

Engaging mothers in children's development, learning and school readiness

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I was traveling in the interior of Talasari block in Maharashtra, a tribal belt located towards the north of Maharashtra, on the border of Gujarat. It is very distressing to see the backwardness of this region, given its proximity to Mumbai, the state capital as well as the economic capital of India. We have been working in this area for the last 4-5 years to ensure that the community, especially the mothers, understand the importance of early childhood education and anganwadis deliver high quality early childhood education.

During my visit, I entered an anganwadi centre in a random village of this block. The anganwadi worker and local Pratham instructor were jointly conducting an activity with 25 children, who were sitting in a big circle and playing a game. They did not even bother to stop when I entered their centre. They were busy doing the circle activity. I was enjoying observing their play, too.



Scan this to see how the children were playing the 'circle activity'

Suddenly, a mother came to meet the anganwadi worker. She was holding a 'Child Report Card' that we had provided to all children in the anganwadis of the block. The mother wanted to talk to the anganwadi worker about the report card. She said that her daughter could easily do 'rope skipping', but worker had marked as 'she couldn't' in her report card. I was curious now, because we had designed this report card in a particular way - pictorial - so that everyone could understand it. I could see that was actually happening here. The anganwadi worker responded by saying that the girl could not skip the rope when she asked her to do it in the anganwadi. The mother was carrying the skipping rope in her other hand. She gave it to her daughter and asked her to skip the rope. The child followed her mother's instruction and started skipping the rope fast. The anganwadi worker was anxious. She took the report card, changed her remark on it, and handed it to the mother. The mother thanked the anganwadi worker for changing her remark on the card and sat down on the floor to see the activity that the children were doing. Her daughter joined the 'big circle' activity.

I was impressed with this mother. Her engagement and courage to come forward and challenge the anganwadi worker's comment was really admirable especially in such a deprived area. She must have carefully reviewed the report card after receiving it from the anganwadi worker and interacted with her daughter about the activities mentioned on it. When I came forward and started asking her about all this, she explained that there is a group of mothers in her hamlet. They meet regularly and talk to each other about their children's progress. The Pratham instructor - the person who was playing with the children in the anganwadi - goes to the hamlet and visits the group periodically, interacts with them, and also provides some material to them. That's how she got to learn many things related to her daughter's development and her own role in this process. The mother was feeling proud and confident while sharing her experiences of being active in her daughter's development and learning. She told me that her husband and mother-in-law also appreciates what she is doing for her daughter.

With the joint efforts of Pratham and anganwadi teams, there are more than 200 such Mothers' Groups active in this block in around 64 anganwadis now. We are trying to build a strong ecosystem of early childhood education in these villages.

While working with children in balwadis and anganwadis across India, we realized that nurturing children and preparing them for life and formal schooling is not a job of only the Government or anganwadis for that matter. This is a joint responsibility of society and governments. Therefore, in Pratham's Early Childhood Programs, we believe that it is essential to 'reach out', to engage mothers in supporting children's readiness for school and learning, besides actively building awareness about the food and feeding practices, basic health and overall development of the child. The family is the first and the most important contributor to any child's development. We believe that a supportive learning environment at home can be a big contributor to the overall development and growth of a child. According to a Chinese proverb, 'it takes a whole village to raise a child'. Thus, in order to nurture children properly, we need to build a good ecosystem for quality early childhood development. So far, governments across India have put systems and processes in silos without considering that coordination is needed across all areas of children's development, and most importantly all stakeholders in the child development process. The primary focus of the government-run anganwadi system is leaning towards health and nutrition of children, the pre-school education component of these systems leaves a lot to be achieved. While privately-run pre-schools also exist as an alternative in many areas, they are plagued by challenges of affordability and quality. However, in many households in rural communities and in urban slums, parents lack the guidance, know-how and time to engage appropriately with children themselves. As a result, children are often

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unable to develop solid school readiness foundations before they enter school. And then they face difficulties in learning and lag behind in their school studies.



Picture from Pratham's Program with Mothers in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh

Since the mother is typically the one who spends the greatest amount of time with children at this stage, she plays the role of long-term influencer in the child's developmental journey and has the potential to be a strong pillar of support for furthering learning outcomes in children. Therefore, I think 'School Readiness' should be defined properly so that the transition of young children from preschool to grade 1 can be recognized and celebrated by everyone. If it is defined clearly and made simple enough for everyone to understand, then everyone, especially mothers, can support children to become school ready irrespective of their economic conditions. In our large-scale efforts to engage mothers across India, we have seen that mothers can do meaningful activities with their children - particularly helping children become school-ready - when simple ideas are given to them through demonstration, group discussions, short videos, etc. Digital technology is also acting as an enabler in breaking this gap between children, parents, anganwadis, schools and curriculum.

Child development is a continuous and cumulative process. Therefore, emphasizing on creating and sustaining learning activities at home and in the community to enhance each child's early learning is important. Mothers and other family members working together on easy assignments, creating opportunities for children to learn through exposure, and hands-on experiences with their families are highly important.

Mothers need to be invited in anganwadis. Periodic meetings and individual home visits should be conducted and inputs should be provided to them again and again.

Based on the experience of working with mothers across various parts of the country and analysis of the program data that we collect, we know that the mothers of these children currently attending anganwadis, are between 20 and 35 years old, and the majority have attended school at least till grade 5. These mothers show high interest in getting more and more information on how to support their children, how to tell stories to children, how to nurture good habits among them etc. Thus, wherever we are working with mothers, we go to their hamlets and work with them in small groups. We receive high response from them and also see the improved results. Meeting in small groups encourages mothers to support each other and they feel comfortable. These small groups are inculcating and promoting habit



Picture from Pratham's Anganwadi Support Program in Dausa, Rajasthan

of 'Self-Help' among these mothers.



Picture from Pratham's Hamara Gaon Program in Balangir, Odisha

We need to empower the mothers to be able to play a more active role in their children's development, improve developmental outcomes and influence the household environment to make it conducive to their learning needs. An active mother can potentially also support the anganwadi in strengthening its school readiness activities.

We also need to involve larger community (other than parents) in the learning process of the children in their villages, districts and collaborate with ICDS (anganwadis). It is high time to increase investment of efforts, time and resources in spreading the importance of building the right foundations in the early years. This will also need to have continuous research and evaluation efforts to assess the effectiveness of processes and impact.