BUILDING CAREGIVER ENGAGEMENT FOR SCHOOL READINESS

Results from a pilot intervention in New Delhi

INDUS ACTION

With the support of

दिल्ली सरकार
आप की सरकार

INTRODUCTION

It is now abundantly clear that a child's first 5 years of life are critical for the establishment of early cognitive, social–emotional, and regulatory skills and competencies that serve as precursors for lifelong adaptation and functioning (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The settings in which young children grow and develop, and the interactions and experiences they encounter in these highly formative years, set the stage for later learning. That is, the first 5 years are filled with antecedent events, experiences, and relationships that either support or diminish children's abilities to benefit from new and ongoing opportunities and acquire basic and complex social–emotional and cognitive skills. Thus, the degree to which children are poised for learning upon entering the formal school environment is predicated in very large part on what transpires well before they enter the school door.The cumulative effect of interrelated factors such as poverty, low parental education, parental mental health concerns, and living in a linguistically isolated household presents particular challenges for the development of young children.

Early differences in performance do not necessarily disappear as children progress through school; in fact, the achievement gaps between children of advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds tend to widen over time.
(Chatterji, 2006; Future of Children, 2005).

It is thus necessary to identify effective methods of enhancing the early learning experiences of children across diverse environments and supporting school preparedness. Adopting an ecological perspective, we can perceive school readiness for all children

- As starting at home, well before a child enters a formal child care or preschool setting; &

- In terms of relationships among the child, family, and school, and their interactions with one another.

Specifically, we conceptualize school readiness to include the capabilities of children, families, and practicing professionals that promote positive and adaptive student outcomes in formal and informal educational settings. In addition, we define school readiness for children across a span of developmental dimensions including cognitive, physical, and social–emotional capacities of children and their interrelationships with one another. (National Education Goals Panel, 1997; K. L. Snow, 2006, 2007).

BACKGROUND

There are approximately 5.5 lakh children in the age group of 7 months - 6 years in 11000 Anganwadi's across Delhi. The Government of NCT of Delhi, to its credit has already institutionalized and operationalized the ambitious Anganwadi(AWD) Samiti Project that involves parents and community members in the day to day operations of an Anganwadi Center and its services. These Anganwadi Samiti's present a historic opportunity to involve its members and parents as key stakeholders in the child's cognitive development as the ideal next step towards investing in the Early Childhood Education of the children of Delhi. **Enabling parents as an active agent in their child's development aligns with the framework of implementation envisaged under the ICDS Mission by the Government of India.**

In 2017, Center for Early Childhood Education and Development, Ambedkar University in partnership with The World Bank Group and ASER conducted a 5 year study for 13,000 four year old children in Assam, Rajasthan and Telangana. The study used The World Bank's School readiness assessment to assess children and most scores were below 40%; The study showed that school readiness scores at age 5 were strong predictors of learning outcomes at ages 6 and 7 thus, by building a higher school readiness score at age 5, children could do better on more conceptual tasks in subsequent years.
It also showed that children who had learning support and reading materials at home scored around 15% higher in early grade scores. Parents

doing simple activities with children helped their cognitive development. Strategies which promoted family engagement in preschools could help improve children's school readiness and learning outcomes.

Indus Action, during it's RTE 12 (1) (C) enrollment drive, assessed a sample of 500 children from the 2000 families that came to apply for the lottery in New Delhi in 2018, on the same school readiness scale. It was found that 83% of these children were not cognitively ready to attend school and were at a risk of academic exclusion even after winning the lottery to a free private school education.

INTERVENTION DESCRIPTION ───────

The **Broad Framework for implementation of the ICDS Mission (2013)** proposes **3 solutions** to the problem:

1. Focusing on ECCE as an integral part of the ICDS and not just nutrition.

2. Parent led AWC based interventions for coaching parents on early stimulation andcare-giving.

3. Parent led home based intervention for early childhood education.

Indus Action, through its two years of efforts in bridging the gap in these parental capacities, has designed a parent engagement program that helps disadvantaged families get cognitively and socially ready for school. The efforts included conducting a 5-week summer camp with budget private schools in 2016-17 for mothers and children in three low-income communities which yielded 35% average growth in numeracy and literacy levels of 4-6 year old children.

CONTENT OF THE CURRICULUM (4 KEY HABITS)

The program provides books, handouts and resources designed in Hindi, to parents, to help them build simple habits that are necessary to provide quality cognitive stimulation to children in early childhood.

These 4 key habits include

1. Observing your child's actions and behavior.

2. Letting the child take initiative in activities.

3. Asking for reasons and use why and what next questions in conversations.

4. Asking your child about what and why of emotions.

As part of the curriculum a parent is given a check list of 100 to-do's, 1 to do for each day in the program as an attractive poster to put up on their home wall. The to-do's include activities pertaining to **3 main developmental domains**.

1. **Pre-literacy :** These include concepts like identification of sounds in the environment, listening to stories through picture books, tracing lines in sand and rearranging and telling of already heard stories. The activities aim at building foundations of language as opposed to identification and memorization of language itself and overall foster print in the home environment.

2. **Pre-Numeracy :** These include counting activities, concepts of light-heavy, big-small, seriation, shape recognition and some form of number recognition. The activities are aimed at helping caregivers identify pre-numeracy concepts that already exist in the home environment and leverage them for building cognitive stimulation.

3. **Social Emotional Readiness :** The activities include identification of emotions in oneself and others, verbalization of emotions and finding reasons, building executive function through self regulation and persistent tasks like colouring within patterns, taking turns in role plays etc. The aim is to build awareness around importance of emotional and social readiness in home-school transition.

MY ENVIRONMENT

MY SURROUNDINGS

MYSELF
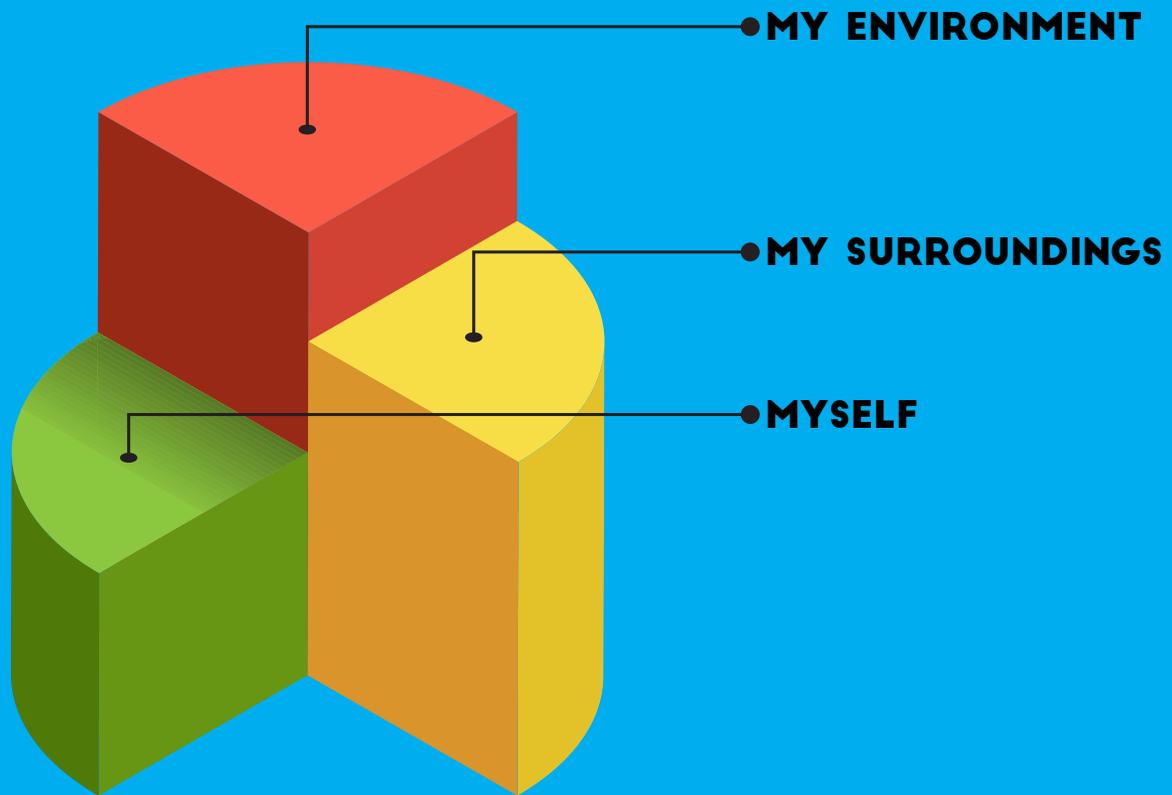
These activities are based on 3 broad themes that widen the scope of exploration for the child as the 100 days of intervention progresses, mainly her/himself in the first month, her surroundings in the second month and her environment in the third month.

The parent visits the Anganwadi Samiti member (Chairperson or social worker or parent member) once every week, to have a check-in conversation about what is happening at home and how are they progressing on building the above 4 habits.

Duration of the program

Through approximately 100 days of a cycle parents progress on and foster these 4 key habits necessary for school readiness. The parent's growth on the habits is self assessed on a simple 5 point rubric, 2 times in the program, (beginning and end) and recorded by the community evaluation team to gauge progress and impact.

TOOLKIT DESCRIPTION

The tools designed under the program can be segregated in two categories, kit for the family and kit for the facilitator/ evaluator. Below is a description of each tool developed and its purpose.

KIT FOR THE FAMILY:

Form and Title of material	Purpose of the material
Poster: School ki tayyari sirf 100 din mein	This poster serves as checklist for the parent and goes on the wall of the house, It covers 12 weeks of activities that parents can do with their child everyday for school readiness.
Handout: Meri 4 aadatein	This handout contains a 5 point rubric that the parent and facilitator can use for the self assessment of the parent on the 4 crucial habits that parents can build for cognitive stimulation and school readiness of their child.
Workbook: Chhatr workbook	The workbook contains simple activity sheets that the parent and child can work on together to build school readiness.
Handout: Story sheets	Story sheets have picture stories that the parent and child can sit and enjoy together and build conversations on.

KIT FOR THE FACILITATOR/EVALUATOR:

Form and Title of material	Purpose of the material
Assessment Flip book and KOBO Form: *Kya aapka bachcha school ke liye tayyar hai?*	The facilitator uses the flipbook to assess the child's school readiness through simple game based activities, the facilitator uses the KOBO form to capture the data digitally.
Handout and KOBO Form: *Meri 4 aadat*	The facilitator uses the rubric to assess the growth in parental habits through the 5 point rubric, the facilitator uses the KOBO form to capture the data digitally.
Handout: *Scoring list*	The facilitator uses the list to score the child on the school readiness assessment.
Handout: *Scoring ke anudesh*	The facilitator uses the handout as a guide for how to use the school readiness assessment.

OTHER:

Form and Title of Material	Purpose of the material
Facilitator monitoring checklist	Monitoring team can use this simple checklist to monitor the work happening at any given center by the parent facilitator.

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PILOT TIMELINE AND PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

TASK	TIMELINE
1. Identification of 15 pilot centers and facilitators.	20th to 30th June
2. On boarding of 10 Samiti members as facilitators.	1st week of July
3. Induction and onboarding of 150 parents including beginning of pilot assessments.	15th to 30th July
4. Program roll out.	15th to 30th July
5. On call weekly support to facilitators and whatsapp check ins.	15th July to 15th September
6. Randomized visits and observations by IA Staff.	15th to 30th August
7.Endline assessments of all parent-child pairs still in the program.	25th to 30th September
8.Endline assessment of children whose parents dropped out for comparison.	1st week of October
9.Focus Group Discussions with high performing facilitators and caregivers for feedback.	2nd week of October
10.Sample reassessment of endline data to validate assessment of outcomes.	2nd week of October
11. Program evaluation report submitted to the department.	10th November

GROUP
DESCRIPTION

The majority of the intervention group had 3 to 4 year old children falling in the income bracket of less that 1 Lakh per annum. Most parents had achieved primary education although actual literacy levels in the intervention group was quite low.
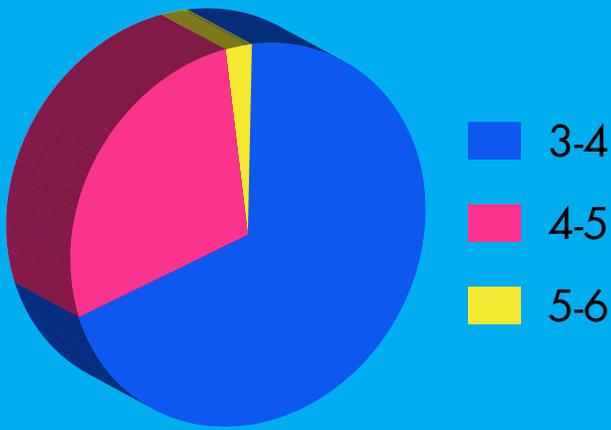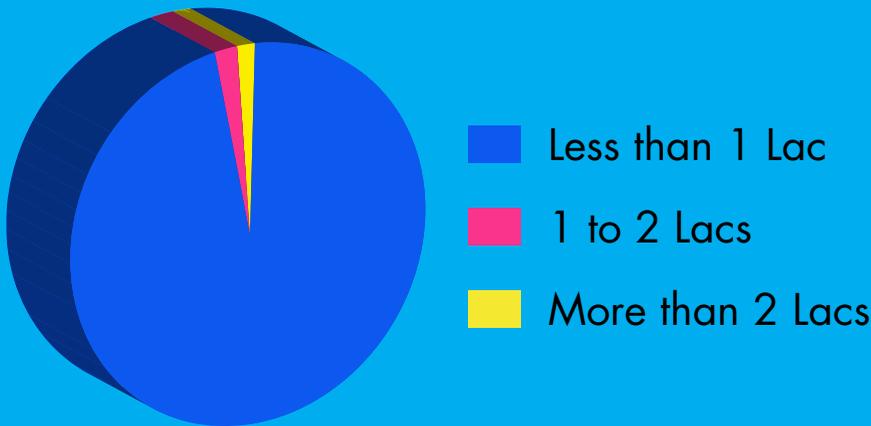
Fig 1- **Age Distribution of children**

Legend:
- 3-4
- 4-5
- 5-6

Fig 2- **Income levels of caregivers**

Legend:
- Less than 1 Lac
- 1 to 2 Lacs
- More than 2 Lacs

Fig 3- Education levels of caregivers

Legend:
- 8th-10th Pass
- 11th-12th Pass
- 5th- 7th Pass
- Below 5th
- Graduate

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RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

	Readiness level	3 to 4	4 to 5
Baseline (CG)	13%	12%	14%
Baseline (EG)	23%	17%	33%
Endline (EG)	77%	74%	80%
Endline (CG)	52%	51%	50 %

Table 1 : Indicating readiness levels in children at baseline and endline in control and experimental group.

• Results from the School Readiness Instrument:

We tested 150 students in the 15 targeted aanaganwadis at baseline on an adapted version of the School Readiness Instrument and found 13% of them to be ready for school. A subset (n=53) of these children, whose parents did not use the kit or take up any sessions with our facilitators in the 3 month intervention period were tested again at the end of the intervention and we found that 52% children were ready for school (a majority of these children of the 150 children had enrolled into formal schooling or were at their village at this time and hence we settled for a subset). A combination of interventions through the awd chairpersons, the growth that comes with sitting in formal learning spaces for the first time in life and the time in the academic year can be explanations of this growth curve.

After our learning circles stabilized we tested all the children in the circles (n=78) on the same instrument and found 23% to be ready for school at that point. There was a 2 week gap between the first and the second round of baseline data collection and the subsection of the first group was considered to be the control group. These were children who themselves and through their caregivers used the kits and their parents attended more than 1 session out of the 12 sessions held by chairpersons on building habits and using the kit. We found that 77% of these children were ready for school at the end of the intervention.

Adjusting for the time gap at the baseline level for the 2 groups and constraints of the logistics of field experimentation we can estimate the intervention impact at or slightly above 25% in terms of readiness rates and percentage gains can be estimated at or slightly above 32%.

Hence the pilot intervention shows us evidence to say that children who experience print material/ school readiness activities at home and whose parents actively engage in sessions of the program or through activities at home have a 32% more chance of being ready for school as compared to their counterparts who don't.
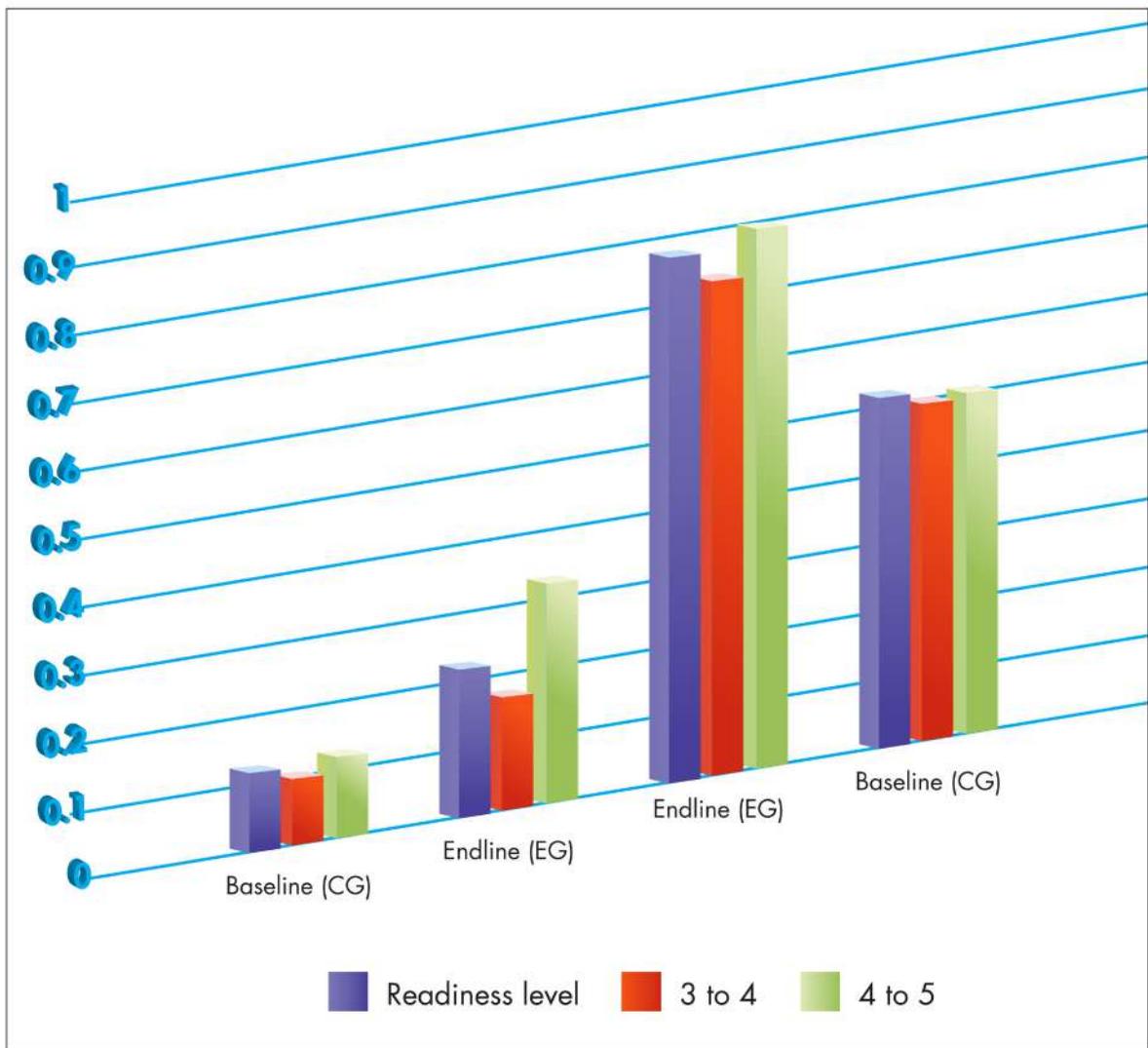
Graph 1 : Indicating readiness levels in children at baseline and endline in control and experimental group.

- **Results from an attempt to measure behavioral shifts in parents:**

We used a self assessment rubric with parents to make them reflect about the **4 key habits** that were communicated during the interventions. Parents reflected on where they stood on a 5 point scale with respect to each habit both at the beginning (n=120) and at the end (n= 75) of the intervention. Only parents who stayed on were asked reflective questions in the end. We did not collect control group data for this aspect of the intervention as there were no similar interventions running at the centers with respect to developing parental habits, hence any growth on these aspects can be attributed to our intervention. Below are the results for each aspect of the 4 habits:

1. Look:

This habit asked parents to observe their children in order to develop an understanding of their likes and dislikes, the scale ranged from not having any time to observe their children to observing actions and developing understanding of their likes and dislikes. As seen in graph 2 most parents were at 1 or 2 at the beginning of the intervention as compared to the end where most parents had moved to 3, 4 or 5. There was a significant chunk still at 2 which we observed were parents who could not find time to attend sessions.
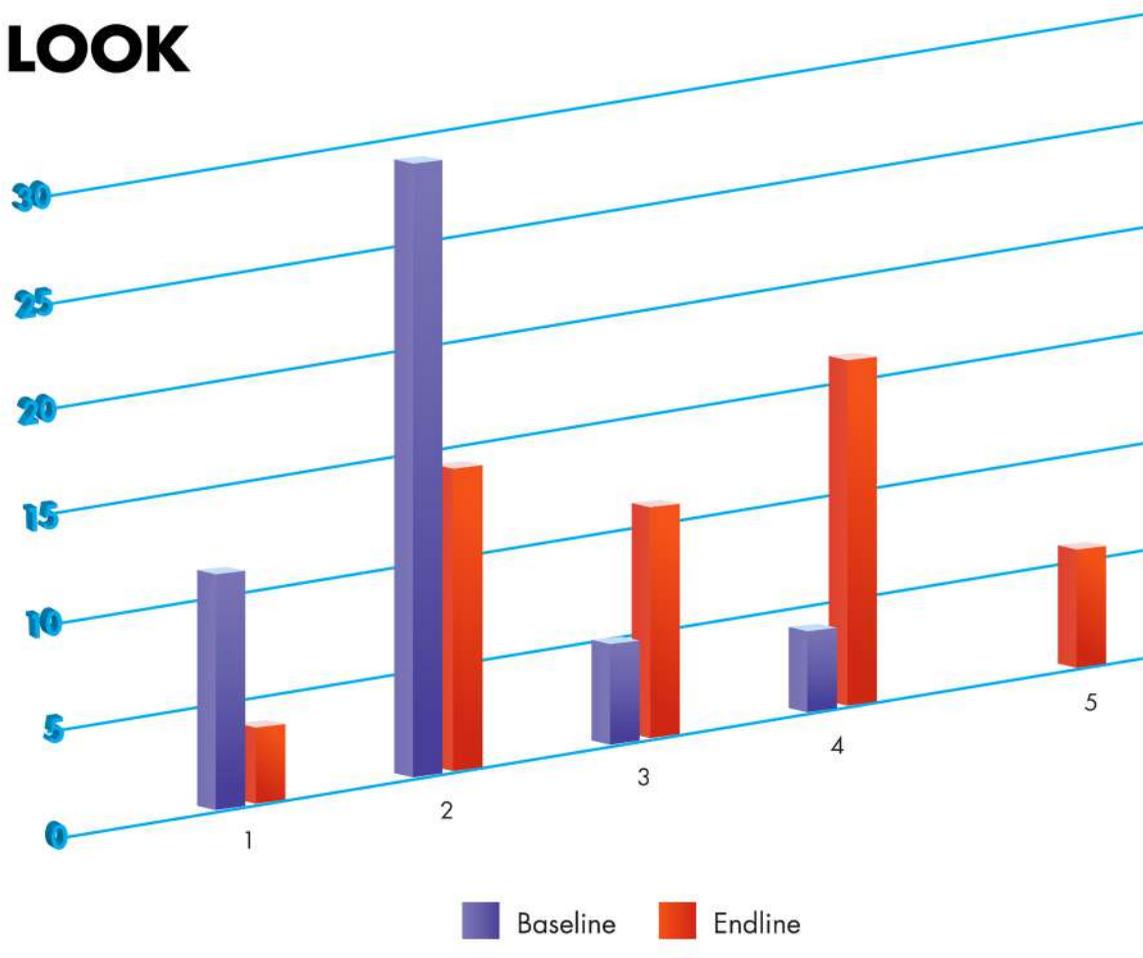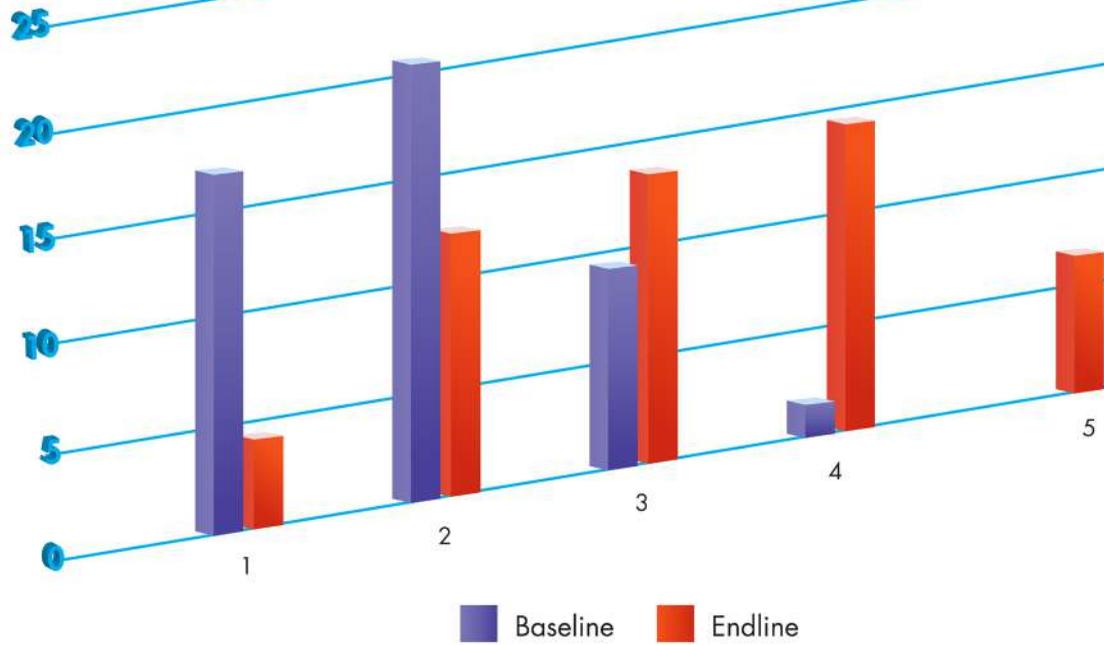
Graph 2: Indicating parental growth on the 1st strand of self assessment rubric.

2. Ask why: The second habit focused on asking what and why questions to their child pertaining to everyday phenomenon and within activities. The rubric ranged from never asking questions to your child to asking them in every conversation four to five times with response. As seen in graph 3 most parents were at 1 or 2 at the beginning of the intervention as compared to the end where most parents had moved to 3, 4 or 5.

Graph 3: Indicating parental growth on the 2nd strand of self assessment rubric.

3. Letting the child take lead:

The habit was focused on fostering constructivism in parents, to let child take lead to discover things on their own, The scale ranged from always telling my child what to do while interactions or activities to letting the child take lead in all activities. As seen in graph 4 most parents were at 1 or 2 at the beginning of the intervention as compared to the end where most parents had moved to 3, 4 or 5.
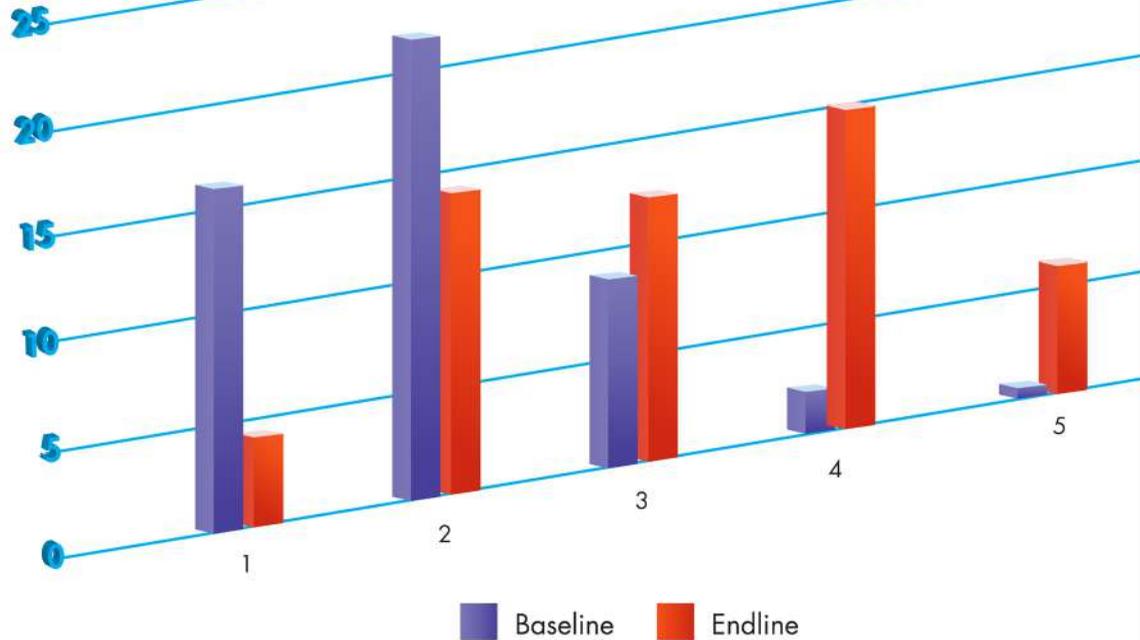
Graph 4: Indicating parental growth on the 3rd strand of self assessment rubric.

4. Emotions: This habit pertained to asking what and why of emotions

caters to building awareness in parents around emotional needs of children and social emotional readiness for school. The scale ranges from I never ask my child how s/he is feeling to Me and my child always discuss how they are feeling and why and also discuss how others might be feeling and why. As seen in graph 5 most parents were at 1 or 2 at the beginning of the intervention as compared to the end where most parents had moved to 3, 4 or 5.

Graph 5 : Indicating parental growth on the 4th strand of self assessment rubric.

The self reflective rubric data shows a clear growth in parental awareness and articulation around necessary aspects that the program was trying to foster, even when the engagement was the best possible only 3 centers out 15. It shows that small sessions can also go a long way in building awareness and material to use at home can play an integral part in fostering habits. It is necessary however to find ways to fit engagement more closely with the parental needs and schedule to garner more attendance as avenues of reinforcement of these concepts.

QUALITATIVE OBSERVATIONS ——————

The program designers conducted 2 focus group discussions with facilitators and mothers who had shown diligence and growth after the 3 month period to understand qualitative aspects of the program impact and gather feedback to make the program better. The insights from these are mentioned below:

Focus group discussion with mothers:

- Mothers felt involved in the journey because they had material to look at home, this was the first time they had a workbook to go through at home.

- They described the session as a space where, "they got to talk about their child and understand where other children were in the journey."

- They described a shift in their perception from, "the child is 3 now and I don't need to teach him" to "this age is also important and we need to pay attention now as well."

- They wanted the curriculum to introduce alphabets and have shorter easier to grasp poems.

Focus group discussion with AWD Chairpersons:

- Parents who were literate engaged significantly better in the intervention than parents who were not.

- Older siblings and other literate family members engaged with the material as well.

- They also agreed that the parents felt motivated to engage because of the presence of a physical kit.

- 6 to 8 parents constantly engaged and stayed back for session and activities at the center by the end of the program.

- They found semblance between the AWD Curriculum and the program curriculum because both used pratham books.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCALE

Align parental engagement with existing structures with existing structures in the Samiti program for effective implementation on scale. Some key recommendations are:

- ntroduce habits rubric in ECCE day and revise it every-month.

- Give workbook to each child with integrated story sheets.

- Give poster to each parent on ECCE day and orient them towards its use.

- Chairpersons to follow up on poster in every samiti baithak.

Using pilot members as trainers to sensitize other chairpersons using a cascading model to roll out in the city. Recommendations for program activities: ntroduce habits rubric in ECCE day and revise it every-month.

- 3 hours of orientation session with all Samiti chairpersons.

- Weekly follow ups on whatsapp group.

- Once in a month meet for sharing best practices.

- Using sample for monitoring and evaluation through an internal team.

CONCLUSION

Hence we can say that caregiver awareness and print material at home does have a huge impact on school readiness of three to five year olds, but the engagement has to be planned in order to fit into the caregiver's schedule to be able to garner effective participation.

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