

UNICEF drives early childhood education change ^[1]

Programme in four districts involves parents and caregivers, trains anganwadi workers to stimulate activities among young children

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EXCERPTS

A quiet revolution is in progress in Maharashtra's tribal Palghar district.

In the Savra Padvalpada village in Manor taluka, Rajeshwari Dode teaches her sons Aryan (6) and Tushar (4) what sinks and what floats, as she washes clothes and utensils in the river. She uses various light and heavy objects to demonstrate that. A few months ago, the children would have been engrossed in their games while their mother completed her chores. She now integrates an activity she learnt at a mothers' meeting in the local anganwadi, to teach her children concepts.

In the taluka's Embur Tokepada village, it is not just Jyoti Dhumada who attends anganwadi meetings; her father-in-law Barku Rama Dhumada and mother-in-law Renuka are equally involved in teaching her two daughters and son. Ms. Dhumada regularly engages her children in household activities, training them to recognise shapes, sizes and colours. "My granddaughter does not sleep unless I tell her a story," said Renuka.

Nothing unusual in parents involving their children in activities or grandparents telling their grandchildren a bedtime story, you might think. However, in these parts, it is not that common, said Soonrita Sahasrabuddhe, education officer, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). "Besides, this is a scientific way to learn."

In this district and in Pune, Yavatmal and Aurangabad, UNICEF is leading an effort to change the early childhood education (ECE) paradigm through anganwadi workers, involving parents and caregivers in the process.

Six months ago, UNICEF selected the four districts for its pilot project on parenting as it wanted to implement the model in urban, rural and tribal settings. A similar project is being run in Rajasthan.

Engaging caregivers

The programme is breaking a popular notion of anganwadis in a powerful way. The Centre's Draft National Education Policy recently called for expansion of the Right to Education Act to cover three years of pre-school. The policy praises the contribution of anganwadis in improving health and nutrition, but says their record on education is not so strong, as they have few teachers trained in or dedicated to ECE.

And this is what the UNICEF project aims to change.

To begin with, it tied up with the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences (MGIMS), Sevagram, in Yavatmal and Aurangabad and non-governmental organisations Save the Children and Gram Mangal in Pune and Palghar, apart from each district's health administration.

Besides these tie-ups, UNICEF has access to the infrastructure of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) through the State's health apparatus. Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) were included in the programme. There was a reason for this: till the child turns three, ASHAs are involved with the child's development through regular home visits. Between the ages of three and six, the child starts attending anganwadis.

MGIMS conducted three cycles of supervisors' training and eight rounds of training for 3,000 anganwadi workers and ASHAs.

In the four districts, the programme spans over 16 ICDS projects with 5,000 frontline workers, and aims to cover a population of 25 lakh.

The programme retains the anganwadis' primary role of providing breakfast and lunch, reciting poems and prayers, and engaging in activities. In addition, the anganwadis hold parents' meetings every month. Parents are taught what role they play in a child's ECE and how they can engage with the child while performing day-to-day activities.

During the mothers' meetings, frontline workers help a mother play with her child, followed by age-appropriate messages on child health and nutrition. Anganwadi workers use a flip chart to explain the daily opportunities they have with a child and how to utilise them. Anganwadis have also been engaging siblings and grandparents in the process.

Ms. Sahasrabuddhe said the activities and curricula are adjusted according to participants' preferences and requirements. One of the anganwadis' first activities was finger painting in art books, but that was changed after they were told that introducing books at an early stage may intimidate some parents.

"In the past, it was just stories and songs," said ICDS supervisor Pranali Satvi, who oversees 24 anganwadis in Palghar district. "Now we know how to engage the family in a child's development."

The results of the effort are showing. "The old pre-school education was not so effective," said Navnath Ghantode, child development project officer, who has been working in the district for two years. "We are hearing positive feedback from parents who would not even come in the past."

Vaishali Gawli, an anganwadi worker at Savra Padvalpada village for the past 14 years, says parents have realised the potential of ECE. "I have around 38 children enrolled here, and 30-32 come regularly," she said.

The workers are able to monitor the impact on the child's development. "One woman who attended our meeting said from now on, she is going to talk to her infant grandchildren. This is schooling without any pressure," Ms. Satvi said.

Breaking divides

Anganwadi workers have begun to involve fathers just as much as mothers, in children's activities. In Yavatmal's Babhulgaon taluka, Sachin Chaudhari of the Veni Kasba village has been actively involved in his two-year-old son Krishna's ECE. He attends parents' meetings every month. "I don't find it odd that most people attending such meetings are women. I have also changed my schedule according to my son's activities, supervising work at my farm later," he said.

The anganwadi at the taluka's Asegaon Devi village appears like all the others from its activities, with one fundamental difference: it was started for the Phase Pardhi community.

The community was branded as a 'criminal tribe' by the British in 1871. Years after the tribes were denotified, the stigma remains. The community has been 'banished' to the edge of the village, and have no access to wells.

Pratibha Shinde, an anganwadi worker, said the villagers would not mix with the community at the common anganwadi, and so a second one was started for them a decade ago.

"The first thing I do when I come here every morning, is to get the children ready. They are shabby and dirty. I wash their hands and feet, comb their hair and give them breakfast," she said. Ms. Shinde sings a prayer at the beginning of the mothers' meeting and takes up activities where parents measure distance and identify objects along with their children.

Most of the mothers work as casual labour, but miss a day's wage of around ₹100 to attend the meeting.

ECD and malnutrition

The benefits to children are more than an active learning environment. Dr. Subodh Gupta, a professor at MGIMS, Sevagram, who has been at the helm of the intervention, has studied the impact of Early Child Development (ECD) on children with acute malnutrition.

In 2012, Dr. Gupta and his team used ECD intervention at a primary health centre in Wardha dealing with malnourished children, and in another PHC using the routine ICDS stipulated methods (the control PHC).

In the ECD programme area, 73.2% of children moved to normal from wasted (moderate to severe malnutrition) as compared to 43.3% in the control PHC. The proportion of children with severe wasting (acute malnutrition) declined to 2.7% from 23% in the ECD programme area as compared to a decline to 10.9% from 19.6% in the control PHC area.

"Parents may not understand stunting, but they understand the importance of our model: touch, talk, play. That is all we expect from them," Dr. Gupta said.

Studies around the world have proved that ECD intervention has an impact on combating malnutrition, he said. "When a child is happy, when he feels loved and protected, when his mind is stimulated, he eats better. There are World Health Organization guidelines in this regard. That is what makes ECE so important."

To him and the anganwadi workers, every effort counts. "As they say, if we change the beginning of the story, we can change the whole story," he said.

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