

Early Learning for Development (ELD) in Bangladesh

KEY STATISTICS

Basic data (in % unless otherwise stated)	
Parents who develop their child's intelligence by:	(0-2 years/ 2-5 years)
Using warm and responsive care	51/ 59
Developing learning ability	12/ 47
Encouraging active participation	4/10
Setting example of good behavior	0.8/2
Not doing anything	44/18
When a child does something wrong, parents:	
Physically punish (slap/hit/beat)	22/54
Verbally punish (rebuke/scold)	22/47
Verbally punish (rebuke/scold)	14/37
Impose restriction	10/21
Do nothing	61/11
How parents promote school readiness for their children:	
Teach how to speak	25/31
Read to child and encourage writing	12/52
Promote interest for learning	8/31
Encourage mixing with others	2/4
Send to school at proper age	2/6
Create opportunity for sports/games. Encourage mixing with others	1/3
Do nothing	64/20
Primary school completion rate	54

Source: Progatir pathay - MICS 2003, and PEDP-II Baseline survey, 2005

BACKGROUND

Global experience clearly demonstrates that early childhood interventions for cognitive and psycho-social development have many benefits - especially for the most disadvantaged children. Children who receive age appropriate interactive care for cognitive and psychosocial development through centre-based learning, and supported by the family, do better at primary school. This results in higher enrolments, less repetition, and fewer dropouts. Participating children also enjoy additional benefits like stronger health, improved nutrition intake and socialisation skills.

ISSUES

Discrimination is a major issue with at least one-third of parents saying girls received less love and affection than their brothers. In the same study between 66 and 87 per cent of caregivers reported that children with disabilities were neglected, teased or avoided (2001 KAP study).

Providing a safe and stimulating environment for children also remains a challenge in Bangladesh. Drowning accounts for more than one in four deaths of children aged 1-4. The KAP study found that two-thirds of homes are not safe for children (for example in dangerous locations, not fenced) and more than half were unhealthy (dark or cramped). The broader community must support parents in this, by providing safe play areas, covering wells and supporting new parents. Communities should support and promote play groups or pre-schools to improve social and learning skills among young children.

In fact, a parent's or caregiver's lack of knowledge underpins many challenges related to early learning. This lack of knowledge is often caused by extreme poverty or geographical isolation, both of which leave families with limited access to social services. People seeking jobs in the city also leads to a breakdown of the traditional extended family network, which in turn affects the support for early learning.



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Many parents do not understand the importance of playing with their children, singing, reciting nursery rhymes or talking and listening to their children. The KAP study found that about two-thirds of parents did not know how to stimulate their children's feelings - or even if they could. The study also showed there was little understanding of a child's need to learn through exploration, of curiosity or of a child's self-confidence.

Two in five parents say they would physically punish their children when they were naughty, even though many parents are aware physical punishment is damaging to children. Moreover, fathers - crucial role models - are also absent during many children's formative years. On average, fathers spend less than one hour a day with their children (KAP).

Play groups and pre-schools can also improve school readiness: teaching children how to turn the pages of a book, how to hold a pencil, to follow instructions and to play with other children. Many Bangladeshi parents have little or no understanding of preparing children for school.



Centre-based early learning opportunities for children aged 4-6 are not common and no national system or structure is available to support young children's school readiness other than some initiatives taken by the INGOs and a few national NGOs. All of them provide pre-primary education for easy transition of children to grade one in primary school. However, the majority of existing facilities such as child care centres, privately run kindergartens and religious pre-schools (maktabs) are not considered developmentally appropriate teaching or learning environments for young children.

ACTIONS

From 2001, the Government of Bangladesh and UNICEF have been implementing an Early Childhood Development (ECD) project to empower caregivers to create safe, secure, stimulating and enabling environments for age appropriate nurturing of their children. The aim is to promote the cognitive, emotional and social development of the child from newborns to 5 years.

The main focus is on developing awareness of the importance of ECD amongst family level caregivers. Front Line Workers (FLWs) are trained in understanding the importance of early learning and then they spread key messages by visiting families during routine household visits.

A UNICEF-supported Child-to-Child (C2C) approach is used in teaching the importance of early learning to BRAC's Kishore/Khishori (adolescent) groups. These adolescents then play with younger siblings, with a greater understanding of early learning, and spread relevant messages through their communities.

A national communication strategy and production of ELDP materials have also been created. This includes the development of a TV serial, depicting a holistic view of ECD, as a family progress through pregnancy to new parents raising their young child.

UNICEF has been instrumental in creating a national ECD network. This network has enrolled potential partners and organizations to promote collaborative initiatives in the area of early learning and stimulation. A website, www.ecd-bangladesh.net, has also been developed to promote ECD.

Strengthening young children's abilities to learn and socialize and prepare children for primary education has been piloted in early learning centres (play group and pre-schools). Here, children develop social, language, motor and cognitive skills. Children also play games promoting better hygiene practices. They can play in a safe and nurturing environment, develop school readiness and build self-confidence.

IMPACT

The project has succeeded in raising awareness significantly among the key stakeholders about the importance of ECD. This has resulted in an inclusion of a separate chapter on ECD in the latest policy documents of the Government of Bangladesh e.g. Poverty Reduction Strategy Programme and National Plan of Action for Children.

A national ECD network involving 150 organizations is working in the field of ECD with a focus on early learning.

The project also successfully created models for a school readiness initiative through the Early Learning Centres (ELC) for 3-5 year old children living in disadvantaged areas, including three CHT districts and urban slums. Part-time teachers are running 2600 play groups and pre-schools in these areas. In total, this amounts to nearly 21,000 children in selected urban slums and 44,000 children in the CHT. A recent study of the pre-schools at early learning centres (Para centres) in the CHT districts found 94 per cent of the students who had completed the pre-school course were enrolled in primary school. More than half the primary school teachers (53 per cent) noted the pre-school students were doing well compared to other students.

ELCs generated a demand for other related interventions in the community, e.g. caregivers' education, home-based early learning opportunities. The challenge now is to capitalize upon the lessons learned, including heightened awareness among key stakeholders, to expand it further in a sustainable way.

FUTURE ACTIONS

The Early Learning for Development Project (ELDP) has been included in the current (2006-2010) Country Programme Action Plan.

Whereas the programme focus during 2001 - 2005 was on building awareness regarding ECD, the current phase during 2006-2010 will concentrate more on behavioral change of key participants. Interventions in the form of training, orientation, Interpersonal Communication, supply of materials etc. for primary and secondary groups as well as creating awareness for tertiary groups will strengthen and build capacity. The project will continue to include a focus on practices that promote gender.

During this period the Early Learning Centre will be the main focus, operating as a link between home and primary school and preparing young children for primary school. Families and communities will also be involved in the centres and through this involvement will learn why, and how, to give age-appropriate interactive care to young children while they are at home. Through the ELCs, links will also be established with the primary schools to provide transition support for children and caregivers. Schools' capacity to receive new students and create a Child Friendly Learning Environment (CFLE) will be developed.

It is estimated that about one million 3-5 year old children and their families from selected disadvantaged areas will directly benefit during the current Country Programme (2006-2010) cycle.