

EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING IN THE PHILIPPINES

by

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Children in the first six years of life stand on the threshold of opportunity. This is when the foundations of their health, their capacity to learn and, indeed, their lifelong behavior are established. With survival, growth and development occurring simultaneously in these early childhood years, the future trajectory into adulthood is being set. Will the youngsters become healthy, bright, and effective citizens? Or will they be forever weakened by poor health, hampered by learning limitations, and buffeted by a life of lost promise? Some will even give up early and become yet another statistic of infant and child mortality.

Psychosocial development and lifelong learning get their impetus as soon as a child is born. Brain connections form during the first two years of life, but for the child to develop properly, he or she must experience fully the senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching and moving. Without this, connections will not develop or existing ones may be lost. The young child either uses them, or loses them!

Sadly, many Filipino children miss out on the chance to develop to their full potential. Even if they are reasonably well fed (and many are not), young children all too often fail to receive the psychosocial stimulation and early learning experiences that support brain growth and development. Parents and caregivers may not have the time – or may not make the time to provide them. Others simply do not know how.

Formal early education and psychosocial stimulation services can help overcome the deficiencies incurred during the first two years. Yet, coverage and quality of these progressive services remain low. There simply are not enough day care services to go around, especially in crowded urban slums and remote rural communities, including those of indigenous people. Recent studies reveal that two out of three children 3-5 years of age are not enrolled in any form of early education. Rural children are less likely to have access than urban children, and boys less than girls. Indigenous children lose out altogether.

This failure to provide quality psychosocial stimulation and early learning is a critical factor in the high dropout and repetition rates among first graders in the Philippines. On average, the number of children who do not complete grade 1 is five times higher than in any other grade at the elementary level. In contrast, initial results of the national school readiness assessment show that children who received early childhood education scored higher than those who did not.

Yet, even those children enrolled in early learning programs may not be developing to their full potential. According to the Education for All Assessment Report of 2000, the quality of day care services remains low. Poorly prepared day care workers and teachers, and insufficient materials for basic learning and play take their toll. Because too few Early Child Care and Development (ECCD) centers exist in rural and poor urban areas, if at all, only a small fraction of children aged 3-5 has access to early education services. That means most children stay home, often without adult supervision if the parents are out working. In congested urban slum settlements, even young children may leave the house to roam the streets, looking for food, money, or simply, company. Exposed early to the harsh realities of life, they are soon captured by local criminal elements. Abuse and exploitation – sexual, physical and emotional – then become part of their daily lives.

ECCD programs can make a difference for quality early education services that are attractive to children and their parents. Direct support to these programs in disadvantaged rural communities and densely populated urban poor settlements will go a long way to help beleaguered teachers and caregivers in public day care centers and pre-schools. Early education should be both exciting and fun.

But one crucial missing element needs to be met – teaching and learning aids. The ECCD box of teaching/learning materials offers the assistance needed to enhance early child development success. Thousands of communities need these materials now. Children can't wait. Their time is now!

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