



## UNICEF EDUCATION

### Education Case Study

#### INDIA

#### Engaging parents to overcome reading poverty

15 July 2021

Never has the saying “Home is the first school, and parents are children’s first teachers” been truer. When school closed, COVID-19 placed parents squarely and suddenly on the frontlines of the pandemic and in home-based learning as never before. UNICEF commissioned a [rapid assessment](#) with funding from the Global Partnership for Education that bears this out, finding that nearly 45 *per cent* of parents of students in Grades 1 to 5 reported spending more time supporting home-based learning. This case study examines how education programming in India is building on this increased engagement among parents in the development of their children’s basic reading and math skills for children aged 3 to 8 years, that is from pre-primary through to the early primary grades.

The Government of India supports a staggering 1.34 million early childhood development centres or *Anganwadi* across the country that offer integrated services, including early learning. They are an important service provider for the poorest families and girls, with families tending to prioritise private provision of preschool opportunities for boys.

When COVID-19 closed the *Anganwadi* centres in March 2020, affecting 28 million pre-primary learners, UNICEF worked with the Department of Women and Child Development in six states to create an illustrated monthly calendar of activities that families could do together with their pre-school aged children. It was rolled out in a digital format for those parents with smart phones as well as in print for those that lacked devices or internet. In areas where smart phones and internet were plentiful, parents set up WhatsApp groups to share ideas and encourage one another.

For the children already in the early grades of primary, education officials also moved to provide curriculum-based audio and video resources for parents to use at home during school closures through the national digital learning platform, [DIKSHA](#). With its pro-equity mandate, UNICEF promoted community-based

in-person lessons of small groups of 5 to 7 children led by volunteer teachers - often parents - to bridge the digital divide and reach those without access to devices or the internet. The community-based classes focused on foundational language and math skills and science activities.

For children in the tea gardens in Assam, who are among the most marginalised, UNICEF supported the use of SMS messages with simple activities that parents could do at home to help their children develop basic reading and math skills. For example, a child might be given six words and asked to read them aloud, think of a story, draw a related picture and read it to a parent or other family member. Volunteers from the community provided valuable follow up by calling families to check that they had received the activity and explore any challenges they had experienced.

In recognition of the important contribution made by parents to their children's learning during the pandemic, the Government, with inputs from UNICEF and other partners, developed national [Guidelines for parent participation in home-based learning during school closure and beyond](#). The Ministry of Education released them to all states in June 2021 for their translation, contextualization and operationalization.

## RESULTS

- Through outreach to over 7 million families using high tech and low tech means, UNICEF-supported home-based early learning activities reached more than 10 million children (approximately 48 *per cent* girls) from March 2020 to present.
- Its community-based classrooms reached 160,000 primary-aged children (approximately 50 *per cent* girls) during the same period.

- SMS messages with simple activities reached 56,000 primary-aged children (49 *per cent* girls) in the Assam tea gardens during COVID-19-related school closures.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- **Parents stepped up as frontline responders to support home-based learning during the pandemic.** The COVID-19 crisis showed that with relevant support, parents can play a particularly vital role in supporting young children continue their foundational learning at home, a role that should continue once school reopen, and schools work to help students recover lost learning.
- **Parents need preparation and support for their changing role.** The COVID-19 pandemic heaped many stresses upon families while at the same time shifting parents into new or expanded roles in home-based learning. Parents, just like teachers and other members of the school community, need preparation and support to be able to sustain their increased engagement in their children's learning. For this reason, the national Guidelines covers the topic of care for caregivers, although more work is needed still to round out support for parents. Regular follow up with parents by teachers is also important for home-based learning.

## NEXT STEPS

Following the launch of the national Guidelines on parent participation in home-based learning, UNICEF will work at the state level to ensure they reach parents online, in print and via mobile phones to encourage them in maintaining their active role in their children's foundational learning in the home.

**Cost effectiveness:** To date, UNICEF has invested approximately US \$350,000 on education programmes that involve parents in the foundational learning of their children aged 3 to 8 years. These funds leveraged another US \$550,000 from state and district governments.

For more information, please contact:

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