

Investing in the early years of children's lives is key to developing children as confident and creative learners, active problem-solvers and socially responsible members of society.



Development Partners

Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)
The Marshall Foundation
The Sir Dorabji Tata Trust

The Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) is a private, non-denominational, development agency, established by His Highness the Aga Khan in Switzerland in 1967. The Foundation seeks sustainable solutions to long-term problems of poverty through an integrated, community-based, participatory approach that reinforces civil society and respects local culture. In India, AKF works essentially in three thematic areas: Health, Education and Rural Development. It also works to strengthen civil society institutions.

The Aga Khan Rural Support Programme [(AKRSP(I))] is a non-denominational, non-government, development organisation. AKRSP(I) works in the states of Bihar, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh for the betterment of rural communities by promoting activities and developing models for sustainable natural resource use and building human capacities.

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The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is a group of private development agencies working to empower communities and individuals, often in disadvantaged circumstances, to improve living conditions and opportunities, especially in Africa and Asia. Its agencies work in over 30 countries for the common good of all citizens, regardless of their gender, origin or religion. Its underlying impulse is the ethic of compassion for the vulnerable in society.

conditions and child rearing practices in the local community and understanding their roles as Mother Teachers both in the classroom and the community. The programme also covers child-centred activities, and development of teaching and learning material. Drama, role plays, drawing, story telling, group discussions and craft work are used as means to reinforce, recapitulate and memorise what had been taught. Mother Teachers, in turn, are able to draw upon these experiences to create a stimulating learning atmosphere for children.

AKRSP(I) continues to build the capacity of teachers through refresher training and classroom simulation activities. Exchanging experiences has motivated teachers to solve their problems themselves. The training programme has impacted Mother Teachers in significant ways. They are convinced of the appropriateness of the teaching methods being used and value the training inputs received through the programmes. They invariably compare the approach with their own experiences as children and appreciate the difference it makes to the children

and their development. Particularly, Mother Teachers see their role as that of a catalyst for promoting community learning activities and are motivated, involved and enthusiastic about what they are doing.

The Way Forward

Experiences from the ECD programme have demonstrated that an inclusive approach for education of pre-primary children based on community involvement can lead to marked changes in the lives of children. The programme will continue to provide enriching experiences to children in the 3-6 age group that benefit their physical, social, emotional and academic development. The next strategic step of the education programme is to collaborate with the government school system in Bihar to integrate a pre-school component within primary schools.

INDIA



Early Childhood Development (ECD) Programme

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme implemented by the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) in Bihar focuses on providing quality education to children from marginalised and disadvantaged communities. Developmental research has shown that early childhood years are critical for physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language development. Investing in the early years of children's lives is key to developing children as confident and creative learners and socially responsible members of society.

However, access to quality early childhood programmes is often a challenge for children from marginalised and disadvantaged communities. Recent studies from Bihar have shown that children who directly enter Grade 1 without ECD experiences are at a higher risk of dropping out. Even if children stay

in school, persistent patterns of underachievement are established right at the beginning. It is in this context that the Early Childhood Development programme focuses on an inclusive and pluralistic approach towards education by providing quality pre-school experiences to these children. A core concern of the programme is to ensure a smooth transition from early childhood development settings to primary education. The programme also lays emphasis on the holistic development of children and making parents and families realise the importance of early childhood education in their children's lives.

Background and Context

In 2009, the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) in collaboration with its implementation partner, the Aga Khan Rural Support programme [(AKRSP(I))], began to work with local

communities to establish Learning Support Centres (LSCs) in the Muzaffarpur and Samastipur districts of Bihar. LSCs were primarily initiated as a response to a community demand for the education of children to break the cycle of poverty and improve the quality of their existing lives. Initially, LSCs were set up to cater to primary grade children, in the 6-12 age group, to address their learning gaps and enable them to become independent learners.

However, once the LSCs started functioning, children coming to the LSCs were constantly accompanied by their younger siblings while their parents were away fending for a livelihood. This had the effect of distracting older children from the activities in the classroom. It was observed that these younger siblings were attempting to participate in classroom activities and imitating the actions of their elder brother or sister.



The ECD programme focuses on the holistic development of children and provides them with a variety of experiences like dramatisation, music, drawing, clay items and other activities. Children are encouraged to learn and grow in a natural environment without any pressure.



Bihar ECD Facts as a Glance	
Coverage	42 tolas 2 districts 3 blocks 7 panchayats
No. of children enrolled	1808 (821 boys and 987 girls)
No. of Mother Teachers	71

They were showing signs of change in behaviour and mannerisms and were gradually being affected by classroom processes. The challenge that emerged was to cater meaningfully to the emerging development needs of these young toddlers, who needed different teaching methods to keep them engaged. Early Childhood Development (ECD) has been a key priority of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) for several decades, where ECD interventions are guided by the principles of being responsive to local contexts, involving families and communities and emphasising childhood development. Drawing on this niche, Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres were established and linked to each LSC with the goal of catering specifically to the development needs of children in the 3-6 age group.

The Approach

The ECD programme views pre-primary education as an important component of education with a unique identity, defined by the age and stage of development of the children, rather than simply a downward extension of primary education. Learning capacity and value orientations of children are largely determined by the time they reach the age of formal schooling. Those without access to quality ECD programmes are often unable to cope with the demands of primary education and have difficulty adjusting to formal learning, interacting with other children and learning new social skills. The ECD programme is designed to

address these issues by focusing on developing foundation skills such as pre-readiness skills in reading, writing and numeracy as well as in cognitive development before the child is subsequently exposed to the more formal learning experiences. Involving the community, especially mothers, to participate in the education process is an integral component of the programme.

The Mother Teacher Concept

One of the key interventions for community participation is through the engagement of mothers as teachers at the ECD centres. With support from its long-term partner, Bodh Shiksha Samiti in Rajasthan, AKF initiated the "Mother Teacher" model in Bihar. Women from the community, who had the potential and inclination to work with children, were identified as Mother Teachers and trained to conduct the day-to-day education activities of the ECD centre. The choice of term "Mother Teacher" is deliberately used in this context to emphasise the role of the teacher as a caring, sensitive and empathetic adult, who provides both education and care to the children.

The value of recruiting Mother Teachers from the local community is manifold. First, children relate to them well since they speak the same dialect. This gives a sense of security to children and helps in developing their confidence. A Mother Teacher also knows about the background of each child. She brings with her important information about the child and the family, which helps in planning pre-school activities in a contextualised manner. Mother

Teachers, in general, have a special rapport with parents as they are from the same locality. This places them in a unique position to engage in matters pertaining to children's hygiene and development. They continually monitor, document and understand children's progress in the classroom and regularly report to their parents.

Mother Teachers now provide a bridge between the family, community and the ECD centre, which leads to the overall development and well-being of the child. In addition, they plan their time between classrooms, community visits, monthly meetings, planning for the next day and, of course, taking care of their own homes. This is remarkable given the social context within which women have usually lived in these communities. Most of them have had limited exposure beyond the four walls of their home and lacked the necessary skills to participate in community activities. Their transition into their roles as Mother Teachers has empowered them to become "agents of change" in their communities and enhanced their voices in the decision-making process.

Child-Centred Environment

ECD classroom processes play a vital role in enhancing the social competence and school readiness of children. Each child is accepted as an individual with his/her own feelings, ideas and relationships with others, different from those of adults, and the programme supports each child's individual pattern of development

and learning style. Teaching is rooted in the child's familiar world where he/she is allowed to handle and explore materials from everyday life.

Children are encouraged to draw and paint, practice saying words and phrases, speak aloud in the classroom and sing rhymes and songs. Children also play with flashcards, geometrical shapes, beads, puzzles and clay items, which stimulates their imagination. The attempt is to provide meaningful activities to children at the individual level and abundant opportunities to learn from interacting with people and material. Mother Teachers work towards creating a safe and nurturing classroom environment based on trust rather than on fear of teachers. This facilitates children's independence and encourages self expression and creativity.

Professional Development of Mother Teachers

The training of Mother Teachers is a critical component of the ECD programme. A majority of women identified to be Mother Teachers have basic literacy and numeracy skills and have rarely participated in community activities. The training programme was conceptualised around these issues by focusing on the child development process through a two-pronged approach in both classroom training and community mobilisation.

Training modules cover a range of issues such as developing an understanding about oneself, reflecting on the socio-economic

"Children need both care and education in their early years to help them achieve optimum growth and development. As a Mother Teacher, I have become empowered with knowledge about young children's development and child-care practices. Participation in ECD centre activities has strengthened my view of children as active and engaged learners. I now feel valued and appreciated in the community."

Abha Kumari, Mother Teacher from Mirapur Shani tola (hamlet)



The Mother Teacher training programme is conducted in a facilitative atmosphere to encourage women to address various educational and social issues. The emphasis is on developing proper attitudes, competencies and capacities that will enable them to function effectively within ECD centres and the community.

Cover photo : The ECD programme is designed to provide an expanded range of experiences for young children, helping them develop skills and form attitudes that will enable them to make good use of learning opportunities both within ECD centres and formal education.