

ARNEC CASE STUDY

# Parents and community involvement in COVID-19 ECCD programs

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, YOUTH AND SPORT  
(MOEYS), CAMBODIA



**ARNEC**  
Asia-Pacific Regional Network  
for Early Childhood

## **ABOUT THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, YOUTH AND SPORT (MOEYS)**

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) is the government ministry responsible for promoting and regulating education, youth, and sport development in Cambodia. It is responsible for developing and implementing educational policies, action and strategic plans, and regulations relating to early childhood, primary, secondary, higher, and non-formal education, as well as teacher training. The Early Childhood Education Department within the MoEYS oversees policies, objectives, strategies, and programs relating to Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD). The MoEYS is funded through an annual budget allocated by the Cambodian government. The MoEYS is one of 11 government ministries that form the National Committee for ECCD, which was created in 2014 and in the same year endorsed the National Action Plan for ECCD, a guiding document for programs and initiatives for the MoEYS.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE COVID-19 ECCD PROGRAMS**

The MoEYS COVID-19 ECCD program was a new initiative developed in response to national closures of ECCD facilities across Cambodia in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The program was designed to support the continuation of children's learning across the five areas of the national preschool curriculum framework through providing families with play and interaction-based activities to engage in together within the home environment. The program embedded a blended learning approach through the delivery of scripted content across television, radio, social media, and websites. This was developed through multi-sectoral collaborations across ministry departments and development planners (typically non-government and non-profit organisations), as well as connections with preschool sector professionals. A learning app was also developed through private sector partnerships. Funding for the program was adapted from MoEYS original 2020 budget in response to the need to provide preschool education within the home learning environment.

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## KEY PROGRAM FEATURES

The MoEYS COVID-19 response program was a new initiative that was designed to support families in providing play and interaction-based learning to children through distance learning materials within the home learning environment. The program was developed by the MoEYS through multi-sectoral collaborations across ministry departments (e.g., Ministry of Information, Ministry for Women) and with development planners (e.g., non-government agencies such as Plan International and UNICEF).

The program incorporated a blended learning approach which included:

1. Video, radio, and poster learning materials to support families to facilitate learning activities within the home learning environment, and promote COVID-19 awareness and prevention strategies
2. A learning app developed through partnerships with the private sector

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a focus on parental education within Cambodia, with the COVID-19 response program drawing upon key elements and learnings from an existing parent support model. The MoEYS also drew upon existing connections with the preschool sector to ensure that preschool principals and teachers across community, public, and private preschools continued to connect with families and provide them with developed learning materials.

## PROGRAM RATIONALE

The program was developed in direct response to COVID-19 impacts and the resulting nation-wide closure of preschools. Based upon national policy initiatives and action plans, the MoEYS confirmed that young children required access to learning through the preschool curriculum framework to support their development during this time. The program was intended to reach families and support them in providing learning activities within the home environment. This built upon a pre-existing focus within Cambodia on parental education.

## GOALS OF THE PROGRAM

The MoEYS aimed for the program to increase parental knowledge and engagement in learning within the home learning environment to support developmental outcomes for young children. The overarching goals of all programs and initiatives of the MoEYS are developed in line with the Nurturing Care Framework and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

## PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND STRUCTURE

The program was focused on the development and dissemination of ECCD content via video clips, radio broadcasts, and posters. Key personnel for the program came from an existing workforce across ministerial departments. Content was developed by a technical team within the MoEYS comprised of experienced preschool teachers adept in the implementation of the preschool curriculum framework.

The technical team developed scripts for the video and radio content, drawing on the five subject areas of the preschool curriculum framework: language (Khmer), mathematics, social and science studies, physical and health education, and local life skills. Scripts included simple play and interaction-based activities for parents.

The technical team worked closely with the Ministry of Information, responsible for media and broadcasting in Cambodia, to produce video clips and radio content, and broadcast these on national and private television networks and radio stations.

For easy access of materials by families, additional content was also uploaded to the social media site hosted by ECCD Cambodia, and the MoEYS website.

Development planners were invited to create and produce their own content and independently upload this in collaboration with the MoEYS.

Content and messages were delivered across a range of modalities to ensure equal access across the population. The radio model was developed to reach families with limited access to television, smart phones, or internet. The program was also reliant on principals and teachers from preschools sharing content with families.

## CONTENT

Content was distributed across various platforms to maximise accessibility.

### Television

- Simple videos demonstrating play and interaction-based activities related to the five areas of the preschool curriculum framework for parents to implement within the home learning environment
- Messaging around COVID-19 (e.g., awareness and prevention)

### Radio

- Early childhood education radio episodes designed to support learning within the home environment
- Broadcast through the Ministry of Information on the National Radio Program

- Multi-lingual radio episodes in three languages (Kreung, Tampuan, and Pnong) in Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri provinces broadcast on provincial radio stations (Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri)

#### **Posters**

- Content included COVID-19 information and prevention strategies, suggested activities for families to do with their children in the home during COVID-19, and positive parenting practices (e.g., share your affection not your fear)
- Disseminated to preschool staff

#### **Social Media/Websites**

- Videos and posters were also shared on the MoEYS website, e-learning platform, and social media pages, KROU Cambodia (an online teacher resources operated by the MoEYS) web platforms, and ECCD Cambodia web platforms (including YouTube and Facebook)

#### **TRAINING & SUPPORT**

No specific training was provided as content development was undertaken by content experts and early childhood practitioners.

#### **DURATION & INTENSITY**

The MoEYS aimed for the program to reach families of preschool-aged children across Cambodia during COVID-19 lockdowns. The program was first established in March 2020 and is ongoing.

#### **FUNDING**

The original 2020 budget for the MoEYS was prepared in 2019, prior to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Cambodia. The budget was then adapted to account for the COVID-19 response. Funding was reallocated to the COVID-19 response program from programs and initiatives that were no longer practical, such as in-person ECCD workshops. The adapted budget included the provision of materials (videos, radio programs and posters) to support remote learning.

Additional funding was received from development planners such as UNICEF and Plan International to join with the MoEYS in the production of materials.

#### **PARTNERSHIPS**

Program implementation relied on collaboration across government departments and development planner organisations (e.g., Plan International, Save the Children, UNICEF). For example, the MoEYS consulted with Plan International to establish ways to efficaciously disseminate content to families. Through this

collaboration, the MoEYS were able to distribute content via USB or directly to preschools in communities supported by Plan International.

#### **IMPACTS & OUTCOMES**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the MoEYS consulted with community, public, and private preschools in Cambodia. They identified that approximately 50% of preschools used the content and materials from the program to provide information and support to families.

#### **EVALUATION**

Evaluation of the program was based on informal feedback gained through conversations with parents, members of the public, and additional agencies. This feedback identified that parents found the content easy to use and deliver to children, and that the program was appreciated by the community.

Formal child outcome-based or family capacity evaluations were yet to be undertaken as of November 2021.

#### **FACILITATORS & BARRIERS**

##### **Key facilitators:**

- Multi-sectoral and multi-agency collaboration was crucial in the design and implementation of the program elements
- Drawing upon pre-existing parenting models and integration with preschool curriculum framework to support home learning and capacity building of families
- Through interdepartmental collaboration, the MoEYS was able to innovate and provide content and materials across a range of modalities
- Multi-modal delivery ensured program reach across the population despite potential digital divide in access to internet and technologies

##### **Key barriers:**

- The digital divide within the population meant that not all families had equal access to television, smart phones, and the internet
- Some parents were concerned that their children would not learn via online or distance learning program
- Some young children expressed that they missed the social nature of preschool and interacting with their peers, increasing child stress
- Frustration observed among preschool staff, parents and children as the pandemic changed the way people work and interact





**FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

**Key Learnings:**

- As the MoEYS had limited prior knowledge on how to facilitate video or radio programs, they learnt on the ground through collaborations across departments and organisations, demonstrating the importance of multi-sectoral connections
- Building of parental capacity to support children’s early education and development
- The importance of consulting with early childhood teachers to understand the content of the preschool curriculum framework as well as the needs of children and families

**Future Directions:**

- Importance of multi-sectoral collaborations – these were essential for the delivery of blended learning options which can enhance ECE reach to a greater proportion of the population
- Increase connections and collaborative work with development planners
- Continue work with radio, television, and poster programs
- Build preschool sector capacity to support children and families, particularly in the return to school

LINKS TO THE WHO NURTURING CARE FRAMEWORK OUTCOMES			
	Messaging around supporting familial and child health during the COVID-19 pandemic		Continuity of learning between the preschool and home as early childhood teachers embedded areas of the preschool curriculum into content
	Provision of play and interaction-based learning activities to be implemented within the home learning environment		COVID-19 awareness and preventions information for families

**Mapping to Nurturing Care Framework (NCF)**

**NURTURING CARE – OUTPUTS (STRATEGIC ACTIONS)**

The NCF suggests five strategic actions for a program to align with best practice:

**1. LEAD AND INVEST**

- The program was developed in a mature policy environment supporting quality ECCD services.
- The program adopted a multi-level structure with strong partnerships between ministries and NGOs.
- There was a well-developed program plan, with clearly articulated vision, goals and targets.
- Clear roles and responsibilities for implementation were assigned on a national governance level, and accountabilities were given to a technical team to support all program elements.
- Due to the nature of the MoEYS and its funding models, funding for the program was relatively easily obtained (i.e., transferred from other existing programs). Nonetheless, preparing a long-term financial strategy to support the program was still required.

**2. FOCUS ON FAMILIES**

- The primary focus was to support families directly through television, radio, and other online media platforms, including the provision of resources and activities to enhance home learning experiences.

- Families provided informal feedback on the experiences and program content, which afforded opportunities for responsive amendments on a needs basis.

**3. STRENGTHEN SERVICES**

- The program was based on previously implemented parenting programs and mapped against key learning areas of the preschool curriculum and, in the future, could strengthen those existing programs with the home learning support methods.

**4. MONITOR PROGRESS**

- Informal conversations were conducted by the MoEYS personnel with families, members of the public and other agencies to monitor the progression, reach and acceptability of the program.

**5. USE DATA AND INNOVATE**

- Data and resources were shared through partnerships, such as ARNEC, to support an international platform for early learning and research regarding effective practices in response to the pandemic.



### NURTURING CARE – OUTCOMES

To reach children’s full potential of adequate early development, the NCF identifies five components of nurturing care, including good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, opportunities for early learning, and security and safety.



## Stakeholder experiences and considerations for future implementation

Stakeholders from Education and Health sectors recognised that this program:

- Ensured primary caregivers and young children had access to good-quality health information
- Made health services more supportive of nurturing care
- Increased outreach to families and children with the greatest risk of sub-optimal development
- Established specialised information sources for families and children who did not have access to preschool
- Collaborated with other sectors to ensure a continuum of nurturing care
- Reinforced the fact that education begins at birth
- Ensured good health practices in an early childhood program
- Put family engagement at the core of an early childhood program

- Invested in ongoing education for children, irrespective of access to preschool

The MoEYS COVID-19 initiative was a well-rounded approach to knowledge dissemination, in the absence of formal ECCD services. The initiative was wide-reaching, given its span across various media outlets and its collaboration with various preschools in Cambodia. Future program implementation should continue to prioritise multi-sectoral collaborations to ensure a wide-reaching approach. The approach of utilising radio, television, web-based, and poster modalities to disseminate information will also be continued. As children return to formal schooling, it will be essential to build capacity amongst the preschool sector, and support families in this transition. Future implementation may also cover a wider range of topics/foci, based on examination of successful approaches in other Asia-Pacific regions.

## Links to research base and previous evidence

Evidence suggests that for information-technology interventions and programs to be successful, they need to be tailored to overcome barriers including inequitable access to technologies or internet (Sartore et al., 2016). This aligns with the MoEYS approach as they focused on delivering content through a range of modalities to reach a larger percentage of the population, a portion of whom did not have access to internet and/or television.

Parental engagement in play and interactions within the home learning environment is suggested to improve developmental and academic outcomes for young children, particularly when they are based upon responsive caregiving practices and cognitive and communicative stimulation (Boonk et al., 2017; Lehl et al., 2020; Lugo-Gil et al., 2008; Lukie et al., 2013; Melhuish et al., 2008; Nicholson et al., 2016). When parent-child interactions are positive, they can mediate the effects of adverse experiences and socioeconomic vulnerability (Miller et al., 2014; Tamis-LeMonda, 2019).

## Policy considerations

COVID-19 and its impact resulted in the closure of ECCD facilities across Cambodia. The MoEYS championed the continuation of learning during this time, keeping the focus on the existing preschool curriculum framework to ensure minimal disruption to children's learning and development. The approach adopted by the MoEYS built on an existing focus on parental education, and recognised the importance of providing learning activities and support within the home environment.

The successful design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the program depended on a number of background conditions that should be highlighted. These include, but are not limited to:

### 1. Use of technology

The MoEYS utilised various modalities for knowledge dissemination, including radio, television, posters, and a learning app. They recognised that, for the program to be wide-reaching, it was necessary to share information via different platforms because of differing access to technology across Cambodia. The importance of investing in quality ECCD services that have the potential to utilise remote technologies in times of crisis (e.g., pandemic) has been clearly demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. For the provision of technology-based ECCD services to be impactful and sustainable, a subnational and national dialogue ought to be linked with community perspectives so that user experience and needs can be built into future innovation. Funding from a dedicated revenue source and ongoing strategic direction from a similar technical group will ensure continuous quality of services and integration with F2F ECCD services under normal conditions.

### 2. Emphasis on importance of home-learning environment

Stable, empathic caregivers are the cornerstone of the home learning environment. Valuing care work starts with measurement of unpaid care and housework to address inequalities and empower primary caregivers (primarily mothers) to champion home learning during periods where their child is unable to attend preschool. Ongoing services to support caregivers may include parent education around public health and child development, as well as assistance in

managing issues which may impact their child's learning and development and their own wellbeing, including parental mental health. Policy decisions should be based on an evaluation of how best to support primary caregivers.

### 3. Pre-existing programs and workforce

The MoEYS COVID-19 response was based on a pre-existing focus on parent education in the field of child development. An existing workforce was well-equipped to develop content suited to families across Cambodia. Further, the technical team were able to utilise an existing preschool learning framework to ensure alignment with national goals. Policymakers can ensure nationwide support of ECCD and associated initiatives through supporting the workforce and flexibility of service delivery, such as ensuring the continuation of knowledge dissemination and support.

### 4. Flexibility and program responsiveness

The MoEYS created the aforementioned program in response to COVID-19 and subsequent school closures in Cambodia. They responded promptly, and with flexibility regarding the various different modalities preferred by families in different regions. Pre-COVID, funding was allocated toward in-person programming, but they pivoted to prioritise a remote approach. This speaks to the importance of stable, ongoing funding for program responsiveness and flexibility, meeting the needs of families during times of crisis.



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This is one of the ten case studies from ARNEC's documentation of good ECD practices and innovations in the context of COVID-19.

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