

# EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN AGES 0-3: SUCCESSES & CHALLENGES



Save the Children

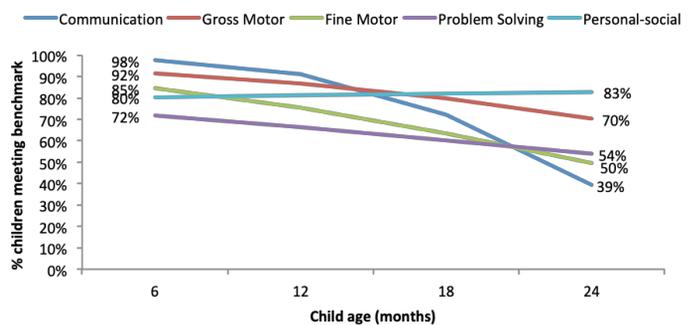


Children acquire foundational skills in all developmental domains from the earliest ages; however, most programming for children ages 0-3 in Rwanda has focused on the health and nutrition needs for securing children’s physical development. In response, Save the Children and its partner, Umuhuza, initiated its 0-3 Early Childhood Development (ECD) programming to particularly address language, communication and wider cognitive development deficits, while simultaneously highlighting holistic child development in all domains.

As illustrated in this graph, as they age, children in Rwanda were found to be increasingly falling behind in meeting age-appropriate benchmarks across nearly all domains, especially in communication.

**Children who are not appropriately stimulated early in life fall behind in their development of communication skills, which is a predictor of acquiring literacy skills later on.**

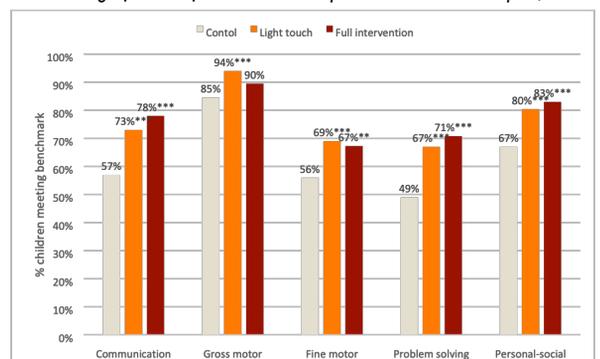
Findings from the First Steps 0-3 RCT Baseline Report, 2015



Most parents in rural Rwanda aren’t aware of the importance of engaging in stimulating activities with their children, don’t understand the process of children’s brain development and don’t realise the ways in which they can contribute to their children’s ability to acquire language and communication skills.

With the introduction of 0-3 ECD programming, Save the Children and Umuhuza found that **parenting education was a successful and cost-effective means of improving children’s early development.** Results showed notable changes in parents’ knowledge, attitudes and practices and demonstrated significant improvements in children’s likelihood of meeting development milestones across both implementation models studied as part of a randomised control trial (RCT) that assessed children from 1,614 households in rural Rwanda.

Summary of results from the First Steps 0-3 RCT Endline report, 2016



## IMPLEMENTATION MODALITIES

Save the Children and Umuhuza piloted various iterations of 0-3 programming to identify the most cost-effective and scalable model that can deliver a significant impact on children's development. Programming with results thus far demonstrating the best value for money include:

- Using a radio drama to deliver key parenting education messages
- Pairing group sessions with at least one home visit
- Equipping volunteers to stimulate discussions and practice new activities using visual aids
- Training parents to make homemade books and toys
- Providing access to high-quality, age-appropriate books

## KEY ACHIEVEMENTS FOLLOWING PROGRAMME INTERVENTIONS

- Children were significantly more likely to meet developmental milestones
- Significant improvements were found in home literacy environments, parent-child home learning activities and key health, nutrition and hygiene practices
- Fathers were more likely to be engaged in their children's early development
- Beneficiary parents were less likely to use negative discipline behaviours
- Parental education was no longer associated with children's likelihood to meet development benchmarks, implying that the programme had a levelling effect on inherent disadvantages

## KEY FINDINGS

- The number of parent-child stimulation and learning activities regularly occurring in the home was highly correlated to improvements in child development indicators. This demonstrates the importance of ensuring parents understand the importance of these activities and are equipped with simple techniques to engage with their children in this way.
- Children (including babies) who were exposed to books through programme activities were even more interested and curious in them. This highlights the importance of ensuring that children are able to access books from a young age to help foster better readers in the future.

## IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND MITIGATION MEASURES

- Securing fathers' participation; the use of a radio drama that included the transformation of a relatable male character, combined with home visits helped address this challenge.
- Ensuring implementation fidelity across groups of volunteers with limited training; increasing the number of training days, preparing session guides and trouble-shooting tips, and incorporating a practice session with feedback into refresher trainings helped address this challenge.

## EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

- Despite parents' desire to buy books increasing following programme intervention, and access to book buying being provided through book selling points in each village of implementation, financial barriers limited parents' ability to purchase books for their children.
- Lack of financial or material incentives limited parental willingness to attend in some areas, especially urban areas.
- Although programme interventions were shown to benefit families from all education levels and socio-economic status, family wealth remained a significant predictor of changes in home learning activities, which suggests that more attention and support needs to be paid to ensuring children from poorer families receive adequate stimulation and early learning opportunities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Parents play a central role in the development of their children; training parents from their children's earliest ages can help to reverse the decline in children's development as they age.
- Interventions should specifically ensure parents are equipped with knowledge and skills that will promote supportive attitudes and increase positive parenting practices.
- Children of all ages, including babies, need access to age-appropriate books; opportunities for all parents to access literacy materials for their children, particularly those from the poorest households, should be prioritised.