

ARNEC CASE STUDY

The role of play in engaging young children and their families during COVID-19

PRATHAM EDUCATION FOUNDATION, INDIA



ABOUT PRATHAM EDUCATION FOUNDATION, INDIA

Pratham Education Foundation is a non-profit organisation that was established in 1995 to provide education to children in the slums of Mumbai. It has since grown to be one of the largest non-government organisations in the country with a focus on high-quality, low cost and replicable interventions to address gaps within the education system for children from early childhood to secondary education, with added components focused on skilling and employment for youth and education for adult women. Pratham works at a large scale – in 22 states and union territories across India – both in communities directly and in collaboration with state governments to implement its evidence-backed interventions to improve the quality of learning among children.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF KARONA: THODI MASTI THODI PADHAI

The *Karona: Thodi Masti Thodi Padhai* program was developed to continue and encourage learning for children aged three to six years within the home learning environment in Indian communities. The program was newly developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and based upon existing programs including direct play-based interventions within preschool services and community-based mothers' groups. The program followed a community-centric model placing mothers at the centre of the child's learning process. Group leaders, known as Smart Mothers – termed so because they were leader mothers who also often had access to a smartphone – facilitated weekly meetings where they shared resources with other mothers who did not have access to a smartphone, discussed activities, and shared experiences. Simple and fun teaching-learning activities to support mother-child interactions were shared daily on the mother's phone through SMS and WhatsApp.

Pratham Education Foundation, India

Contact: Samyukta Subramanian, Program Lead, samyukta.subramanian@pratham.org

Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC)

1 Commonwealth Lane

#03-27

Singapore 149544

www.arnec.net

secretariat@arnec.net

ISBN 978-1-74128-383-9

KEY PROGRAM FEATURES

Karona: Thodi Masti Thodi Padhai (i.e., *Do it: A little Fun, a little Study*) was developed to continue and encourage learning for children aged three to six years in communities across India during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the program was developed in response to the pandemic, the program-strategy aligned with what Pratham was already focusing upon (i.e., holistic development of the child across all areas of development and engaging with mothers of preschool children). Pratham's approach, prior to COVID-19, included implementing direct play-based interventions within government-run preschool institutions, engaging with mothers through community-based mothers' groups, and engaging the larger community in the village through village-level fun learning events called 'melas'.

The program consisted of:

- Equipping families, especially mothers, to facilitate learning in their homes through play
- Communicating through WhatsApp and SMS (short messaging service) in 10 different languages and following up through phone calls
- Delivering curated content for different age groups (e.g., videos, games, audios)
- Partnering with governments and sharing content with other not-for-profits

PROGRAM RATIONALE

Due to the pandemic and temporary closure of educational institutions, many children were not able to receive any form of early childhood education. This can have significant impacts on children's development and wellbeing. Therefore, the program was developed to support early childhood education and development within the home learning environment through engagement of mothers while also raising awareness about public health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, program activities were designed to engage children in activities that could create positive play and interaction-based environments where learning could continue.

GOALS OF THE PROGRAM

The intervention program focused on the holistic development of children aged three to six years.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND STRUCTURE

The program followed an at home and community-centric remote learning model, where mothers were positioned as the primary support of their children. Social structures within the villages included Anganwadi workers, volunteers and mothers' groups. These were important in initiating and sustaining momentum during the program.

Pratham had a pre-existing public repository of digital content (i.e., videos, stories, activities and games for children of all age groups) called Pratham Open School that was accessible on a website and through links that could be shared over WhatsApp.

Daily content for the remote activities were first developed at the start of 2020 by Pratham's central and state-level early years content teams. These teams had extensive experience and understanding of activities appropriate for children aged three to six years, given their experience in the sector for over two decades (e.g., training teachers, creating early years content, engaging with families and children).

The early years material, including instructional videos and child development activities, were sent to mothers via WhatsApp. The activities and videos were designed to support interaction and engagement between mothers and their children. Activities were also sent out via SMS messages, although video content could not be sent over this modality and SMS character restrictions meant that descriptions of activities needed to be kept simple. The reason to add SMS messages to this program was to reach on a daily basis, those children whose mothers did not have regular access to a smartphone.

The WhatsApp and SMS messages were sent out to mothers following a specific framework in which each day of the week included activities targeted to support a particular developmental area. A two-way communication structure was supported through follow-up phone calls between Pratham team members/ community volunteers and all mothers within the program, which facilitated the translation of messages into actions.

All mothers' groups had leaders (known as Smart Mothers), who often had their own smartphone and played an important role in facilitating regular interactions between the group members. The mothers' group structure and culture ensured that mothers who did not have access to phones could learn about activities from other mothers. The groups also provided guidance, motivation, and engagement to continue activities with children.

CONTENT

The resources were both fun (masti) and connected to learning (padhai/study). The videos engaged participants in art, music, and theatre, along with language, pre-math, cognitive, pre-literacy and science. The content was available in 10 regional languages and instructions were customised based on the state.

Content was initially based on previously created digital activities (e.g., videos, stories, games) designed by Pratham's early years content team and sent out to all

mothers through SMS or WhatsApp. The messages were created within a framework, which allowed for a different theme on each day of the week. For example, Mondays were set to enhance language development skills and Tuesdays had the focus on the development of motor skills.

The content evolved as the program progressed, this occurred in response to feedback from families. Each state content team within Pratham were independent in creating daily messages, ensuring a contextualized response. The overall content was guided by the following factors:

1. The goal for holistic development of young children
2. Simplicity of language to enable mothers' understanding of activities
3. Short, concise, and specific messaging
4. The use of easily available local resources for activities
5. Content appropriate for this age group and the pandemic period
6. Activities to be fun and meaningful

TRAINING & SUPPORT

Program development and implementation was supported by widespread teams across different states in India, including a central resource and content team and early childhood education support workers on the ground. The program was developed and facilitated by existing teams. During the pandemic, everyone came together virtually to support and assist with the process.

DURATION & INTENSITY

Mothers Groups were formed in each community. A mothers' group comprised four to five mothers who met once a week to discuss teaching-learning activities and share experiences.

FUNDING

The program was funded through donor support. The funding was already in place prior to the pandemic, therefore, Pratham had to re-evaluate how the funding could be utilised based on the limitations of the pandemic (e.g., home and online learning).

While initially there were some concerns around losing funding, the actions and plans shared by Pratham with their Donors resulted in securing the funding, which was provided prior to the pandemic, for the Karona: Thodi Masti Thodi Padhai program.

PARTNERSHIPS

Many other organisations came forward to seek Pratham's content, which is an open access source. This motivated partnerships with other organisations

to share content, as well as partnerships with governments in various states (e.g., Delhi, Haryana, Himachal, Punjab, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh etc.) across India.

IMPACTS & OUTCOMES

In the 2020-21 academic year, the program was implemented across 14 states in India. Pratham reached 3,000 communities and approximately 90,000 children in the three to six years age group. During this period, there were approximately 15,600 mothers' groups covering 72,600 mothers across the 14 states.

Key outcomes:

- Activities that were most popular were those that were easy to understand, fun and utilised easily accessible materials
- Amongst children assessed on a sample basis, there was a 20-25 percentage point increase in those who could do activities across various domains like cognitive, pre-math, language, pre-literacy
- Sharing activity-based content with mothers and sustaining high engagement had a positive relationship with learning outcomes for children (e.g., pre-math and pre-literacy)
- The mother's access to any type of phone, be it a low-tech regular keypad phone or a smartphone, was positively correlated with learning improvements. Hence it was critical to expand phone access through leader mothers in mothers' groups

EVALUATION

Families responded with text messages, videos, and photos sharing their experiences and challenges. Feedback was collected once per week which supported familial engagement and the quality of connection with the program.

In-person assessments were conducted in Jan-2021, post lockdown, to understand the learning progress of children over the preceding 1.5 years, and the relationship between mothers' characteristics and children's outcomes. The sample for these assessments were 4,655 children across five states in India with 65% of children aged five and six years.

The assessment captured children's learning levels across various domains, using child friendly and activity-based methods. These domains included cognitive, pre-math, language, and pre-literacy.

The learning progress captured was as follows:

Cognitive Development Activities:

- Classifying cards: The percentage of children who could do the activity increased from 51% to 72%

- Matching Cards: The percentage of children who could do the activity increased from 65% to 87%
- Sequencing Cards: The percentage of children who could do the activity increased from 45% to 67%

Pre-Math Activities:

- Recognising Numbers from 1 to 10: The percentage of children who could do the activity increased from 31% to 56%

Language Development Activities:

- Describing Pictures: The percentage of children who could do the activity increased from 66% to 86%
- Handling Books: The percentage of children who could do the activity increased from 52% to 70%

Pre-Literacy Activities:

- Recognising alphabets: The percentage of children who could do the activity increased from 25% to 47%

FACILITATORS & BARRIERS

Key Facilitators:

- Mothers groups: Existing community connections were pivotal. Around 15,600 mothers groups were part of the program
- Contextualisation: The content of the program was based on the language, need and relevance of the communities

Key Barriers:

- Funding: Funding was supported prior to the pandemic from Donors which was linked to different programs. Nonetheless, Pratham ensured clarity with their Donors and program measures to keep funding for the new program
- Engagement: some groups were more engaged than others often due to the lack of available technology resource. Yet, once families understood how and where to access material, their engagement grew
- Technology: SMS services were initially challenging due to limited access to phones and limited technical support




LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Lesson Learned:

The remote connections and mothers’ engagement played a vital role for children’s learning during the pandemic. Therefore, remote learning and the engagement with mothers’ groups should continue to play an important role in future programs as well.

Future Directions:

- Internal preparation, including training own team to deal with different situations (e.g., learning online and training online)
- Building awareness on COVID safety norms through a precaution and prevention campaign along with preparing young children for school re-opening
- Extending learnings with this age group to children in grades one to two and their mothers. In the 2021-22 academic year, mothers’ groups were expanded to 20 states across India - over 30,000 mothers groups were formed, reaching 190,000 children across preschool and grades one to two

LINKS TO THE WHO NURTURING CARE FRAMEWORK OUTCOMES	
	Child developmental progression on literacy and numeracy through mothers and the home learning activities.
	Community-centric home learning model for mothers.
	More program engagement by mothers resulted in better learning outcomes for children.

LINKS TO OTHER RESOURCES

Pratham COVID-19 response, <https://www.pratham.org/covid-19-response/connecting-with-children-learn-and-fun>

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 adopted a multi-level organisation structure with clear role descriptions for the Pratham Education Foundation, Smart Mothers and mothers' groups to collectively support early childhood development.
- There was a well-developed program plan, with clearly articulated vision and targets.
- Clear roles and responsibilities for implementation were assigned at the Pratham organisation level, leaders of mothers groups supported all program elements.
- Given the nature of Pratham and its donor funding models, funding for the program was relatively easily obtained to run the program (i.e., transferred from other previously existing programs). Nonetheless, preparing a long-term financial strategy to support the Karona: Thodi Masti Thodi Padhai model was required.



2. FOCUS ON FAMILIES

- The primary focus of the Karona: Thodi Masti Thodi Padhai program was to support families directly through the Smart Mothers, including the guidance, motivation and engagement of other mothers to enhance home learning experiences.
- Family provided responses to messages, as well as feedback on the experiences and program implementation, which afforded opportunity for program amendments responsive to need.
- Communities were supported by local mothers, i.e., Smart Mothers, who had access to smart phones and existing relationships within the other mothers and became the drivers of change for children's development.
- Small groups were created for mothers to strengthen and support community platforms for early childhood development. Those mothers' groups were supported on a weekly basis to ensure implementation of the home learning components.

3. STRENGTHEN SERVICES

- The Karona: Thodi Masti Thodi Padhai program was based on previously implemented Pratham programs and, in the future, could strengthen those existing programs with the home learning components.
- Protocols were in place to mentor and supervise all mothers, especially Smart Mothers, to ensure good quality of practices and experiences for everyone.



4. MONITOR PROGRESS

- Progress was monitored based upon mothers' feedback with consistent review of program content and frameworks.
- Post lockdown assessments were used to understand children's developmental progression, as well as relationships between child outcomes and mothers' characteristics, such as phone access.



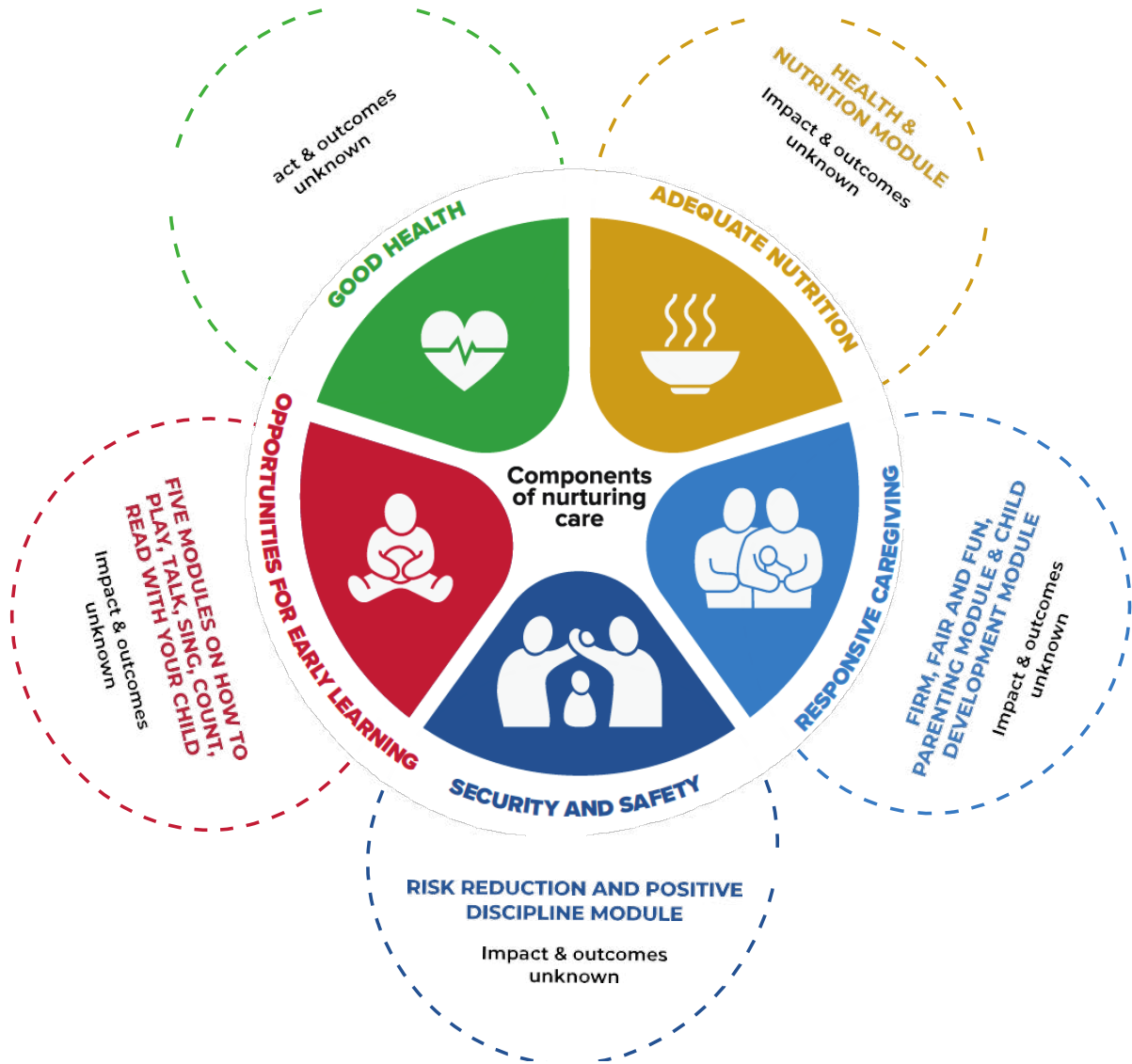
5. USE DATA AND INNOVATE

- The Karona: Thodi Masti Thodi Padhai program was piloted and evaluated within a sub- sample of five states in India. Future plans should look at scaling the program to a broader cohort of families both nationally and internationally.
- Data and resources have been shared with and 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, health and nutrition sectors recognised that this program:

- Included families and children with the greatest risk of sub-optimal development,
- Collaborated with local communities to ensure a continuum of nurturing care,
- Reinforced the importance of education from an early age,
- Ensured good health practices,
- Placed family engagement at the forefront of early childhood programs, and
- Invested in education for adolescents and adults, by providing a strong foundation for young children

Primary caregivers provided ample feedback throughout the program, and children's development was later assessed, demonstrating the potential of the program to positively influence child development. Difficulties with online access were noted, indicating that future implementation of the program ought to explore offline media or other alternative means for engagement where possible, to increase reach and accessibility. There is significant potential for the program to reach beyond 14 states, to a national or regional level.

Links to research base and previous evidence

- The objectives and structure of the Karona: Thodi Masti Thodi Padhai program align with an increasing body of evidence supporting the potentiality of increasing child development trajectories through parental engagement in play-based interactions within the home learning environment (Boonk et al., 2017; Nicholson et al., 2016; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004).
- Quality parental-child interactions can mediate the adverse effects of familial socio-economic disadvantage and vulnerability, serving as protective factors for positive child development (Miller et al., 2014; Tamis-LeMonda, 2019).
- While evidence is still emerging on the effects of supporting parents to implement learning within the

home environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, a small body of research highlights positive associations between teacher-parental support and frequency of learning focused home activities (Zhang et al., 2021).

- The maternal social support networks created through the Karona: Thodi Masti Thodi Padhai program link to evidence supporting positive associations between participation in social support networks and maternal wellbeing, particularly when dealing with stressful life events (Balaji et al., 2007; Ginja et al., 2018). This in turn supports mothers to provide more positive and stimulating interactions with their children (Belcher et al., 2007; Phua et al., 2020; Yesmin et al., 2016).

Policy considerations

Accessing quality early childhood education and care is a difficulty faced by many parents/caregivers in India. Pratham Education Foundation's home-based and community-centric remote learning model during COVID-19 placed primary caregivers (typically mothers) at the centre of teaching their children, utilising WhatsApp, phone calls, SMS messages, videos and audio material. The intervention's efficacy to date demonstrates that the right intervention can positively influence young children's learning outcomes in a way that is complimentary to existing education and care opportunities.

At scale, and beyond the pandemic, this intervention has the potential to benefit families in need across India and in other countries. For this to occur, it is recommended that the following points are considered:

- Stable, empathic caregivers encourage children to flourish within the home environment and beyond. Valuing care work starts with measurement of unpaid care and housework to address inequalities and empower mothers to champion home learning during periods where their child is unable to attend an ECEC setting. This 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, including parental mental health. Policy decisions should be based on an evaluation of how best to support primary caregivers.
- Investing in quality remote early childhood support services and community mothers' groups that have the potential to utilise remote technologies in times of crisis (e.g., pandemic). Government funding and community support are essential for this to occur, and subnational and national dialogue ought to be linked with community perspectives in this regard. Funding from a dedicated revenue source should ensure continuous quality of services. Policies and programs should be designed to serve everyone, including those in disadvantaged regions. Pratham Education Foundation's intervention was inclusive, and available to families whether they had limited available technology, or more sophisticated

devices such as smartphones. Their approach was flexible, and delivered established, evidence-based content via innovative means. This adaptability and flexibility is crucial.

- Supporting professional learning and training for child support workers/educators, to ensure they are equipped to support mothers and children within and outside the traditional ECEC environment. Governance bodies should provide ongoing communication and updated policy guidance to ECEC facilities to ensure subsidy decisions are coordinated to best meet the needs of young children and their families, particularly under constraining conditions (e.g., pandemic).
- Coordination of assessment and monitoring systems is needed to assess the impact of remote learning models on children's learning and development, e.g., via ECEC facilities and/or early childhood support workers. This ought to involve careful consideration of access, reach and coordination of services, and the effectiveness of the services serving disadvantaged communities. Pratham Education Foundation's intervention was sensitive to community needs, drawing on in-built, highly responsive mechanisms to check-in with families during the pandemic. Establishing relationships with children and families is an integral part of understanding the benefits of remote learning models on child learning and development through the pandemic and beyond.

The Nurturing Care Framework sets out three levels of support, depending on caregivers' and communities' needs. These are universal support, targeted support, and indicated support.

Pratham's programming provided universal support across 14 jurisdictions in India, and was designed to benefit all families, caregivers and children, regardless of their risk or financial means. Holistic development for young children was a key consideration of their intervention, and information and resources were tailored to different families based on their circumstances and community considerations.

Reference list

- Balaji, A.B., Claussen, A.H., Smith, C., Visser, S.N., Morales, M.J., & Perou, R. (2007). Social support networks and maternal health and wellbeing. *Journal of Women's Health, 16*(10). <https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2007.CDC10>
- Belcher, H.M., Watkins, K., Johnson, E., & Ialongo, N. (2007). Early Head Start: factors associated with caregiver knowledge of child development, parenting behavior, and parenting stress. *NHSA Dialog: A Research-to- Practice. Journal for the Early Intervention Field, 10*(1), 6-19.
- Boonk, L., Gijsselaers, H.J.M., Ritzen, H., & Brand-Gruwel, S. (2017). A review of the relationship between parental involvement indicators and academic achievement. *Educational Research Review, 24*, 10-30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2018.02.001>
- Ginja, S., Coad, J., Bailey, E., Kendall, S., Goodenough, T., Nightingale, S., Smiddy, J., Day, C., & Lingam, R. (2018).
- Associations between social support, mental wellbeing, self-efficacy and technology use in first time antenatal women: data from the BaBBLeS cohort study. *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth, 18*(441), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12884-018-2049-x>
- Miller, E.B., Farkas, G., Vandell, D.L., & Duncan, G.J. (2014). Do the effects of head start vary by parental preacademic stimulation? *Child Development, 85*(4), 1385-400. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12233>
- Nicholson, J.M., Cann, W., Mathews., Berthelsen, D., Ukoumunne, O.C., Trajanovska, M., Bennetts, S.K., Hillgrove, T., Hamilton, V., Westrupp, E., & Hackworth, N.J. (2016). Enhancing the early home learning environment through a brief group parenting intervention: study protocol for a cluster randomised controlled trial. *BMC Pediatrics, 16*(73), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12887-016-0610-1>
- Phua, D.Y., Kee, M.Z.L., & Meaney, M.J. (2020). Positive maternal mental health, parenting, and child development. *Biological Psychiatry, 87*(4), 328-337. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsych.2019.09.028>
- Tamis-Lemonda, C.S., Shannon, J.D., Cabrera, N.J., & Lamb, M.E. (2004). Fathers and mothers at play with their 2- and 3-year-olds: Contributions to language and cognitive development. *Child Development, 75*(6), 1806- 1820. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2004.00818.x>
- Tamis-Lemonda, C.S., Luo, R., McFadden, K.E., Bandel, E.T., & Vallotton, C. (2019). Early home learning environment predicts children's 5th grade academic skills. *Applied Developmental Science, 23*(2), 153-169.
- Yesmin, S., Rahman, N.F., & Khatun, R. (2016). Community based psychosocial intervention in reducing maternal depression and improving infant's development in Bangladesh: A randomized control trial. *IOSR Journal of Nursing and Health Science, 5*(3), 11-20. <http://dx.doi.org/10.9790/1959-0503021120>
- Zhang, C., Qiu, W., Li, H., Zhang, L., Li, X., & Li, J. (2021). Parental stress and home activities for young children during the stay-at-home quarantine time in China. *Early Education and Development, 32*(6), 843-862. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2021.1949561>

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

The case study was prepared for ARNEC by the team from the University of Wollongong led by Professor Marc de Rosnay in collaboration with partners from the Asia-Pacific region.

ARNEC would like to thank Pratham Education Foundation for allowing us to document its good practice.