

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN AGES 4-6: SUCCESSES & CHALLENGES

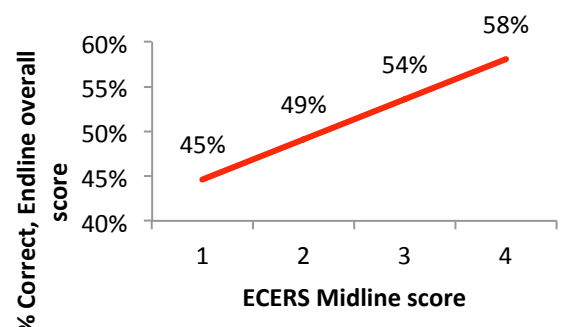


Save the Children

Early childhood education is linked to improved school achievement, lower repetition rates, increased likelihood of graduation and eventually higher productivity in adulthood. However, most children in Rwanda, like many other developing countries, are not currently accessing early childhood development (ECD) or pre-primary services and support. Even when ECD services are available, often not enough emphasis is given to early literacy and maths (ELM) skills development, which is crucial in order for children to attain the necessary school readiness skills. This includes support by parents or other caregivers at home, as well as the form of teaching and learning taking place in classrooms. In response, Save the Children targeted its ECD programming for children ages 4-6 to focus on training parents on simple activities they can do with their children at home, and working with teachers and the government to improve the way children are taught in ECD centres or pre-primary classrooms.

Literacy acquisition, the process of becoming a reader, begins in the earliest stages of a child's life. **Parents who engage with their children from a young age in simple activities such as singing, storytelling, and exposing their children to a print-rich environment can help build the foundations of their emergent literacy skills.** In supporting children's emergent literacy parents can have a significant impact on critical elements of their children's pre-school education and preparation for starting primary school.

For children who are able to access formal pre-school services in ECD centres or pre-primary classrooms, the quality of the teaching and learning environment determines to a large extent the benefits they experience from this exposure. This figure from SC's ELMI Endline Report in 2015 looks at ECD centre quality at midline and shows a continued significant relationship between higher Quality of Learning Environment scores at midline and stronger overall learning gains from midline to endline, showing that children who attended high quality ECD centres were not only better prepared for Grade 1, but also retained their advantage into Grade 1 and had double the gains of their peers who attended low quality ECD centres.



ECD centres' scores on the quality of learning environment at midline predicting learning gains from midline to endline; from ELMI Endline report, 2015

IMPLEMENTATION MODALITIES

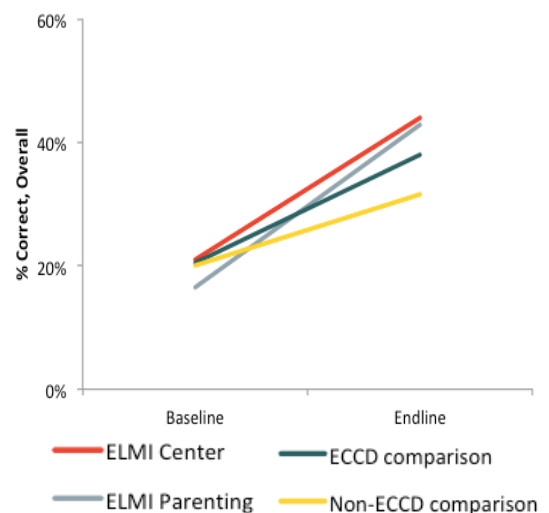
After piloting different modalities for children ages 4-6, the following set of activities represents the current focus of Save the Children's 4-6 work, which it believes to provide the best value for money and is feasible for delivery at scale:

- Supporting pre-primary teachers to deliver 9 weeks of parenting education sessions, focused on practical activities parents can integrate into their daily activities
- Initiating playgroups that enable trained parents to continue to meet while youth volunteers engage children in play-based activities
- Providing parents and children ages 4-6 access to high-quality, local language, age-appropriate books
- Training pre-primary teachers (including those in teacher training colleges) and providing materials for print-rich pre-primary classrooms
- Assisting relevant departments within the Government of Rwanda to draw upon programme findings and resources to inform policies, strategies, curriculum, and guidelines.

KEY PROGRAMME FINDINGS

- Fostering early literacy and math skills with pre-primary aged children in schools and communities helped children to be better prepared for school.
- Children with more reading materials and toys in their home and whose parents engaged them in home learning activities had higher school readiness skills.
- ECD parenting education offered a less costly option than traditional centre-based approaches to achieving gains in early childhood development.
- Children attending ECD centres / pre-primary and receiving parenting interventions had the strongest school readiness skills; children receiving neither intervention were the most disadvantaged.
- The quality of a child's early learning environment impacted their school readiness.

Summary of children's school readiness scores, distinguished by intervention and comparison groups from the ELMI Endline Report, 2015



CHALLENGES

- Lack of incentives and negative perceptions of the value of parental support for children's development limited parental interest in attending sessions, particularly in urban areas and amongst men.
- Overcrowded classrooms and general lack of materials and child-friendly classroom arrangements limit teachers' abilities to implement improved classroom practices.
- Lack of government provision of pre-primary teachers' salary has an effect on motivation and retention.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Training parents on simple activities they can do with their children at home is a cost-effective, equitable and impactful way to improve children's school readiness; this type of programming should be supported and promoted by government and other stakeholders.
- There's a need to increase accessibility to a large variety of age-appropriate children's storybooks in the community.
- It's important to consider timing of parenting sessions to ensure times are convenient to male parents and those working in non-agricultural sectors.
- The government should ensure that pre-primary teachers are paid and equally valued as teachers in schools.
- Pre-primary classrooms need to be resourced with sufficient materials to promote learning.