GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Supporting gender-transformative parenting through pre-primary education systems

Key findings

- **Parents are the primary agents of gender socialization.** As young children are in the process of forming their own gender identity, their primary caregivers can reinforce their behaviours and act as role models on how to behave and interact with others.

- **Pre-primary schools can be avenues for parenting education, with the potential to support gender-transformative parenting and increasing fathers' engagement in education.** Teachers play a crucial role for promoting the equal and active participation of both fathers and mothers in their children's learning and development processes.

- **Gender-responsive parenting should be included in teachers' pre-service and in-service training.** Pre-primary education teachers require specific competencies and knowledge of effective strategies to support parents and promote gender-transformative parenting practices.

- **Pre-primary education systems have key implications for gender equality in employment and income.** Access to a variety of early childhood education and care service modalities, and in different locations, can contribute to increasing caregivers' take-up of employment opportunities, particularly for mothers.

Context

A child's family and community play a crucial role in their learning and development. Parents are the primary agents of gender socialization, especially at an early age, and may consciously or unconsciously transfer gendered norms of behaviours, aspirations and expectations to their children. Pre-primary education services can support parents[1] in becoming active participants in their children's development and engage in gender-transformative parenting practices. The design of the pre-primary service provision can also support or hinder gender equality through parents' employment outcomes.

What do we know?

- **Parents play a key role in gender socialization.** This is particularly true in the early childhood period when gender identity is being formed.[1] Gender socialization, or the processes through which a person learns to behave according to gender norms, is not inherently negative but can perpetuate discriminatory stereotypes. A meta-analysis of over 170 studies revealed significant sex differences in the way parents encourage play activities and toy choices for their children following gender stereotypes for boys and girls.[2]

- **Fathers are often less likely to be engaged in family and community activities and early childhood education activities.** Studies are increasingly finding that fathers' involvement during early childhood contributes positively to children's early learning outcomes.[3] However, compared to mothers, fathers are less likely to be involved in early learning activities, as caring for young children continues to be regarded primarily as a 'woman's role'.[4]

- **Early childhood education and care can have significant implications for mothers' employment and income.** Studies in Brazil, Ecuador, Kenya and Nicaragua found that access to early childhood education and care has a positive impact on maternal employment.[5] In a review of 22 studies, all but one found increases in mothers' labour market outcomes from increasing access to childcare, care hours or reduced cost of care.[6] This impact, however, varies depending on the design of the service options available. A recent review by the ILO found that full-time pre-primary provision is only available for a minority of children globally, mostly in high- or upper-middle income countries.[7]

What should we do?

- **Incorporate gender-transformative parenting in teachers' pre-service and in-service training.** Pre-primary teachers should develop the necessary competencies to be able to support parents in their role and model positive gender norms with their children.

- **Engage parents equally in pre-primary education programming and outreach.** Pre-primary education can help create the conditions and environment for positive gender socialization of children through parents' practices, beliefs and knowledge. Strategies to enable fathers' and mothers' equal involvement in pre-primary education are crucial to build strong and gender-responsive family–preschool relationships. Some examples include the use of communication strategies to contact both parents for children's preschool needs as well as implementing community–critical reflection activities to challenge inequitable gender norms and stereotypes.

- **Design pre-primary education programmes that support gender equality.** It is important to ensure that service provision hours suit labour-market needs in each specific context and allow primary caregivers to take up employment opportunities, particularly women. Service modalities should be adjusted to better fit the needs of working mothers by including the provision of full-time and extended care. Location of childcare centres and pre-primary programmes can also play a role in increasing mothers' employment chances.

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1. The term 'parents' is used here to extend to any guardian or caregiver providing consistent care to children, including adoptive or foster parents, siblings, grandparents, other relatives, or non-related caregivers.

What are some country good practices?

Pre-primary education systems have the potential to contribute towards gender-transformative parenting by promoting parental engagement in children's learning and by supporting equal employment opportunities among mothers and fathers. Some examples of gender-transformative initiatives implemented by countries are presented in Box 1.

Box 1: Examples of gender-transformative parenting initiatives

Chile

Chile Crece Contigo or 'Chile Grows with You' is an integrated child protection strategy implemented by the government, which included a **significant expansion of formal early childhood education** services. Service modalities were adjusted to provide **full-time and extended care** according to the needs of working mothers.[8]
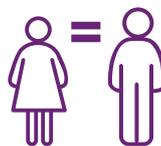
Sweden

Preschool teachers reported implementing **strategies to engage fathers and mothers equally in pre-primary education**. These included calling both parents when a child is sick, raising issues with either parent who is present at school instead of only reaching out to or waiting for the mother.[10]

Malaysia

The Malaysian Government proposed **tax incentives for employers that established workplace-based childcare facilities** as a measure to encourage women's participation in the labour market. These initiatives were in many cases delivered through public–private partnerships with private providers running the centres.[9]
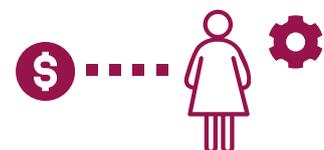
Mozambique

The Accelerated School Readiness programme included running parent-to-parent education sessions. Recommendations to **increase fathers' engagement** in these activities include providing incentives to parents who attend and incorporating discussions on household decision-making processes regarding childcare to promote behaviour change towards **more equal roles among fathers and mothers.**[11]

Source: World map vector from stock.adobe.com

Note: The designations employed in this publication and the presentation of the material do not imply on the part of UNICEF the expression of any opinion whatsoever concerning the legal status of any country or territory, or of its authorities or the delimitations of its frontiers.

What are the remaining evidence gaps?

- **Evidence on the effectiveness of different pre-primary provision models to support parental and maternal employment in low- and middle-income countries.** Research should be oriented to comparing the impact of various early childhood education and care service modalities on parents' participation in the labour market. This includes community-based versus school-based and workplace-based services.

- **Better understanding of the role of preschools in supporting positive gender socialization by parents and communities.** Evidence is needed on effective strategies used by preschool teachers to raise awareness of gender stereotypes and their impact on children's development.

- **Evidence on effective practices to increase fathers' engagement in their children's learning and development.** This includes testing the use of different awareness-raising initiatives on the role of fathers in education, and strategies to make preschools more welcoming to men. A variety of tools have been developed for practitioners to support male caregivers in their role as primary agents of gender socialization, but more evidence is needed on how these work across different cultural contexts.

- **Evidence on the inclusion of strategies to promote gender-transformative parenting in pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes** to identify to what extent teachers are exposed to information that enables them to develop competencies for assisting parents and engaging them in children's learning and development processes. This should include information on any support given to educators and other staff to increase fathers' involvement in preschool and classroom activities.

Further reading

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