

# A Study of Preschool Child Growth Services in India

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## ABSTRACT

The changes in the social and economic structure of India have intensified the need for universal early Preschool Child education. The formidable challenges before the Indian Government are: to provide high quality early Preschool Child education programs; to preserve indigenous practices such as multilingualism, family/community involvement, participation of older children as caretakers of their younger siblings; and to provide early Preschool Child education to all children despite serious financial constraints. This article presents a brief overview of the traditional childrearing practices in India, chronicles government initiatives in early Preschool Child education, describes the range of programs available in India, and identifies goals that will shape the future of early Preschool Child programs in India.

## 1. Introduction

India has a wealth of traditional practices in early childhood care and education that date back almost 5000 years. It was the changing social context, over the years which laid the seeds for the introduction of the concept of early childhood education or preschool education in the country. Till India became independent of the British rule in 1947, the need for early childhood education particularly in the form of preschool education was primarily fulfilled by voluntary agencies and private institutions. This initiative in India has been documented formally in the later half of the nineteenth century. The value of this education lies in the recognition and acceptance of it as vital for the developmental need of all children, and that every child has a right to preschool education of equitable quality. The National Policy of Education (1986) has given a great deal of importance to this aspect and views it as a crucial input in the strategy of human resource development as a feeder and support programme for primary education. The field of early education has considerably expanded over last two decades as reflected in shifting usage of the term from Early Childhood Education (ECE), Early Childhood Development (ECD) to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). It refers not only to what is happening within the child but also to the care that child requires in order to thrive. Researches have shown that the most crucial years for learning are the preschool years when the child's brain is

growing and developing. These are the years when nurturing and appropriate stimulation will reap lifelong benefits as children develop self-worth and a host of new skills that will serve them for a life time. Children enter into preschool life with a significant background of learning experience within their family and outside home. Preschool children come to the early setting as active, experienced learner with a natural curiosity. These children are unique and eager to makesense of their world, to develop relationship and to extend their skills. Children at ECCE tend to learn more rapidly due to interaction with other children and also come across several learning and play activities. They develop self-help qualities and become more independent and confident (www.preschools.indiaedu.com). Early childhood care and education is all that the name implies and more. It comprises all the essential support a young child needs to survive and thrive in life, as well as the support a family and community needs to promote the child's healthy development. Preschool education is the provision of education for children before the commencement of statutory education between the ages of three to six years. It is designed to stimulate and support the child's motor, cognitive, language, social and emotional development. Preschool education centers in India are known by different names such as nursery school, shishuvihar, shishuvatikas, anganwadis, balwadis and montessori schools. All these serve children before entry into primary schools.

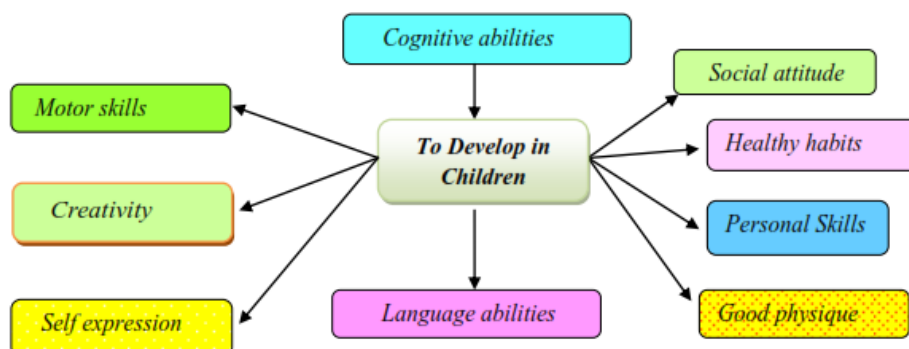


Figure 1 Preschool Education

## 2. Preschool Education

Preschool education in its wider sense implies not only acquisition of knowledge but also the development of abilities, skills and qualities of character. There has been a worldwide consensus among psychologists, that preschool age is the critical period in the life span of the child. It is during this period that foundation for all later development is laid. The importance of early years of life in the personality development has been emphasized by Freud as according to him "child is the father of man". The bare structure of personality is formed by the age of five years. Rousseau (1972) in his book "Emile" is credited with identifying the period of childhood as important. He described that a child is just not a small or young adult, but in fact going through a unique period in his life. Childhood - a time when, like a flower the child is "unfolding and growing". Bloom (1964) in his book "Stability and Change in Human Characteristics" has argued that major changes in the personality characteristics are not possible after the child has reached high level of stability. Thus, the major objective in the early childhood stage should be therefore to help children in developing basic concepts which would lead them towards logical reasoning.

## 3. Preschool Education Services In India

It is now globally acknowledged that the first six years are the most crucial in human development. There is no other time in human life when so much is learned in such a brief period. In India this awareness is reflected by large number of preschool services run by government and private efforts. The Government of India has identified eight flagship programmes of which ICDS is one. The scheme of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) was evolved to make a coordinated effort for an integrated programme to deliver a package of services and was formally launched on October 2, 1975 with only 33 projects. Out of these 33 projects, 19 were rural, 10 were tribal, and 4 were urban, spread over in all the states and Union Territory of Delhi. Integrated Child Development Services Programme continues to be world's most unique early childhood development programme which is being satisfactorily operated for more than three decades of its existence. The uniqueness of this programme lies in the fact

that it has introduced and includes preschool education component for the children whereas other components have existed earlier in various national programmes and have been routed through ICDS to reach the larger population. ICDS is now operating 6,719 projects in the country, with 1,241,749 operational anganwadi centers. Out of the 14 lac habitations in India with living population, anganwadi centers are already available in 12 lac habitations. For the Eleventh Five Year Plan, Government of India appointed a committee to work on ICDS and preschool education. This report found that on an average, 37% children were registered for preschool education activities in anganwadicentres. The study also found that the gap has reduced between the children registered for preschool education and those actually attending the centers. Children attending preschool education activities under ICDS have continuously increased from about 17 million in March 2002 to nearly 19 million in 2003, 20 million in 2004 and 23 million in 2005. The working group calculated that preschool education will have to be provided for 70 million children by the end of 2011 and 73 million by 2016.

The universalization of ICDS is an opportunity for meeting the growing need of early childhood education in the country. The nodal agency for coordination and monitoring of the scheme at the central level is the Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Human Resource Development and its counterpart departments at the state level, the scheme is centrally funded. ICDS conceptually embodies a unique integrated, cost effective approach for holistic development and provides a package of services to children, expectant and nursing mothers and lately introduced services for adolescent girls. The package includes (I) Supplementary nutrition and therapeutic nutrition, (II) Non-formal preschool education, (III) Immunization, (IV) Health checkups, (V) Referral services and Nutrition and Health education (NIPCCD, 2006). ICDS services are provided through a vast network of ICDS centers which are better known as "anganwadi." The term anganwadi developed from the idea that a good early childhood care and development centre could be run with low cost material even when located in an "angan" or "courtyard".



Figure 2 Some Governmental Agencies Which Support Preschool Education in India

#### 4. Programs Available In India

There are a variety of federal, voluntary, and private programs serving children birth through age eight. Programs Run by the Government. Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is India's national program to serve children between 0-6 years (Muralidharan, 1992). In fact, it is the largest child-development program in the world serving approximately 16 million children a year (Young, 1996). ICDS services are operated through a network of Aganwadis (courtyards) and are "supported by the World Food Program, CARE, UNICEF, the European Union, USAID, and the World Bank".

Programs Run by Voluntary Organizations. Many voluntary organizations assisted by the government agencies are actively involved in India in the field of early childhood education. The voluntary agencies work primarily with special groups like tribal people, migrant laborers, and rural children in specific contexts. For example, with the assistance of The Central Social Board, voluntary organizations run creches for children (0-5 age group) of working and ailing mothers that provide health care, supplementary nutrition and sleeping, play, and recreation facilities. The 1970 Labor Regulation and Abolition Act specified a creche within 50 meters of every workplace where women are employed as contract labor.

Another kind of program run by the voluntary organizations is the mobile creche, which started in 1969 in Delhi to serve the children of migrant laborers in Delhi. At present, mobile creches are available in major cities of Delhi; Bombay, and Pune. They operate at one construction site until the construction is completed and then move to other construction sites along with the workers. The staff is provided on-site training, which is considered more appropriate to the situation. Families are charged a very nominal fee within the reach of the parents at the lowest income levels.

Programs Run by Private Institutions, These programs are supported by high tuition fees from students. The preprimary schools in private sectors serve mostly as feeder schools to the primary schools. Therefore, the curriculum is more academically oriented. Moreover, the demand and competition in the formal schools also is a contributing factor in the growing academic orientation in preprimary schools in private sectors. The language of instruction in some schools is Hindi (the national language), in others one of many different state languages or in still others, English. Instruction in English is demanded by the parents because of the demand of the English language in higher education and in the job market. Private programs available in India include:

- Parochial schools operated by various religious groups. These programs charge tuition fees depending upon the income of parents. Catholic schools in major Indian cities are very competitive and serve mostly middle and upper-middle class groups. Some hold afternoon classes for poor children, both Christian and non Christian. Children are required to wear uniforms. The teacher-to-child ratio in a class is around 1:35.
- Preschools run by private sector companies for the employees. These preschools are attached to the primary section of a school. They are well funded with available resource materials. Teachers are well qualified. Curriculum may be academically-oriented or

child-centered depending upon the school's leadership and the parental demand.

- Schools owned by residential communities. Enrollment in these schools is based on the residency status of the family as well as performance on an entrance examination. These schools are considered very prestigious in the community.
- Laboratory nursery schools attached to universities. Another category of private schools in India is the laboratory school. The curriculum in these schools is well-designed and carefully monitored.

#### 5. Teacher Training

Training of teachers varies according to the nature of the programs. ICDS programs train all three levels of personnel involved in its programs.

Training of Aganwadi Teachers. Aganwadi teachers, both for preschool and creche programs, are drawn from the local communities. The minimum academic qualification for an Aganwadi teacher is the successful completion of the eighth grade. A comprehensive manual is published by the National Council of Public Cooperation and Child Development for training of preschool workers. Usually the training course for the preschool programs is residential. The preschool training runs for 3 months and includes preschool education, nutrition, health education, child development, communication, and population education. Creche workers are comparable to the teaching aides. Girls between 16-25 are recruited by Early Childhood Education in India from the community for the creche programs and are given on-the-spot training for 1 month. The training of creche workers includes health education, nutrition and educational care, craft, language, accounts and administration, and sociopolitical awareness. Trainees are provided hospital experience to become knowledgeable about child care, and maternal care, both prenatal and postnatal. The course is supplemented with seminars and workshops on creche management and early childhood education.

Training of Supervisors. The supervisors serve as resource persons for the ICDS programs. They are trained to supervise the Aganwadis, provide on-the-job guidance and continuing education to the Aganwadi workers, and promote community participation.

Training of Project Officers. The child development project officers undergo an 8-week training in project management (planning, initiation, and implementation of the project) including preschool education, health/nutrition, and community participation. Supervisors and project officers may or may not have prior teaching experiences.

Teacher Training Institutions. Some teacher training institutions in India offer a specialized diploma in nursery school teaching. The trainees are required to have attended college for 2 years. Many college graduates with bachelor degrees are also enrolled in these courses. The duration of the diploma certification course is 1 year.

There is also an integrated 2-year program that prepares teachers for preschool and primary teaching (3- to 8-year-old children). The 2-year course is offered mainly in the teacher-training institutes in Delhi which serves as the curriculum model for other institutions. This integrated training program is

separate from the primary teacher training program offered in many teacher training institutions throughout the country which prepares teachers for grades 1 through 5. In newly opened home-science (equivalent to home-economics) colleges, early childhood education has become an integral component (Verma, 1995). All early childhood education programs run by the government are evaluated regularly and unlike many program evaluations conducted in the United States, qualitative methods of evaluation rather than quantitative methods are generally emphasized. For example, the supervisors and project officers in ICDS programs conduct on-site evaluation of the Anganwadi programs. National agencies are also involved in the program evaluation (National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development, 1992). The program evaluation of ICDS programs include many different aspects of the program delivery as well as the program's long-term and short-term impact on children enrolled into the program. Young (1996) reported studies on nutritional impact, infant mortality rates in ICDS areas, primary school enrollment of ICDS children, and school drop-out rates among ICDS children. Nath and Ray (1993) also reported qualitative studies on community participation models operated in ICDS programs.

## 6. Preschool Education Component Under ICDS Scheme

Preschool education is a very crucial component of the package of services envisaged under ICDS as it seeks to lay the foundation of physical, psychological, cognitive and social development of children. Its programme for children in the anganwadi centers are directed towards providing and ensuring a natural, joyful and stimulating environment, with emphasis on necessary inputs for optimal growth and development. The main objective of preschool education component is to stimulate and satisfy the curiosity of child, rather follow any rigid learning curriculum. Preschool education in a non-formal setting forms the backbone of ICDS programme as its all services converge at the anganwadi (Shabnam, 2003). Non-formal education is to be imparted to children in the age group of 3-6 years at anganwadi center especially to children from socio-economically deprived sections of the society. The early learning component of ICDS should involve significant inputs for providing a sound foundation for lifelong learning and development. The Government of Gujarat has setup up a Toy Bank to provide deprived children the opportunity to play with toys and experience play-based learning. There are about 17 lakh children covered by around 25,000 AWCs in Gujarat who are catered to by the Toy-Bank initiative (MHRD, 2002). ICDS provides increased opportunities for promoting early development, associated with improved enrolment and retention in the early primary years. Early childhood education envisaged in ICDS programme is an essential component for children who are at the verge of going into formal education system. The ICDS programme in its more than three decades of existence has reflected both strengths and weaknesses regarding the preschool education. Some of the strengths of the scheme have highlighted its significant impact to enhance the overall development of children. The National Evaluation Report on ICDS indicated that it played positive role in promoting enrolment in elementary preschools. However, the report also stated that there was tremendous scope for improving the implementation of the preschool education

component (PSE) of the ICDS Scheme. PSE imparted through anganwadi under the ICDS scheme emerged as a single most important factor in the better performance of attenders, even many years after having attended anganwadi's, thus indicating its sustainability. ICDS is an effective medium to enhance early learning among children in the long run by way of non-formal education. It was observed in a study that academic performance of children who received preschool education under ICDS Scheme was better than those children who do not attend anganwadi. The behavior pattern of children with respect to obedience, behavior with peers, elders and teachers indicated long term positive effects of ICDS services. The children exposed to education through ICDS in younger years had better mental status than those who did not receive such stimulation. However, some weaknesses of PSE are evident from the various researches and reports conducted which reveal that children in the National study did not perform well on identification of colours and other cognitive tasks, emphasizing the need for conducting creative and cognitive activities as an integral part of the preschool education. Similar observations were made by Arora et al, 2006 that preschool education is one of the major component of ICDS but this remains one of the weakest component as the worker possess limited skills to conduct preschool education in a holistic manner and are less favorably inclined towards children.

## 7. Parental Involvement In Preschool Education

There is no denying that parents are crucial to a child's basic care and well-being, but parents are also essential for early childhood education. The kindergarten years are integral to the success of early childhood education. This is the time when children's brain is developing at a rapid rate and they learn language skills and patterns that will stay with them through out their lives. Both mother and father should be centre stage in their child's learning as evidence underlines that this is vital to educational success (Kimberly, 2009). Therefore, parent's involvement plays a vital role to enhance literacy skills and development of children even more so when their involvement begins in the cradle and extends to the early childhood education centre (Desimone, 1999). Parents are the prime educators until the child attends nursery or start school and remain a major influence on their children's learning through preschool period. Early reading experience with their parents prepare children for the benefits of formal literacy instruction, indeed parental involvement in their child's reading has been found to be the most important determinant of language and emergent literacy (Pellergini, 1995). When parents get involved, children schooling is affected through their acquisition of knowledge, skills and an increased sense of confidence that they can succeed in school (Epstein and Dauber, 1991). Parental involvement in a child's schooling is a more powerful force than other family background indicator (Flouri and Buchanan, 2004). Involvement in early years have been found to equate with better outcomes for the child and have significant impact on children's cognitive development both at the age 3 years and when they enter into formal education (Williams et al, 2002). Parental involvement in the children's learning positively affects the child's academic performance, greater cognitive competence, greater problem-solving skills, greater school enjoyment, better school attendance and fewer behavioral problems (Fan and Chen,

2001). Parent child relationship are improved when parents frequently participate in children's activities and have awareness about importance of preschool education and its vital role in children lives (Hohmann, 1995). Infact, benefits of parental involvement extend beyond the realm of literacy and educational achievement (Patricia, 2009). Studies show that children whose parents are involved show greater social and emotional development, including more resilience to stress, greater life satisfaction, are more self-directed and have better social adjustment and mental health (Allen and Dally, 2002). The importance of parental involvement as an accelerating and motivating factor in their children's education is a worldwide accepted fact. Actively participating parents help their children in their academic development by going to school and participating in open houses (Martin, 2008). There is a need to educate parents towards preschool education as they do not have clear idea regarding the purpose of early childhood education and its vial role in preschool years (Yashodhra, 1991). Preschool education under ICDS programme has been quite disappointing and devoid of the real emphasis on child centered activities, which nurture the joy and develop creativity among children as stress is laid on formal learning process. ICDS functionaries reported that parents lay stress on formal learning process for their children as they did not have correct perception towards preschool education activities (Mathew, 1994). Parents must know the significance of early childhood education and also be made aware of supportive services such as ICDS. Such awareness may help parents to send their children to anganwadi centers and provide favorable environment for the child's development with respect to health and hygiene and also encourage their learning and curiosity. They can also be made aware about the importance of play way method of learning at the preschool stage to bring about necessary school readiness as an initial step to further schooling (Nair, 1997). Both the parents and teachers need to provide opportunities for children to learn and create teaching situation where children can develop an understanding of the world around them and develop thinking skills. Since ICDS has been envisaged and conceptualized as a community based programme so the participation of community is an essential condition for successful implementation of preschool education. Various research reports document that the community carried a positive attitude towards anganwadi centers and consider it as a good place where children can learn, read and write in

play way manner. Community extended their contribution towards preschool education in the form of supervision of activities and solving problems of workers to arrange a locally available education material for them. They also motivate the community people to send their children to ICDS centers for non-formal education (NIPCCD, 2006). Such awareness creation would go a long way in bringing about quantitative and qualitative improvement in preschool education (Nair, 1997). The world of preschool education is changing for good but still it's waiting to become the best (EFA Report, 2007).

## 8. Conclusion

The Integrated Child Development Services Scheme (ICDS) is one of the most successful program in India with special reference to children and women. Preschool education is an important and crucial component of the scheme including children in the age group of 0-6 years under its ambit. Yet little research was focused so far on this component of the scheme especially in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Little empirical data is available on the nature and content of preschool education provided to children at various anganwadi centers of the state especially in Kashmir division. The present study had been designed to fill the lacunae by collecting in-depth and holistic data on preschool education imparted as part of the ICDS Scheme. Apart from studying the preschool education component, the present research moved one step ahead by correlating the cognitive and language development of children with the preschool education received by them at different centers respectively. Studies of such nature though have been conducted elsewhere are however, rare in Kashmir division. So, it will be interesting to assess whether preschool education received by young children has any implication for their cognitive and language development. Relevance behind conducting the study is to assess the perception of parents towards significance of preschool education and make them aware about their own contribution to the development of their children in early years of life and also evaluate their awareness about ICDS and its role in preschool education. Community perception is an integral requirement of ICDS; therefore parental awareness and perception towards the scheme needs to be assessed and on the basis of this suggestion if required, can be forwarded to strengthen the parental participation component of the scheme.

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