

Stepping Stones

A Stepping Stones Approach: Promoting involvement of males in childcare and child development activities

Context

Stepping Stones, started in 2005, is an innovative program aimed at promoting Early Child Development, by using the locally available resources and public sector ICDS program. The program is currently being implemented in 58 villages in forest buffer zone of two districts in Central India. This area has a sex ratio of 946 females for every 1000 males, and a literacy rate of 87.22%.

The lower sex ratio of the population may reflect highly unequal gender relations some symptoms of which include the continued practice of female seclusion, very low female labor force participation rates, a large gender gaps in literacy rates, extremely restricted female property rights, strong gender preference, widespread neglect of female children and a drastic separation of married woman from her natal family. These remote rural areas have an average annual per-capita income below the state average. People are predominantly farmers or farm laborers or involved in cattle rearing and forest based labors. These areas are also known for farmer's suicides due to reduced income from farming, crop failures. Traditional practices are widely prevalent in these regions strongly influencing health seeking behavior and child care practices. Availability and accessibility of health and social services for rural people is a great challenge.

Problem

Culturally, child bearing and rearing is the domain of women. Thus, women are overburdened due to child care responsibilities in addition to routine household chores and farm / forest laborer for income generation. Often, child is left to the care of older sibling or neighbors, when mother is too busy in her duties or out of home for work.

In most of the families, males are the heads of households, key earning members of family. They are reluctant to take child care as their responsibility and hesitate to spend time with their children. Care of children in daily routine like bathing children, feeding, changing diapers, dressing them are mainly done by women. Hardly a few men spare time for playing with their older kids. But younger children are relatively less to be interacted by fathers and male members of the family. Fathers role in child development is evident and needs to be promoted in this programme.

Identifying Potential Causes of Gender Inequality

The key potential cause of this inequality is lack of education and awareness in this population regarding physiology of child development and importance of contribution of fathers in ECD. Another potential cause is poverty which forces the male members of family to focus more on earning activities. Also cultural and social aspects which direct males to handover early child care responsibilities to mothers is equally important. These include: cultural beliefs about appropriate roles of men and women; marriage and kinship systems; household-based inequalities in resources available to men and women; gender inequality in the legal and educational systems and in labor markets; persistent poverty; and class and gender bias in development strategies.

Innovation

For raising awareness through Positive Parenting programme of Stepping Stones, we have developed a set of modules and self-reflective assessment tools which particularly emphasize on participation of males in child care and development activities. Subsequently we involved fathers and grandfathers, adapted family focused intervention, updated curriculum. Male field workers started delivering the sessions and provided space for fathers to participate and discuss. Prepared Picture books showing fathers engaged in child care. The parenting sessions which are delivered through home visits are scheduled so that male members of the family are captured at home. They are engaged in parenting sessions and development assessments. They are invited for community group sessions and assigned the activities like participation in role plays etc. Many photos and videos of positive parenting practices in the community that involve males are captured and shared in community group meetings. Their participation is appreciated and disseminated through training sessions, monthly meetings and photo-voice workshops. Thus, many male members of families like fathers, grandfathers and uncles have come forward to volunteer for ECD activities at village level.

Father helping child to walk



Father helping to change child's clothes



Grandfather feeding granddaughter



Early Indicators

About 60% of home visits for parenting interventions by our field staff are well received by male members of the family and they have started spending time with children and participate in childcare activities. The effects are evident and are captured through photo/video documentation and notes in work-diaries of field staff. Gender disaggregated data on changes will be entered in RMAF.



Grandfather swinging with granddaughter



Father playing games with child