

Boosting the Impact of Nepal’s Child Grant through a Parenting Intervention

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides the results gathered over two years of Save the Children’s parenting programme developed for the Government Child Grant in Nepal. The paper draws on global evidence pointing to the vital role of parenting practices for children’s development and explains the essence of the programme used with parents in Nepal. Selected findings from impact studies carried out in 2018 and 2019 are used to show the positive changes found in parents’ behaviour with their children after participating in the sessions. It is argued that instead of merely seeing the Child Grant as a means to nutritional improvements it should be used as a pathway to advance development in all domains of early childhood – physical, cognitive, social and emotional – so that children get a good start in life. The parenting programme implemented by Save the Children as a ‘cash plus’ approach for the Child Grant holds great promise to support the ability of children to develop to their full potential.

1. Introduction

Despite being known as one of the poorest countries in Asia, the Government of Nepal is implementing a Child Grant programme from its own fiscal resources. When the grant was introduced in 2010 it was confined to the Karnali region while *Dalits* were in priority across the country. The coverage has gradually been expanded and it is now universal in 14 out of Nepal’s 77 districts reaching a total of 737, 579 children. The programme entitles all

mothers (or primary caregiver) to an amount of Nepalese Rupees 400 per month for up to two children under the age of five years. The purpose of the Child Grant is to address chronic malnutrition. Notwithstanding the progress in reducing stunting rates over the last few decades, 36 per cent of all children below five years are still stunted in Nepal (Nepal Nutrition Profile, 2019).

Although low transfer values, low coverage and a weak delivery system are cited as factors hindering the effectiveness

of Nepal's Child Grant (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2015), a recent study argues that it has had some impact on child nutrition (Renzaho et al., 2019). Studies on cash transfers and nutrition from other parts of the world, however, suggest that complementary activities are often required to have a consistent effect on anthropometric measures (Bastagli et al., 2016) with quality health services seen as a key (de Groot et al., 2017). Aside from adequate nutrition, it is now widely accepted that infants and young children also need a conducive social and emotional environment to develop other early childhood domains that are crucial for their long-term and holistic development. Evidence from several interventions suggest that creating synergies between nutritional and other development areas will result in optimal development of children. More importantly, such integrated initiatives also have the potential for a greater impact on nutritional outcomes (Maalouf-Manasseh et al., 2015).

Against this backdrop, Save the Children realised that the Child Grant could be used as a pathway to promote holistic development of children while still retaining a focus on nutrition. Hence, a parenting programme including all essential elements to boost physical, cognitive, social and emotional development of children was initiated. The aim of this paper is to use the findings from the pilot studies that assess the impact of the parenting programme to highlight the positive contributions that this can have in terms of children's overall development.

It is generally accepted that parents play a key role in children's development, but the magnitude of influence that their actions have on the well-being of the child is not given adequate attention. In a poor country like Nepal, the quest to reduce economic poverty results in government and donor spending on health, education, infrastructure, social protection programmes and so on – all which are undoubtedly important. However, enhancing competency of parents to practice

behaviours that will not only result in young children developing better but also making them feel secure and confident as they grow up, is not given priority. A strong parent-child relationship built in the early years will better equip parents to address problems that may manifest as the child grows up such as adverse peer influence or a desire to detach from or rebel against parents (see e.g., Piquero et al., 2008). A quality relationship means that parents will understand the child and that the child will feel secure to express feelings and share problems. Parents generally love their children, but it may not mean that they always act in the best interest of the child.

Early childhood is a paramount stage of life during which children not only need sufficient nutrition for their growth but also a parent (caregiver) tuned in to their need for stimulation, physical closeness, emotional connection, and social interaction. There is growing evidence suggesting that a great deal of children's intellectual and behavioural development can be traced back to the style parents used when bringing them up and navigating them through childhood (Ermisch, 2008). Parents who are passive and lack in telling their children stories, singing songs or playing will experience delays in cognitive development of the child (Yue et al., 2017). Contrastingly, children of caregivers who interact and engage a lot in playing and communicating demonstrate higher scores in the early years on cognitive, language and socio-emotional development (Landry, 2014). Researchers studying this phenomenon in China goes as far as claiming that the country will face a crisis due to cognitive delays of children as they will not be able to meet the demands of the 'high-skill-based economy'. A survey carried out in China concluded that nearly half of the children demonstrated substantial cognitive delays due to poor parenting practices (Yue et al., 2017).

A study initiated by Save the Children on parenting behaviours in Nepal found that parents lack awareness of their crucial role in

early stimulation and the need to spend quality time with the child. Instead, 'good parenting' is foremost seen as making sure that the child goes to school and receives education. Although parents have some idea about the negative influence of physical violence, they were quick to confess that hitting, spanking and yelling at children are common ways of maintaining discipline (van den Boom, 2016). A parent adopting these practises can be referred to as a 'tiger parent', i.e., a parent that controls the child with punitive disciplining, gives limited room for discussion and focuses on educational attainment with hardly any stress on social and emotional development. 'Tiger parents' love their children but believe that this is what the child needs to grow and prosper. This style of parenting is, however, bound not only to profoundly limit the child's development but can also affect the child's mental health later in life (Anwar, 2013). Parenting research is conclusive in pointing towards a parenting style based on warmth, empathy, closeness but yet with structures and boundaries as being the most optimal for a child's overall growth (Dewar, 2016).

Based on this understanding, an existing parenting programme was identified by Save the Children to be introduced for the Child Grant beneficiaries in Nepal. The International Child Development Programme (ICDP)¹ 'hit the nail on the head' in terms of focus and there was already a local organisation implementing this programme in Nepal.² ICDP is based on eight guidelines of 'good interaction' with children and focuses on enhancing foundational parenting skills that will stimulate social, emotional, cognitive and linguistic development of children. ICDP is applicable for parenting of all age groups of children although starting as early as possible is likely to result in better outcomes.

ICDP aims to make parents more responsive to their children's unique needs and

build better attachment through expressing love, practicing close communication and praise. The programme promotes enriching conversations in which the parent prompts the child to 'think beyond' the present and make connections. Parents are facilitated to 'set limits' to the child's behavior in a positive way and learn how to support children 'just enough' to reach a goal or accomplish a task. The sessions are based on active participation of parents. Role plays, analysis of short films and photos, real life examples, and home tasks are some of the methods used. All materials are locally developed and culturally adjusted. Home visits are carried out to give personal attention and provide support to the parents. The programme is targeted at mothers as the parent who spends most time with infants and young children. However, to ensure support to the mothers' newfound parenting practices, a few sessions on key aspects of parenting are organised for fathers and other adults in the extended family and neighbourhood.

The sessions with parents are implemented by ICDP facilitators. To have an impact on parents, rigorous training and handholding support of the facilitators is needed. A facilitator must attend an initial training programme and then practise with parents under the supervision of an ICDP trainer. It takes at least four months to become a certified facilitator as the trainer needs to ensure that all concepts and practical applications are clear to the facilitator. Trainers are coached and certified by internationally recognised ICDP trainers and will need to display a clear understanding of the ICDP methodology.

The Parenting Programme for the Child Grant is based on 14 sessions that are implemented on a weekly basis with a group of 8 to 12 mothers receiving the Child Grant. Eight of the sessions are based on the ICDP guidelines and principles. The additional four sessions focus on improving nutrition and family budgeting practices. At the end of each

1 <http://www.icdp.info/>

2 <https://ecec.org.np/>

session, the mothers are given a home task and a photo to take home to serve as a constant reminder to practise. In the beginning of 2020, a guide for facilitators was developed in English and Nepali. Although every facilitator can develop their own style and keep their own repertoire of activities, the guide ensures that the core contents are included.³ The programme has now been implemented with more than 2000 mothers (primary caregivers) in the districts of Dolakha, Jajarkot, Kalikot, Kavre and Mahottari.

2. Methods and Materials

In 2018 a quantitative pre- and post-assessment study (before and after the sessions) was conducted covering an intervention group of mothers (n=93) and a control group (n=92) spread across Dolakha, Kavre and Mahottari districts. The intervention group included all parents, i.e., the total population of Child Grant beneficiaries receiving the parenting programme during this year. The control group comprised a random sample of mothers from the same districts only receiving the Child Grant cash transfer, but not the parenting programme.

Validated scales were used to measure mothers' feelings and disciplining practises towards their children, as well as the mental health of the mothers. The findings from 2018 presented in this paper are based on the (1) Conflict Tactics Scales, Parent-Child Version (CTSPC) (Straus et al., 1998) and the (2) Shona symptom questionnaire on mental health (Patel et al., 1997).

In 2019 a new group of parents participated in the Child Grant parenting programme in the same three districts. A quantitative study was conducted based on data collection from the intervention group (n= 148) and a randomly selected control

group (n=142) based on the same distinction as in 2018, i.e., both groups were receiving the government cash transfer but only the intervention group received the parenting programme. In 2019, the CTSPC scale was again used to measure maltreatment of children and selected questions were used from Save the Children's IDELA tool to measure the extent to which caregivers engage with their children in basic activities that stimulate learning (Save the Children, 2019).

To strengthen the reliability of the quantitative findings and to capture nuances in potential changes in parenting behaviour, two qualitative methods were introduced in 2019. The first method is referred to as the 'Three Minutes Speech Sample' (TMSS)⁴ during which the mother is requested to talk about the child and her relationship with the child. This method contributes to understanding the quality of the relationship with the child. The second qualitative method used is based on direct observation of parent-child interaction and use of a scale called PICCOLO⁵ which comprises of 29 behaviours aggregated into four domains that are considered as being developmentally supportive, i.e., affection, responsiveness, encouragement, and teaching. These four domains form a core part of the ICDP parenting programme. The mothers who took part in this exercise were asked to carry out an activity with their child such as feeding, playing or giving a bath. The behaviour of the mother was scored based on the PICCOLO scale.

As the Child Grant is intended to improve nutrition for children, a nutrition assessment was introduced with the 2019 cohort of children whose mothers took part in

³ See https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/17074/pdf/save_the_children_nepal_parenting_program_guide.pdf

⁴ This is adapted from the original Five Minutes Speech Sample, see <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10826-016-0549-8>

⁵ Parent Interactions with Children Checklist of Observations Linked to Outcomes (PICCOLO™) <https://brookespublishing.com/product/piccolo/>

the programme focusing on feeding practices and nutritional status of children before and after the sessions. The study covered a total of 163 children in the intervention area and 181 in the control area (pre and post). A questionnaire based on IYCF (Infant and Young Children Feeding) practises was used to gather data from the mothers along with measuring the weight and height of the children. It is worth pointing out that 2018 and 2019 were considered as a pilot phase of the parenting programme as well as the methods used to gauge impact. From 2021 onwards, the effectiveness of the programme will focus on assessing outcomes for children.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Child maltreatment

In the 2018 survey, mothers who had participated in the programme reported increased positive feelings towards their child (18% at baseline, 26% at endline) and reduced

harsh disciplining methods (e.g., slapping the child decreased from 74% to 1%, shaking the child from 36% to 0%, shouting reduced from 88% to 16%) (Solheim Skar, 2019). The results of the maltreatment scale (CTSPC) are presented in Figure 1.

Similarly, the frequency of maltreatment of children also reduced considerably in the intervention group of 2019. For example, there was a significant increase in non-violent disciplining methods (e.g., explain why something is wrong, introduce alternative activities to prevent undesirable behaviour) and a decrease in psychological aggression (e.g., threaten to spank, shout, swear, label the child as dumb) (Figure 2). These emerging findings indicate that the parenting programme is having a positive influence on disciplining/maltreatment practices (Ilozumba, 2020). As suggested earlier, this in turn is known to strengthen social and emotional development of children.

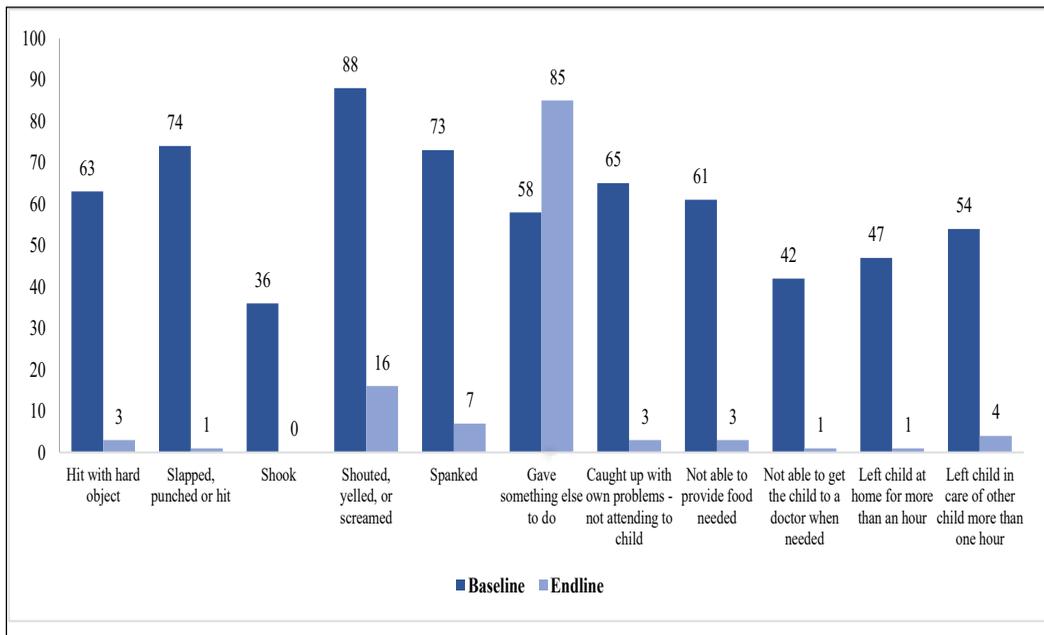


Figure 1: Baseline and endline data on maltreatment of children by mothers (n= 93) in the intervention group (reproduced and adapted from Solheim Skar, 2019).

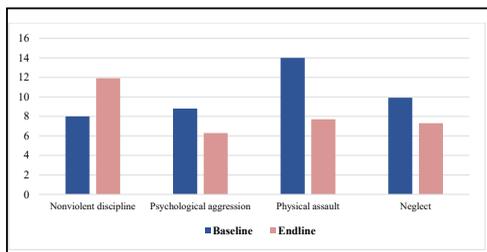


Figure 2: Subscale scores on the parent-child conflict subscales for the intervention group (n=148) (reproduced from Ilozumba, 2020).

3.2 Maternal mental health

The scores on maternal mental health had also improved among the intervention group in 2018, suggesting that the parenting group had not only become a venue for advancing parenting skills but also a platform for enhancing the well-being of the mothers. This, most likely, is a result of regular interactions with other women and the facilitator leading to a sense of extended social support and belongingness (Figure 3). The positive impact on maternal mental health have also been noted in other parenting programmes (see e.g., Singla et al., 2015). This is a crucial

finding considering that parental mental health has a direct bearing on child socio-emotional development (Neece, 2013).

For all parameters mentioned above, changes in the control groups were minor and did not indicate the same positive trends.

3.3 Engagement in learning activities

Engagement in learning activities with the child increased substantially in the intervention group of 2019, i.e., singing songs with the child, playing games with the child, or teaching the child something.

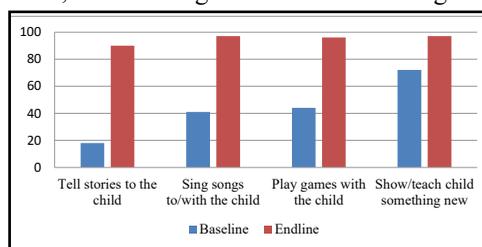


Figure 4: Baseline and endline data on frequency of engagement in learning activities by parents (n=148) in the intervention group (reproduced from Ilozumba, 2020).

baseline 18.2 per cent of parents shared that they were singing songs with their children

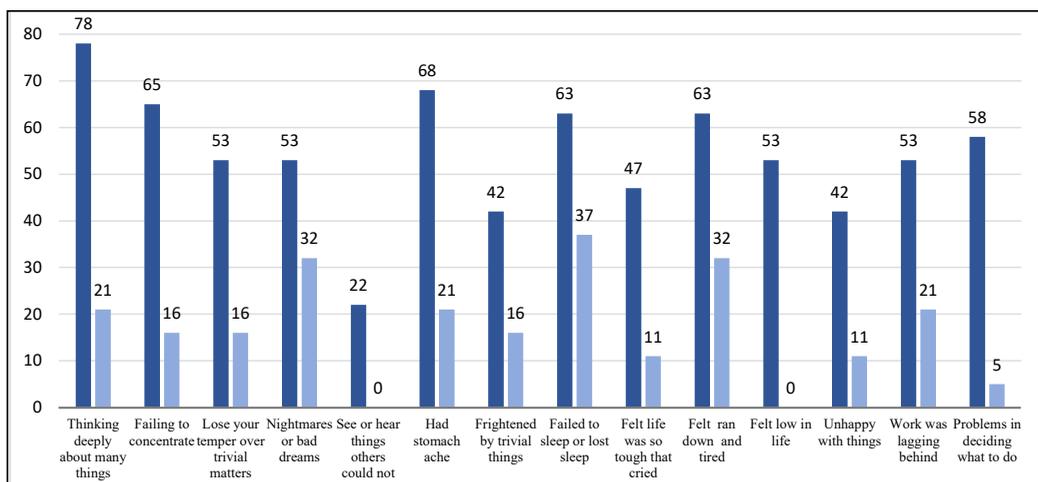


Figure 3: Baseline and endline data on mental health of mothers (n= 92) in the intervention group based on the Shona scale for mental health (reproduced from Solheim Skar, 2019).

whereas this had improved to 90 per cent at endline (Ilozumba, 2020) (Figure 4). This is an important change as engaging in playful activities with small children will stimulate their cognitive development.

3.4 Parental perceptions of the child

Altogether 14 mothers took part in the qualitative study in 2019. Figure 5 illustrates the changes from pre-to-post assessment on the TMSS and the criteria used for scoring. There were improvements across all parameters. Although the sample is small, this is a significant trend worth noting. Parents who are aware of the unique qualities of their children early offer scope for development of the child on all fronts. In the long run, this could mean that instead of merely operating as a ‘tiger parent’ where a lot of the focus of the interaction would be around school performance as the child grows up, the parent may form a better bond with the child and be more responsive, sensitive and encouraging in their parenting style.

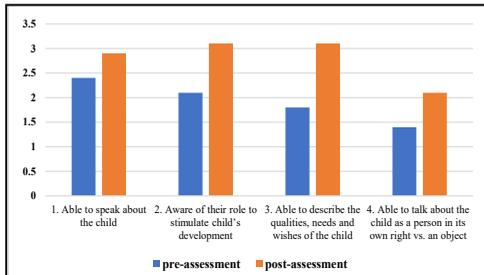


Figure 5: Average Three Minute Speech Sample scores of mothers (n = 14) (reproduced from de Witt, 2019).

3.5 Parental behaviour that supports child development

In addition to the TMSS, observations were carried out on mothers while they conducted a regular activity with their child using the PICCOLO scale to assess their interactions. Figure 6 shows that there were notable changes in the behaviour of mothers on all subscales, thus suggesting a positive influence of the programme.

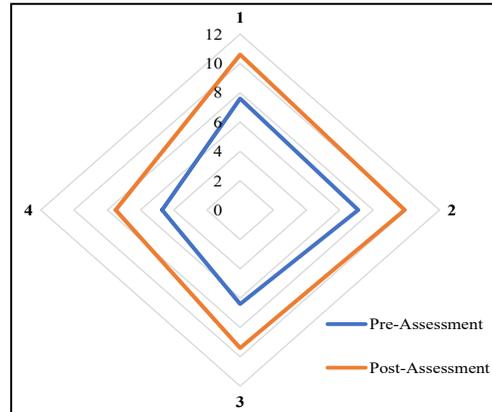


Figure 6: PICCOLO scores of mothers. 1- Affection, 2- Responsiveness, 3- Encouragement, 4- Teaching (n= 14) (reproduced from de Witt, 2019)

3.6 Nutritional outcomes

Nutritional outcomes of 163 children were studied in the intervention area in 2019 using a questionnaire based on IYCF practices along with height and weight monitoring. Key findings emerging from the study are as follows: increase from 32 per cent at baseline to 61 per cent at endline of children who received minimum dietary diversity; increase from 30 per cent at baseline to 56 per cent at endline of children who received a minimum acceptable diet; and reduction in wasting from 15 per cent to 7 per cent and reduction in underweight from 24 per cent to 20 per cent (Joshi, 2019).

4. Conclusion

Substantial evidence suggests that how parents behave with their children early in life will affect their social and emotional competencies, cognitive abilities, educational performance and mental health. The impact assessments carried out till date on the Parenting Programme for the Child Grant in Nepal clearly show that such an initiative can induce parents to adopt a style of parenting that will have far reaching positive effects on children and their development opportunities.

While it is important to increase the coverage as well as transfer value of the Child Grant to enable families to buy food and other basic needs, making the parenting programme an integral part of the Child Grant is likely to substantially augment development outcomes of children. This will, in turn, support numerous children growing up in Nepal to develop to their full potential.

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