

Holistic and appealing approaches that engage children, their families, and their communities are needed to ensure children in disadvantaged circumstances can make the most of opportunities to access education.

Move & Improve

Preparing Children to Succeed in School Through **Sport and Play**

|| Swiss Academy
for Development

Arman's Story: Arman has been going to school for a year and his teacher is pleased with him. He listens carefully and does his work independently. “He always does his homework by himself, too,” say his parents. It was not a given that the 7-year-old would find school easy. His mother can neither read nor write and his father only went to primary school for a couple of years, which makes it difficult for them to support their five children. But one thing was always clear to them—they want their children to have a good education and a better life than theirs.

Access to quality education is not always easy for children from the lowest socioeconomic background in India. The lack of infrastructure and trained teachers, combined with precarious living conditions and poverty, often impede children living in the most disadvantaged areas from going to school regularly or at all. For those who do access school, the teaching methods and conditions do not always provide a favorable learning environment and can be quite challenging for children without sufficient support at home. To make it through the Indian school system, children need to be resilient and feel at ease in learning—qualities that children from poorer backgrounds often lack. As a result, one in four children does not complete primary school.¹ This is especially true for children who, like Arman, live in and around Mirzapur, in the southeast of Uttar Pradesh, the state with the lowest school attendance rates in India.²



Village close
to Mirzapur,
Uttar Pradesh,
India.

photos courtesy of author



Arman
and his
parents

Early Childhood Development for a Good Start in School

One way to address this issue is by preparing children for school through early childhood education, which can have a lasting positive effect on a child's later success in school and in life—and can even mitigate the significant disadvantages, such as poverty, discrimination, or illness, some children experience. The environment children grow up in, the encouragement they get, and the activities they do during their first six years can determine later health and educational outcomes as well as social and economic participation in adult life. Neglect, stress, and malnutrition lead to developmental delays, which can be difficult to compensate for later in life and can have irreversible

consequences.³ Quality early childhood development lays the foundations necessary for children to reach their full potential and can contribute to breaking the vicious circle of poverty. Movement and stimulation are particularly important aspects of such early childhood programs, as they promote brain development in young children.

The Indian government has recognized the potential of early childhood education. Since 2005, early childhood education centers have been built across the country, which also offer government services such as health checks, vaccinations, and nutritional advice.⁴ Even though the number of children attending these centers has tripled between 1999 and 2010, with 70% of 3-year-olds and more than 85% of 4-year-olds attending

a center in 2018, disadvantaged children are still significantly under-represented. In the rural areas, such centers and services are still scarce.⁵ Despite the government's efforts, the children who would potentially benefit the most from quality early childhood education remain excluded. However, as Arman's story demonstrates, there are ways to support the most disadvantaged children in their development. With only a few resources, their learning gaps can be addressed and they can get an improved chance at succeeding in school.

Move & Improve: Early Childhood Education Centers and Parental Awareness in Mirzapur

Arman's success in school defies the above-mentioned rather grim statistics. His parents are

Inside one of CREDA's and SA4D's early childhood development centers.





CREDA conducting a training for early childhood development teachers to learn more about holistic and playful teaching approaches.

factors. As children grow up, they are shaped by their parents, their families, their friends, and many other people in their community. Thus, it is important to consider the context in which children live and learn.

To ensure that children's education becomes a crucial element in a community, SA4D and CREDA encourage

convinced that he is doing so well in school because he was able to attend one of the 50 early childhood development centers that were set up by the Swiss Academy for Development (SA4D) and the local implementing partner, Centre for Rural Education and Development Action (CREDA). CREDA and SA4D are working together in the "Move & Improve" project to ensure that children's right to education is respected and to fill a gap in preparing children for regular primary school in areas with little to no access to government-run early childhood development centers.

To achieve long-term social and structural change, CREDA and SA4D are taking a holistic approach. This approach puts the child's needs at the forefront and considers the cognitive, physical, emotional, and social dimensions of their development. In addition, CREDA and SA4D not only help disadvantaged children access education, they also engage with parents and the community to raise their awareness about how to support children in their schooling. For children to succeed in school, every aspect of their environment must be considered, with schools being just one of many influencing



Story time.

One of the teachers doing the “touch and feel” activity with the children, which stimulates curiosity and senses in a playful way.



parents, caregivers, and community members to participate in awareness-raising sessions addressing the importance of education and childcare, especially for girls. Furthermore, they train early childhood development teachers on how to incorporate a holistic and playful approach in their daily classroom activities. Positively influencing the way in which education is perceived in the community has an additional benefit: working closely with the community and in line with people’s needs allows for change to last. By offering a safe and favorable learning environment, both in and outside of the classroom, this project seeks to help children reach their full potential—both the children of today and the ones yet to come.

Holistic Development Through Sport and Play

The ECD centers run by SA4D and CREDA use sport and play as tools for holistic development, because the role of play is central in child development. The aim is to promote children’s development, supporting their cognitive, physical, emotional, and social skills. Support in those four dimensions are needed for children to fully develop and succeed at school in the long term:

Cognitive: Play stimulates a child’s natural curiosity and desire to learn and works for different types of learners. By providing opportunities to try new things, solve problems, invent, and create and test

ideas, children are encouraged to explore and understand the world around them. In a playful environment, they learn to concentrate, observe, reflect, and anticipate. Furthermore, these activities foster logical and strategic thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving. Finally, play has a positive effect on children’s language development; it improves listening skills, as well as their vocabulary and verbal expression.

Physical: Through movement and dexterity games, children develop physical abilities and motor skills. They improve their body awareness, balance, and rhythm, as well as their coordination, orientation, and reaction

skills. In addition, allowing children to move regularly supports them in becoming more flexible, stronger, and more resilient.

Emotional: In a protected environment, children become aware of their emotions and learn to manage them, too. Winning and losing enhances their ability to cope with negative feelings, such as fear, frustration, or aggression. Through painting, crafts, and role plays, they learn to recognize and communicate their feelings. At the same time, their self-confidence is developed.

Social: By playing with others, children can make friends with their peers and develop trusting relationships with adults. They learn to resolve conflicts, negotiate, and cooperate with others,

as well as to obey rules and act as part of a team. Care workers can explain stereotypes and prejudices and equip children with the basis for a critical understanding of these concepts.

By focusing on these four dimensions of child development, the gap between home and school is reduced and children are mentally, emotionally, socially, and physically prepared for entering the formal, government-run school system. In combination with raising parents' awareness about the importance of education (especially for girls), the activities provide all the necessary care and support for children to grow, learn, and develop to their full potential.

In addition, all sport and play materials can be made by the facilitators or the parents themselves.

For example, balls, dolls, and puppets can be created with locally available materials, such as clay, wooden sticks, or old cloth. No special equipment is needed to provide children with fun learning opportunities that prepare them for school. This makes the approach especially suited for communities with scarce resources.

A Lasting Difference

For Arman, attending the early childhood development center was a great success. He is the youngest in the family and the only one to have attended preschool. Before “Move & Improve,” there were no free early years classes in the village. He first attended the classes when he was 4 years old. Once he got used to the activities, his parents noticed that he liked doing them when he was at home,

The early childhood development centers have toys made from locally available materials.





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too. For example, he learned how important handwashing and tooth-cleaning are. His parents note, “Suddenly we didn’t need to remind him anymore – he did everything by himself.” Although Arman likes school, he misses preschool. He doesn’t hesitate

long to respond when asked why: “The games!”

Example Game:

Learning Through Play:

Crossing The River

This game teaches children subtraction, addition, and multiplication while keeping them moving. It works as follows: The teacher gives math exercises to the student. The student must step on the cardboard pieces placed on the floor that show the result. As they step on the pieces with the correct answers, they can pass to the other side of the “river” without falling into the water. This game can also be adapted in several ways: changing the level of difficulty (from simply recognizing a number for small children up to addition or multiplying for older ones), introducing new rules (jumping on one foot only), and changing the content (to learn how to spell words). The game requires only a few, easily accessible materials. By playing, children not only learn

numbers or spelling, but are also physically active and thus develop their motor skills and balance.

Notes:

¹ USAID. *Dropout trend analysis: India, 2011*. pages 14-18.

² According to UNICEF India, the RTE contributed to reducing by more than half the number of out of school children. However, the majority of the remaining 6 million children out of school across India come from the most marginalized communities and 75% of them live in only 6 (including Uttar Pradesh) of the 28 Indian states (<https://www.unicef.org/india/key-data>).

³ Milteer, R. M., Ginsburg, K. R., Council on Communications and Media, & Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. (2012). The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bond: Focus on children in poverty. *Pediatrics*, 129, e204–e213

⁴ Government of India, Ministry of Women and Child Development, National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy, 2013.

⁵ Annual Status of Education Report. ASER 2020 <http://img.asercentre.org/docs/ASER%202021/ASER%202020%20wave%201%20%20v2/state%20estimates/uttarpradesh.pdf>