic isolation, have inadequate knowledge of early childhood care and development and early learning opportunities, which affects children's psychological and social development. Many parents do not understand the importance of playing with their children or of preparing children for school. Less than 50 per cent of parents of children under five provide care that supports

early learning such as reading books aloud, singing songs, telling stories or drawing with their child.¹

Playgroups and preschools can improve school readiness, yet early learning opportunities for children under six are not widely available in Bangladesh. Less than 23 per cent of children aged three to five years attended early childhood education in 2009². Due to limited budget and the lack of a national policy, preschool education has not been the Government's priority so existing early childhood care and development services suffer from poor quality resources. Moreover, existing early learning centres, such as privately run kindergartens and religious preschools (*Madrassa*), often do not provide developmentally appropriate learning environments.

The academic qualification of preschool teachers remains an issue. Since early childhood and preschool teacher training is not required by most schools, the majority of preschool teachers in Bangladesh receive only on-the-job training.

ACTION

The overall goal of UNICEF's work in child development and education is to enable young children in Bangladesh to participate in appropriate learning activities, to assist their psychological and social development. The project focuses on practices that promote gender equality, interactive care, and safe and child-friendly environments at home, in the community and in the early learning centres. It also works to strengthen early learning systems and organizations.

Establishing early learning centres (ELC)

UNICEF supports the Government of Bangladesh's Early Learning for Child Development Project (ELCDP), which focuses on centre-based early learning programmes. Early learning centres provide age and developmentally appropriate learning such as playgroups and pre-primary education for the most disadvantaged children of Bangladesh, who are least likely to develop school preparedness skills.

UNICEF has supported a total of 7,858 early learning centres located in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, urban slums, tea gardens, jails and 11 of the most disadvantaged districts of the country. Each centre hosts between 25 and 30 children.

The centres serve as entry points to further education. They play an interface role between homes and primary schools and provide support for children and caregivers during the move to primary school. Through involvement with the early learning centres, families and communities learn why and how to give age-appropriate interactive care to young children at



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¹ UNICEF/BBS, *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2006*, Bangladesh 2007

² UNICEF/BBS, *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2009*, Bangladesh 2010

home and in the community. This has generated demand for more early learning centres in communities, as well as helped parents develop child-friendly practices and environments at home.

Fostering a child-to-child approach

UNICEF Bangladesh is one of five countries piloting the *Getting Ready for School - a Child-to-Child Approach* project. The pilot project is being implemented in collaboration with Directorate of Primary Education (DPE), under the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education. The project, which began in 30 schools in six sub-districts in March 2009, is designed to reach children a year before they are eligible to enrol in primary schools. It does not aim to be a substitute for pre-primary education, but an immediate response for children living in disadvantaged areas with no access to any kind of school readiness programme. Altogether 450 young facilitators in fourth and fifth grade are paired with 900 young learners aged five. The older students act as 'teachers', using games, pictures, rhymes and songs to help prepare the five-year-olds for school. The 35-week programme is conducted mostly at home, with one school session a week under supervision of a teacher. Young facilitators and learners receive early learning kits filled with activities to foster pre-literacy and pre-numeracy, which progressively become more complex.

Working together

UNICEF has been instrumental in creating the national Bangladesh Early Childhood Development Network of more than 200 NGOs and academic institutions, which promotes collaborative initiatives in the area of early learning and stimulation. UNICEF continues to develop the capacity of the network, by training trainers, supplying teaching and learning materials, and promoting activities and innovations of early learning throughout Bangladesh.

Advocating for early childhood policies

UNICEF has provided ongoing advocacy, as well as technical and financial assistance, to the Government of Bangladesh to develop appropriate early childhood policies and legislation. A major breakthrough at the policy level was the approval of the Operational Framework for Pre-Primary Education by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MOPME) in March 2008. This policy framework outlines the learning outcomes of pre-primary education, the core materials required in classes, assessment methods, the relationship between Government and non-government responsibilities, etc.

Building on past strengths

The current programme builds on UNICEF's work with the Government of Bangladesh and other development partners on the Early Childhood Development (ECD) project, which ran from 2001 to 2005. This project empowered caregivers to create safe, secure, stimulating and enabling environments for age-appropriate development of children. The main focus was to promote the cognitive, emotional and social development of children, from newborn to five years old.

This project worked with various government and NGO partners to raise awareness of the importance of early childhood development and care. Between 2001 and 2005, the project conducted district and sub-district advocacy workshops for over 21,000 policy and decision makers, service providers and community leaders. More than 14,000 government and NGO frontline workers were trained to provide caregiver education to thousands of parents and caregivers during their routine household visit. UNICEF also supported the production of media 'edutainment' programmes, such as a TV serial that depicts parents incorporating holistic views of early childhood development. This serial, and other early-learning TV spots, continue to be broadcast from time to time on private TV channels.

The ECD project also initiated centre-based group learning programs on a pilot basis in selected urban slums and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). An evaluation of the group learning activities in the CHT showed positive results for school readiness.

IMPACT

When the ECD project was launched in 2001, there were few existing mechanisms or organizations that provided early childhood development assistance or early learning opportunities. UNICEF has succeeded in significantly raising awareness among key stakeholders about the importance of early childhood development, early learning and school readiness.

Putting early learning on the agenda

Following UNICEF advocacy, many Government strategies, such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Programme and National Plan of Action for Children, include a separate section on early childhood development. The Government has initiated the process of having one pre-primary school attached to each government primary school and is now aiming to achieve universal pre-primary education during the third phase (July 2011-June 2016) of Primary Education Development Programme. Preparatory activities are underway such as preschool mapping, curriculum development, material design and production, and the establishment of a Pre-Primary Education Unit within the Directorate of Primary Education.

Moreover, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs is currently formulating a Policy Framework on Comprehensive Early Childhood Care and Development, including the Early Learning and Development Standards for children up to eight years old. These have been developed following UNICEF advocacy and technical and financial assistance.

Improved access to early learning centres

Due to UNICEF's efforts, children have improved access to early learning opportunities in safe child-friendly learning environments. Between 2006 and 2009, an estimated 391,656 children aged four to six years received age-appropriate early learning and school readiness in 7,858 playgroups and pre-primary schools supported by UNICEF³.



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At the beginning of the project most early learning centres were in the CHT and as a result, attendance of children at early childhood education is much greater in the tribal communities (25.2 per cent) compared to the national average (14.7 per cent).⁴ Moreover, 94 per cent of students in the CHT, who complete the pre-school course, enrol in primary school⁵. More than half of their primary school teachers noted the pre-school students were doing well compared to other students. The success of the CHT early learning centres is based on community involvement, local recruitment of teachers and regular supervision.

³ *Overview Report of Early Learning for Childhood Development Project, 2009*

⁴ UNICEF/BBS, *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2006*, Bangladesh 2007

⁵ *Formative Evaluation Study of School Readiness Programme in Chittagong Hill Tracts Districts 2005*

Ongoing work

The challenge now is to capitalize on lessons learned, including heightened awareness among key stakeholders. Forthcoming priorities also include the mainstreaming of pre primary education as an integral part of universal primary education, formulation of the Policy Framework on Comprehensive Early Childhood Care and Development and developing the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) for children aged up to eight years.

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