

# First Steps “Intera za Mbere” Holistic Parenting Education Program

## ABOUT FIRST STEPS (FS)

First Steps (Intera za Mbere) is a nationally-scalable approach to promoting healthy early childhood development by offering holistic parenting education to parents of 0-3 year olds in Rwanda. First Steps focuses on parents’ support for physical, socio-emotional, cognitive and language development, with additional emphasis on cultivating foundational skills for emergent literacy in the home. The pilot phase of First Steps is focused on determining the most feasible and cost-effective approach to delivering parenting education, suitable for national expansion in the Rwandan context and effective in achieving improvements in parenting practices, child development indicators and emergent literacy promotion in the home.

## FS 0-3 EVALUATION DESIGN

In late 2015, a randomized control trial (RCT) was designed consisting of 540 families in each of two different treatment conditions, plus a control group. The three trial conditions are: (1) two half-day trainings for a local volunteer, a basic package of materials and parenting education sessions facilitated by radio; (2) the above, plus provision of a larger package of materials and an additional training for the volunteer on how to use them; plus a salaried area facilitator supporting the local volunteers in guiding group sessions and conducting home visits; (3) control group receiving no parenting education support. In addition to the above activities, all three groups benefit from collaboration with local booksellers, with the aim of making children’s books more accessible in communities.

**Sample:** 1,620 children aged 6 – 24 months and their caregivers from Ngororero District of Rwanda.

**Tool:** Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) was used to measure child development.

## KEY FINDINGS FROM THE FS 0-3 BASELINE

- The least common activities parents reported engaging in with their children were related to early learning and literacy. Children of parents who reported engaging with them in more play and stimulation activities were more likely to meet the ASQ benchmark for their age than children whose parents engaged with them less frequently. **This demonstrates the great need to work with parents to understand the importance of these activities and their relationship to later learning.**
- Older children were less likely to meet ASQ benchmarks than younger children, and the steepest decline in skills was in the area of communication. **This decline highlights the importance of helping parents better support their children’s early language development, which is a foundation for early literacy.**
- Children from wealthier households were more likely to meet the ASQ benchmark for their age than children whose parents were poorer. **This finding reinforces the need to ensure that families with lower socio-economic status are targeted with additional support.**
- In summary, this study found that First Steps’ focus on raising parents’ awareness of the importance of early learning & stimulation, teaching them effective techniques for doing so, and providing greater access to child-friendly print materials is well suited to the needs of young children and their families.



Figure 1. Average mother-child activity frequency

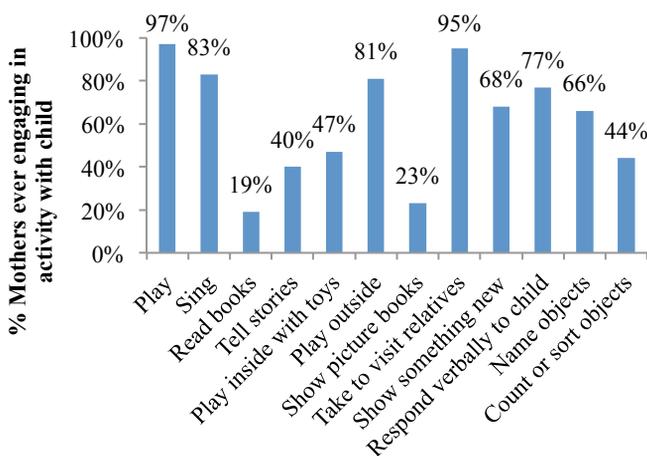


Figure 1 displays that the least common mother-child activities were things related to literacy or learning like reading books, showing picture books, telling stories and counting or sorting objects. These activities are important to supporting children’s acquisition of emergent literacy skills.

Figure 2. Proportion of children meeting ASQ benchmarks, by age

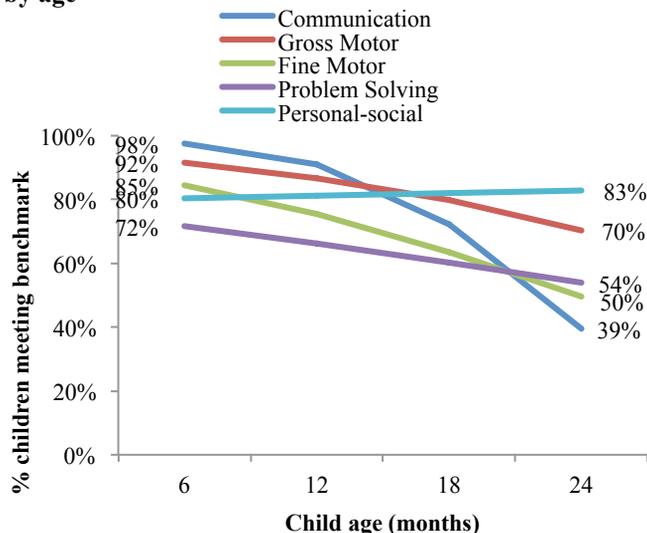


Figure 2 displays that older children are less likely to meet child development benchmarks, especially in the area of communication, which is a critical aspect of emergent literacy development and a foundation for future learning.