

Home Visitors Project

Abstract

The Home Visitors Project was based on Bala Mandir's experiences with the Learning Through Play Calendar (LTPC) as a tool in its early childcare institutions. Home visits are an effective method of early childhood intervention, helping parents and teachers to work together to support and enhance the child's overall development. The parenting messages incorporated in the LTPC helps paraprofessionals to offer practical suggestions and advice to parents. The success of the pilot project in 2000-2001 led to the establishment of a regular Home Visitor's programme in Bala Mandir, which has had a significant impact on ECCD in the community.

Introduction

The early years of a child's life are a period of rapid development, during which the brain forms a foundation for later learning and development. Home visitors' programmes provide the necessary tools and resources to help parents achieve holistic development goals for the child. Research shows that parents who participate in home visiting programmes are able to create more stimulating home environments, and engage in more responsive interactions with their children.

The main objectives of the project were:

- To study the quality of homes in the visited areas.
- To collect baseline data on the family and child, including socio-economic profiles, nutrition, immunisations, etc.
- To make a comparative study between institutionalised children, and those living with their families.
- To disseminate parenting messages to parents/caregivers through the LTPC, and assess their understanding and implementation of these messages.

Methodology

Sample

The total sample size was 283 children, out of which 73 were Bala Mandir (institutionalised) children, and the rest were children enrolled in the Day Care Centre from the nearby slums. The age range was 2 months to 6 years.

Methods

Parents/caregivers were informed/educated on parenting and child development by Bala Mandir staff and research personnel, trained in the LTPC. Home visits were conducted as a follow-up, to assess how well the parents/caregivers had understood, and implemented the parenting messages, and to teach parents how to provide stimulation appropriate to the child's developmental level. Teachers, using a specially prepared assessment schedule based on the SPRUC domains in the LTPC, assessed the children in the school.

Observations

Socio-economic environment of the homes

Most of the houses were huts or Housing Board flats. Most of the houses did not have toilets, and a few houses did not have electricity. The roads were in a bad condition without a proper drainage system. They were predominantly nuclear families; about 64% of the mothers were employed outside the home.

Psychosocial environment of the homes

Severe conflict between the spouses was observed in about 6% of the homes. There was obvious gender discrimination in about 18% of the homes. Sibling rivalry, and temper tantrums, were commonly noticed, especially in the 4 to 5 years age group. About 37% of fathers seemed to have positive interactions with their children.

Comparative study of institutionalised children and those living with their families

The sample was categorised into five age groups: 13-18 months, 18-24 months, 2-3 years, 4-5 years and 5-6 years.

- Physical: Differences between the two groups were noticeable from as early on as the 13-18 months group.
- Communication: Differences were noticeable after 3 years.
- Sense of self and Relationship: Differences surfaced only after 5 years. It was interesting to note that until the 5th year, the institutionalised children fared marginally better in the Relationship domain than the children living at home.
- Understanding: Subtle differences between the two groups were observed in all the age groups.
- Overall, institutionalised children needed more stimulation in all the five domains, as compared to their counterparts living at home. The inability of institutionalised children to perform some of the tasks set was mainly due to lack of exposure/opportunity, rather than lack of skill.

Results & Feedback

- Most of the mothers and/or family members were cooperative and responded well. Some mothers were hesitant and seemed scared to divulge information. A few others gave false information.
- Logistically, the field staff had problems in locating some of the houses, as the addresses given were incomplete. The timing of the visit was also not convenient for some of the working mothers, and many were unavailable, in spite of prior intimation of the visit. Hence, some of the visits had to be rescheduled several times.
- Parents found some of the questions in the assessment schedule difficult to answer.

- In spite of the impoverished conditions, many homes seemed to offer the child a secure environment.
- Most of the mothers/caregivers felt that their parenting skills had been enhanced by the inputs given, and that they were able to use the practical skills on a day-to-day basis.
- The LTPC seemed an apt tool to guide parents on holistic child development.

Recommendations

The field staff offered some suggestions to enhance the development of institutionalised children, as follows:

- Provide mirrors in the baby section to enhance their Sense of self.
- Provide chalks, pencils, crayons, etc., to increase their School Readiness.
- Provide sufficient freedom and toys, for play.

Conclusion

The success of the pilot project translated into a full-fledged Home Visitors' Programme in Bala Mandir from 2002 onwards. The project has helped to empower parents, reinforcing their Right to information on their child's development. It has prompted parents to adopt better, positive parenting attitudes and practices. At the same time, it has enhanced the teachers/caregivers' understanding of different socio-economic and cultural environments of the child.