

NARRATIVES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH

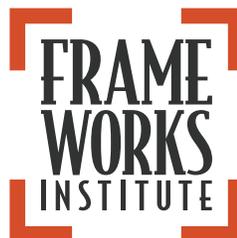
A Field Frame Analysis

A research report by the FrameWorks Institute and BRAC
Institute of Educational Development (BRAC IED)

April 2019

Authors

Sarwat Sarah Sarwar, BBA, BRAC IED
Ashfi Mehnaz, MSc, BRAC IED
Wasima Parvin, MSc, BRAC IED
Abdullah Al Mas-ud, MEd, BRAC IED
Ferdousi Khanom, MSS, BRAC IED
Syeda Sazia Zaman, MSS, BRAC IED
Jenn Nichols, PhD, FrameWorks Institute
Mitul Dutta, MHSc, BRAC IED
Eric Lindland, PhD, FrameWorks Institute



Contents

Introduction	02	Conclusion	28
Methods	04	About The FrameWorks Institute	31
Research Findings	06	About BRAC Institute of Educational Development (BRAC IED)	31
A Lack of Consensus on the Age Parameters of Early Childhood	06	Appendix: Organisations Sampled	32
Dominant Narratives	07	Endnotes	34
Who is Responsible for Early Childhood Development?	08		
1. <i>The It All Begins with Family Narrative</i>	08		
2. <i>The Embedded Gender Equality Narrative</i>	12		
How Does Early Development Happen?	15		
1. <i>The Power of Play Narrative</i>	15		
2. <i>The Social Development Narrative</i>	18		
3. <i>The Zero to Three Narrative</i>	21		
What Can Be Done to Improve Early Childhood Development Outcomes?	23		
1. <i>The Beyond Health, Hygiene and Nutrition Narrative</i>	23		
2. <i>The Positive Early Development Leads to School Preparedness Narrative</i>	24		
3. <i>The Healthy Mother for a Healthy Child Narrative</i>	26		

Introduction

This report presents results from a field frame analysis of leading organisations in the early childhood development (ECD) sector in Bangladesh. Researchers use field frame analyses to examine the communications patterns and narratives that organisations in a given sector use to both frame issues relevant to their field and to communicate with their audiences.

This report identifies the most prevalent frames and narratives that are embedded in ECD organisations' communications materials in Bangladesh, as well as those themes that are absent or less prevalent. In both cases, it characterises how the ECD sector has collectively been telling its story in recent years in Bangladesh. The communications materials collected focused on a range of childhood development topics, including the age parameters of early childhood, parenting and family life, early learning, developmental domains, play and stimulation, gender and equality, legal rights, protection, health, hygiene and nutrition, and maternal wellbeing.

This research was undertaken because of a recognition that leading non-governmental and governmental organisations in a sector often act as “think tanks” for their broader field. They play a key role in driving the conversation around a topic and they shape the direction of a country's programmes and policies: which policies should be adopted and what areas require greater focus, research or stronger implementation efforts. In short, how a sector communicates about an issue has direct implications for whether and how that issue will be more widely addressed. Considered together as a sector, the organisations – both governmental and non-governmental – that lead the effort to shape the lives of young children in Bangladesh (in terms of health, early learning, protection of rights, recreation and overall development) undoubtedly play this role.

In light of this, this report aims to help the ECD sector understand how its communications practices currently shape people's understanding of early childhood development and the factors that influence it. The report also provides suggestions for how the field might refine or shift its storytelling strategies to more effectively advance its agenda and build support for child- and family-friendly policies and programmes.

This report also considers important implications that emerge from the narratives it identifies, including in relation to a parallel body of in-depth cultural research that explores how members of three key populations in Bangladesh – members of the public, those who work in the ECD sector,

and leaders of ready-made-garment factories – understand and think about early childhood development.¹ In that research, 54 in-depth interviews were conducted and analysed across the three study groups in order to identify dominant, shared “cultural models” (assumptions and understandings) that structure the ways in which people think about children’s early development and the factors that shape it. In light of those findings, this report considers how members of these three groups are likely to interpret the field’s strongest and most prevalent narratives based on the dominant cultural models they already hold.

It is important to note that a field frame analysis for the early childhood development sector has never previously been conducted in Bangladesh. As such, this report provides new insights into how leading organisations are currently framing early child development topics to the public, policymakers and others in the country. It also reveals opportunities to reframe the story around children’s early development in Bangladesh to more effectively tell a story that communicates the science of ECD and that builds awareness, understanding and a sense of commitment to the importance of children’s early development.

The research for this report was conducted by the BRAC Institute of Educational Development (BRAC IED) as part of a larger multi-method collaboration with the FrameWorks Institute. The overarching goal of the project is to identify and test a set of reframing strategies that ECD communicators in Bangladesh can use to deepen and strengthen people’s understanding of the science of early child development across Bangladeshi society. In the process, the project hopes to strengthen efforts that build support for the kinds of programmes and policies that best serve Bangladesh’s children.

Methods

Two specific questions guide this research:

1. What narratives are leading ECD organisations telling about children’s development and how are they structured?
2. What are the implications of these narratives for public understanding?

To answer these questions, researchers collected and analysed communications materials from 23 organisations that are active in the field of early childhood development in Bangladesh. Of these 23, nine are international organisations, one is a United Nations organisation and the remaining 13 are national organisations. The organisations sampled for this research are active in different areas of early childhood development, each with different focal areas of interest. For a more detailed description of the research sample, see [Appendix](#).

We addressed the two research questions using a multi-staged process.

1

The first stage of the process involved (with help from an advisory group) identifying and approaching leading organisations in the field of ECD and requesting communications materials from each. Out of the 34 organisations identified, 20 provided their materials directly, while reports produced by three organisations were collected from their websites. The communications materials collected spanned six main categories – reports, pamphlets, posters, flip charts, pocket books and web pages – resulting in a final sample of 86 documents.

2

In the second stage, a codebook was developed to gather data from the sample of materials. Each document was coded to track all the framing strategies (including explanations, narrative, visuals, examples, outcomes, numbers, solutions, tone, metaphors and values) present in any given organisation’s materials. Each narrative component comprised a distinct category that contained a number of possible codes.

3

The next stage of analysis involved finding patterns in the data to identify a set of prominent narratives that leading ECD organisations tell through their materials in order to frame and advocate their issues.

4

Finally, the findings and implications derived from the field frame analysis were compared with results from the cultural models research about how members of the public, the ECD sector and ready-made-garment factory leaders understand and think about early development.

This comparison provided the basis for a set of interpretations, described below, about how the members of these three groups are likely interpreting the ECD field's communications and, in turn, how those communications are shaping patterns of understanding and behaviour among those groups.

In collecting the communications materials, the team encountered a few challenges:



Most of the organisations are not currently producing many communications materials for the general public, which limited the availability of recent samples.



As a result, most of the materials collected were between three and six years old, with a few of them being older. However, because of their significance and relevance to early childhood development communications, these materials continue to be used by the organisations.



Organisations that address children's issues operate in distinct areas of practice. Certain organisations work on health, some on nutrition, very few on protections, others on education and so on. This made the analysis of communications materials challenging in terms of comparing the similarities and differences among the stories being told by different organisations.



Deciding whether a pattern in the data qualified for inclusion was largely driven by its prevalence across the materials analysed from the final sample. Narratives that were identified in more than half of the 23 organisations were automatically included. Other narratives that featured very prominently among a smaller subset of organisations were also included as a result of their strength and consistency.

Research Findings

Before outlining the major narratives running through the communications materials of the organisations sampled, it is worth noting an important area where there was not a consistent storyline.

A LACK OF CONSENSUS ON THE AGE PARAMETERS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

The majority of organisations agreed that a child's early years are formative ones that contribute to their holistic development, as in these quotes from the sampled communications materials:²

Early childhood development is essential for a child's holistic development.

*In recent years, evidence from neuroscience has shown us how much of our brain architecture is formed during the first few years of life.**

There was a lack of consensus across organisations, however, as to what age parameters constituted the period of early childhood. Five organisations defined 0–6 years as the early childhood period, another five focused on 0–5 years as the standard and two organisations extended their definition of early childhood to 0–8 years.

*It is proven that appropriate care or stimulation in the early years, especially from birth to five years, have a profound influence on shaping a child's brain to attain optimum functional capability and stability.**

The Early Childhood Development programme in [our organisation] is to facilitate early childhood care and education necessary for optimal development from birth to age six.

*During a child's early years, i.e., the period from the mother's womb to the age of eight years, it is essential to provide him/her with a safe environment, positive stimulation and care, alongside the necessary health-related services and nutrition.**

Implications

The lack of consensus on the age parameters of early childhood leaves room for confusion or misinterpretation by both members of the public and others, especially on how best to provide early stimulation and play activities in ways that are age-appropriate. This confusion is made more likely in light of the findings from the parallel cultural models research, which found that members of all three study populations shared little consensus about the ages of either “childhood” or “early childhood.” Communications about “early childhood” are therefore already being interpreted in different ways by different audiences and the lack of consistency within communications materials only strengthens this trend. This makes it more likely that ECD communicators and advocates will find it difficult to build the required focus on the earliest years of children’s lives as a time of key developmental processes, including in the emergence of key cognitive and emotional skills. As such, implementing agencies and resource providers should strive to reach a consensus on the age parameters of early childhood and generate materials that reflect a mutual understanding. This more cohesive stance will help focus people’s attention on the importance of the early years and align their understanding of how children’s early development, learning and health can best be supported.

DOMINANT NARRATIVES

The field frame analysis revealed several dominant narratives in the materials produced by the organisations in this study. In addition to this, the research took into account findings from a parallel study of cultural models that examined how three key populations in Bangladesh – members of the public, those who work in the ECD sector, and leaders of ready-made-garment factories – understand and think about children’s early development.³ In the following section, the dominant narratives are laid out and their implications for how the three study populations understand early childhood development issues are discussed. The narratives can be loosely grouped into three categories of story, according to the implicit question they seek to answer.

1. Narratives about **attribution of responsibility**: who’s responsible for early childhood development?
2. Narratives that **define or explain the process of development**: how does early childhood development happen?
3. Narratives that **focus on solutions**: what can we do to improve early childhood development?

Who is Responsible for Early Childhood Development?

Across the communications materials sampled, two narratives dominated how organisations described who has the role and responsibility of caring for young children and working to ensure their positive health, learning and development.

1. The *It All Begins with Family Narrative*

Family was consistently identified as being the foremost contributor to a child's development and wellbeing, with 14 of the 23 organisations sampled highlighting the importance of family during the early years of childhood. This family-focused narrative projects positive family dynamics and family harmony as especially important for a child's healthy development. The importance of family participation was often explicitly stated but was also implied through visuals and pictures of family life.

Several sub-themes were embedded in this larger narrative focus on family:

Parents and the Extended Family

A slight majority (8 of 14) of those organisations who had identified the importance of family during the early years of childhood emphasised the parental role, while the remainder also acknowledged the roles of other family members (grandparents, siblings, etc.). Thus, an emphasis was seen to be placed on the role of parents in fostering child development through engagement, stimulation and harmony. Materials from these organisations centred on the importance of factors such as improving family members' awareness of early childhood development, evidence-based parenting practices and attitudes towards childcare.

Giving parents the tools they need during a critical window in their children's development can create real change in the lives of those who need it most.

[Our] programme also improves the capacity of parents on child rearing through "Parenting" sessions which help the parents to build their children's confidence, skill and abilities from early life.

To ensure early childhood development, early assessment of risks, early intervention, and to create a strong foundation of inclusive education, the parenting programme is introduced specially for the parents and family members of children aged conception to age three.

*All members of the family are responsible for a child's overall development and growth.**

*A child's environment is key to his/her proper development. Development in the mother's womb and, after birth, being surrounded by their father and mother, brothers and sisters and relatives in a supportive family environment; all these contribute to the child's holistic development.**

Visual materials produced by the organisations have also illustrated the involvement of families in child-rearing practices.

Figure 1: It All Begins with Family



The Role of Fathers in Child Development

Six organisations highlighted the integral role fathers play in a child's development, mostly through visual representations. Notably, these six organisations represented less than half of the organisations with a family focus, and just over a quarter of the total sample. Fathers were shown in the materials communicating positively with their children, playing with them, taking part in everyday activities with them, and interacting and exploring the outside world with them. Among these six organisations, one specifically encouraged fathers to attend the parenting sessions they organised.

*A child enjoys spending time with both the father and the mother.**

Figure 2: It All Begins with Family



Family Interaction and Stimulation

Eleven organisations highlighted the importance of parents and family members engaging in interaction, stimulation and play with their children. Caregivers were encouraged to actively take part in a child’s life and to expose them to stimulating experiences and environments within and beyond the household. It should be noted that the materials contained little information about how and why this stimulation is important and did not connect stimulation to the key domains of brain and emotional development.

Figure 3: It All Begins with Family



- 1. I clap with my grandmother.
- 2. I do exercise with my grandfather.
- 3. I play peekaboo.
- 4. Look how many activities I can do.

The Impact of Family Violence on a Child's Development

Across the sample, only a small subset of four organisations communicated about violence against children. Two of these organisations mentioned child protection and the importance of fostering community and family environments that are free from violence. The other two organisations spoke directly about the harmful impacts of family disharmony and domestic violence on a child's growth and development, including increased aggressiveness with peers, social withdrawal and a reluctance to engage in conversation.

Importantly, despite the broader narrative focus on the foundational importance of family, orphaned children and children who grow up without parents were notably absent from almost all of the communications materials across all 23 organisations. Likewise, there was very limited attention paid to a broad range of other risk factors that children face, including child neglect, maternal depression, substance abuse and mental health issues among caregivers, and family dissolution.

Implications

The *It All Begins with Family* narrative leaves out a critical piece of the story: the role of public policies and community participation in raising healthy children. This narrative highlights the central role that parents and the family play in child development and calls on them to increase their action and participation in the developmental process. It does not, however, effectively explain the importance of public and community supports in shaping children's developmental outcomes and their capacity to become effective participating members of society.

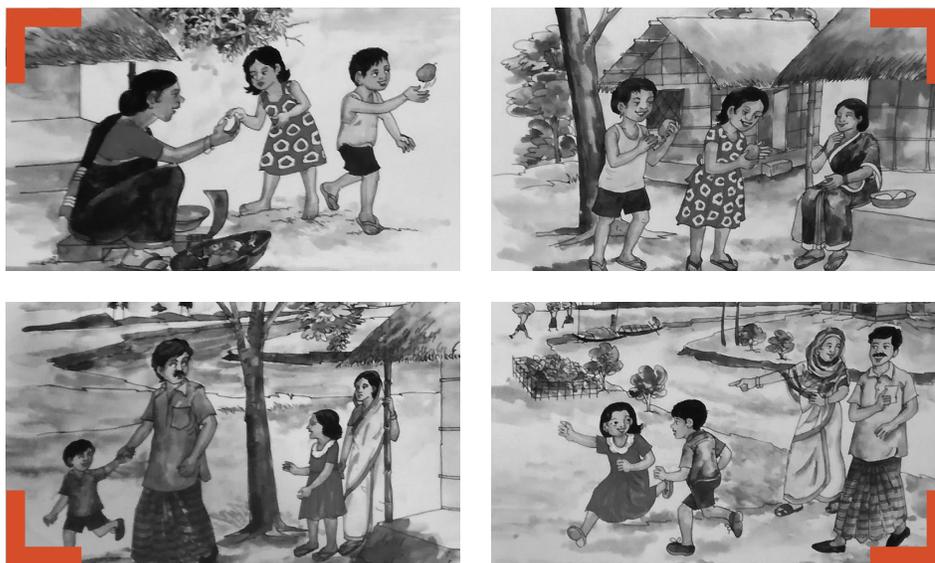
Notably, this focus on the family by the ECD field overlaps with, and likely reinforces, a broader pattern in public thinking, as the findings from the in-depth cultural models research showed that people consistently attribute parents (especially mothers) and family with the greatest role and responsibility for children and their development. The roles neighbourhoods, communities and public institutions play were ranked significantly lower in importance. By paying more attention in their own communications to how community and other public institutions can influence children's developmental outcomes, the field can cultivate support for programmes and policies that strengthen the social contexts in which families raise children. Such a narrative shift can also tap into and strengthen one of the productive models revealed in the cultural models findings – a belief shared across all three research populations – that children's wellbeing is a collective, societal responsibility.

Organisations can also do more to identify the range of risk factors that can confront children from within and around their own families – risk factors that family members, friends and community members need to better understand and be able to identify in order to both provide help themselves and to encourage family members to seek support from outside of the home.

2. The Embedded Gender Equality Narrative

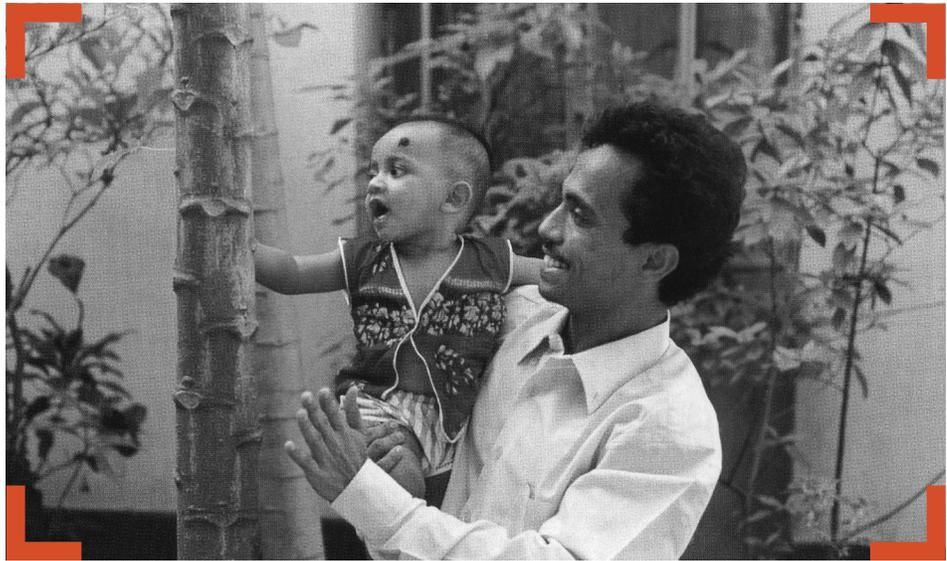
The analysis found that the majority of organisational materials were careful to refrain from gender distinctions between boys and girls in discussing child developmental processes. Instead, the non-gendered terms “children” or *shishu* were used. By embedding the concept of gender equality into their materials, organisations implicitly reinforced the idea that every child should have the same access, right and path to healthy early childhood development. While a large majority of the organisations included in the study embedded the concept of gender equality (in terms of equal access to early childhood care, education, familial love, etc.), in their written materials, 10 also used visuals to further support the principle of gender neutrality. These visuals depicted boys and girls in equal ratios, used imagery such as boys and girls playing together, and avoided obvious markers of difference in the development of boys and girls.

Figure 4: Embedded Gender Equality



With regards to parenting and childcare, all organisations whose materials discussed the issue represented mothers and fathers equally. For eight of these organisations, their materials addressed both fathers’ and mothers’ involvement in child-rearing, with six also using visuals to reinforce equal representation of men and women (see Figure 5). The analysis found that six other organisations focused exclusively or primarily on mothers, which is likely due to the fact that those organisations shared a focus on the prenatal and antenatal health of mothers.

Figure 5: Embedded Gender Equality



Only one organisation explicitly elevated the importance of gender equality among children *and* parents, emphasising that gender discrimination has adverse impacts on girls' early development in particular. Communications materials produced by this organisation had gender equality embedded into their narrative, visually focusing on both girls and boys and mothers and fathers in equal measure. Their materials focused specifically on gender disparity within families and the need to incorporate gender inclusivity. These visuals also pointed out ways to limit gender discrimination within the family and offered solutions that supported the holistic development of girls. Affirming the predominance of the *It All Begins with Family* narrative described above, this organisation highlighted family as the starting point for maintaining gender equality between boys and girls.

■ *We will take care of boys and girls equally, for they are both precious gems.**

It is necessary to educate the children as well as the parents on the importance of gender equality among children. For this reason, it is necessary to educate parents, the community and the general public, nationwide.

Implications

The *Embedded Gender Equality* narrative offers the public a subconscious message of gender neutrality and equality. By discussing crucial aspects of early childhood development without specifying any gender, the materials advance the understanding that young children, regardless of gender, experience the same developmental processes and need the same developmental supports. This intrinsic approach to gender neutrality can help foster a more inclusive society which incorporates early childhood development for all.

Likewise, the equal representation of fathers and mothers in the communications materials is also key, especially in light of the gendered modelling of parental responsibility shown by the cultural models analysis. That research found that while mothers are allocated primary responsibility for taking care of children, fathers are allocated primary decision-making power and responsibility for earning income. Fathers are not, however, modelled as playing a substantive role in caring for and interacting with their small children. As such, strengthening and expanding the gender-neutral narrative of parental caregiving may be instrumental in rebalancing this perceived hierarchy, and could make more room in the public imagination for the role of fathers in their children's development.

Deep and frequent dissemination of gender-neutral narratives may, over time, counter the ingrained nature of patriarchal norms in society and shift public thinking away from perceptions of the home as a strongly feminine domain and of the public arena as highly masculinised. Reshaping public perceptions of who is responsible for child-rearing will help to increase gender equality and equal participation by fathers.

How Does Early Development Happen?

This study found that communicators among the sample organisations were telling three central stories about how caregivers and others should help shape and give structure to the development process in their young children.

1. The Power of Play Narrative

Fourteen of the organisations analysed identified play as a very important component or thread for early childhood development.

Figure 6: The Power of Play



Play as a Developmental Tool

The 14 organisations all focused on play as a tool for early development. They represented different kinds of play activities as important for a child's development across a range of developmental domains, especially social, cognitive and physical development, and in communication and language. Though less frequently invoked, there was also some attention paid to the importance of play in fostering brain and emotional development.

Figure 7: The Power of Play

More and more, play is understood as an integral part of a child's development. Play and active learning provide children with opportunities to explore concepts and learn a variety of skills in a context that extends thinking and builds confidence.

*I sing rhymes and tell stories to my child; I can play with my child daily and introduce new activities during different intervals of the day.**

*Play is an integral component for all developmental domains of a child. By developmental domains we refer to physical growth, brain and cognitive growth, and the ability to socialise and express emotions.**

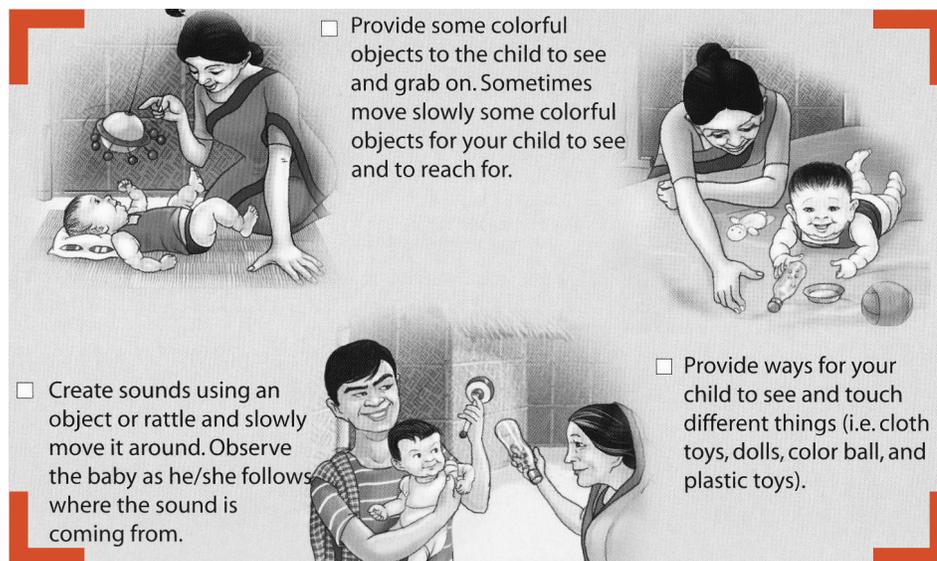
Learning Through Play

Eleven organisations stressed the importance of learning through play and described how activities like singing, dancing, storytelling and art are all tools that advance a child's learning outcomes. These organisations often discussed the benefits of specific forms of play at different ages based on children's developmental needs and age-appropriate play activities.

Earlier, we thought that the only way to teach the children is to involve them in study. Now, we know that play is the most important medium for the children to learn and the learning can be sustained over a longer period if it is done through play.

*Children love to play and during playtime children are the happiest. During this time, when children interact with each other, they learn different things such as sharing, talking and interacting, expressing oneself, etc.**

Figure 8: The Power of Play



Six organisations’ materials also highlighted play in everyday activities. These materials encouraged play activities such as incorporating small games and rhymes into everyday activities to make chores such as bathing, dressing and feeding less mundane and more joyful, and to promote the children’s development of communication and language skills.

Eight organisations discussed play as an interactive tool for stimulation during the early years and described different methods of playful interaction between caregivers and children. These organisations stated that such interactions create a platform for development and learning, and can be used to encourage a child and expose them to the outside world. Parents and other caregivers, including those in early learning centres, were encouraged to be playful and fun-loving with the children in their care.

*When giving your child a bath, tell him/her fun stories and play games with the child, such as splashing water at each other.**

*When singing to the child, place him/her in your lap and clap your hands rhythmically. Smile, laugh, and play along with the child.**

Notably, only one organisation explicitly mentioned play as a right of every child, quoting the United Nations:

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31, “Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities”.

The four organisations that focus on child rights and related legal issues in their communications do not explicitly affirm children’s right to play. One mentions that every child has the right to “grow up in a joyful environment”.

*Child Rights through the Eyes of the Law: Let children grow up in a joyful environment.**

Implications

The *Power of Play* narrative showcases the importance of play as a tool for interaction and stimulation, providing an important explanation for how play activities impact development at different ages. Identifying age-specific play activities for children’s early years illustrates how play taps into their key developmental milestones. The sector appears to have been successful in heightening the public’s understanding of the value of play for children: all groups interviewed in the cultural models research identified play as a “must” for children.

The cultural models findings also show, however, that the public generally links play to physical rather than cognitive or social-emotional development. This suggests more work can be done to build people’s understanding of play as a learning tool critical to preparing young children for school and later life. One way to do this is to be sure that informative messaging engages caregivers as frequent co-participants in children’s play, to help people recognise the important ways that caregivers can support learning and skills development through interactive play.

2. The Social Development Narrative

Although the communications materials analysed in this study mentioned a range of early developmental domains, social development was highlighted most extensively, especially in the materials of 12 organisations. Of these 12, eight conveyed the message that children’s healthy social development benefits the whole community in the long run. These organisations stressed the importance of improving children’s self-confidence, their ability to be helpful in large groups and their understanding of the norms and laws of society beyond the family.

*It is important to teach a child how to interact and act in society from an early age.**

*If a child has positive early years development, it allows them to be self-confident, to be helpful towards other people, and to contribute to society positively.**

Ten organisations outlined age-specific stimulation activities that facilitate a child’s social development, and a further six focused on developing a child’s communication and language skills in conjunction with their social development through activities such as storytelling, singing and praising.

Tell your child stories, rhymes and songs. Encourage him to clap his hands and copy hand gestures.

Across these materials, family members were presented as active agents in developing a child’s social skills. Relatives, including parents, siblings and members of the extended family, were encouraged to talk and listen to children, explore and go for outings with them, and have conversations and positive interactions with them.

*Social development is when a child, after birth, develops the ability to mingle with (besides age-appropriate family members), age-appropriate people and to slowly understand the rules and norms of the society.**

Teachers learned to recognise the importance of the relationships amongst the children and facilitate opportunities to foster social and emotional development and conflict resolution skills.

Attend different social events with your child which will support children to cope with different environments.

Figure 9: Social Development



“I am so busy and important. I have to meet my neighbour”.

In addition to the strong focus on social development, eleven organisations' communications materials focused on children's physical development, and eight of these discussed cognitive skills. Seven organisations addressed emotional development (expressing oneself and one's emotions) in their communications materials. Only five organisations mentioned the importance of brain development in their materials, out of which only three addressed brain development from a scientific point of view – focusing attention on the brain as a developing physical organ. The following quote comes from one of the three organisations that did address the science of brain development:

*The brain is the most important aspect of development. Research has shown that 85–90% of brain development takes place in a child during the period of 0–3 years. During birth, hundreds and thousands of brain cells synapses are not connected. If the child is given proper stimulation and required nutrition during this stage, the cells' synapses connect rapidly, and as a result, the necessary life skills that a child requires are formulated.**

Implications

The *Social Development* narrative offers a limited perspective on development because it fails to address the multifaceted nature of children’s development. Early childhood development takes place through different developmental domains and, while the trend of focusing on social development revealed an interesting pattern in the field’s communications, it also shows that other domains – notably brain and emotional development – are not adequately addressed. This finding is particularly relevant because the cultural models research found that the majority of participants identified social development as a key developmental milestone for young children but held a much shallower understanding of their brain and emotional development.

Social development’s predominance in the public’s consciousness may be due to the strength of another widely shared perception; that modern life, especially in urban places, may have a harmful influence on children (for example, by leading them to use drugs or engage in other illegal or immoral activities). By focusing so strongly on social development in its communications, the field may be unintentionally strengthening this perception in public understanding.

As such, implementing agencies should aim to enrich the narrative further and emphasise the importance of all developmental domains, especially brain and emotional development, for children’s holistic growth. This is particularly relevant as experts stress that both brain and emotional development are at the heart of the developmental story and are central to producing better outcomes for children throughout their lives. Furthermore, experts assert that certain inherent emotional and communicative capacities must be activated early in life because they serve as necessary preconditions to a set of subsequently developed skills, both cognitive and otherwise. These include executive functions and self-regulation skills that are structured by the quality of a child’s environments and relationships. Helping people better understand these fundamental skills can contribute to building widespread support for the types of policies and programmes that can best support young children’s healthy development.

3. The Zero to Three Narrative

Despite the lack of consensus around the age parameters of “early childhood” (see above), a significant subset of the organisations sampled focused on the special importance of the 0–3 age span. Eight organisations discussed the importance of this period, with a majority focused on age-specific care, including attention to appropriate nutrition, health and hygiene, safety, stimulation-based activities and age-appropriate learning. The visuals these eight organisations used often showed children in this age group (sometimes without expressly stating the age), playing or cradled in their parents’ arms or immersed in age-appropriate activities such as playing with a ball, trying to waddle towards their mothers, and so on.

*New research in early human development shows that a person's physiological and psychological adaptations to the environment start from conception and affect development throughout life. This knowledge calls for an approach that provides caregivers and children with timely and relevant support, especially from conception through the first three years.**

In the first three years of a child's life, physical and mental growth takes place at a rapid pace. This is a critical stage for them where adequate stimulation and nutrition are needed.

Eighty percent of a child's brain is developed by the time they turn three years old.

*Give time and care to the first three years of a child's life, which will prove to be highly beneficial for his/her later years.**

*Teach your child step-by-step until the age of three. He/she will move forward in life, and no one will be able to prevent that.**

Implications

The *Zero to Three* narrative corresponds to the scientific focus on a child's time *in utero* and during the first three postnatal years as foundational to all subsequent development. Yet, of the 23 organisations sampled for this report, only eight (just over one-third) are consistently telling this story. From the vantage point of prevalence across the sector, this is among the least communicated and least dominant narratives of all of those described in this report. This should be a point to change, and more ECD organisations should tell this story to drive home the importance of "getting it right" in children's earliest years. This commitment is particularly important in light of the cultural models findings. They showed a general undervaluing of the importance of learning and skills development during the early months and years of a child's life, and that people often "age up" in their thinking and focus on the assumed importance of the school-going years, when "real" learning begins.

To better align people's understanding with that of experts and childhood development professionals, communicators should make efforts to reinforce the *Zero to Three* narrative. These efforts can include an increased focus on the key inputs that strengthen children's brain and emotional development, like play, caregiver-child interactions and opportunities for children to practice their self-regulation skills. This framing of the 0-3 age span as a key developmental window could help people across Bangladeshi society more fully appreciate the importance of those early years and build support for interventions that better support families with young children.

What Can be Done to Improve Early Childhood Development Outcomes?

Three narratives are consistently being used within the ECD sector to communicate about how caregivers and others can best serve the developmental process in their small children.

1. The *Beyond Health, Hygiene and Nutrition Narrative*

Twelve of the sampled organisations – more than half of the overall sample – devoted their attention to the importance of health, hygiene and nutrition for child development. Of these, six placed particular emphasis in at least some of their materials on the importance of immunisation and vaccination for both mothers and children. Perhaps more notably, across the sample of twelve, there was a definable trend of reaffirming that these three traditional areas of focus are necessary but not sufficient to promote positive outcomes for young children. Instead, the materials frequently drew people's attention to an additional set of necessary inputs –specifically stimulation and early learning activities.

Stimulation, protection and early learning along with sufficient healthcare and nutrition are equally important for the children during their early childhood...

Alongside proper healthcare and nutrition, safety, encouragement and early learning is essential for the development of children from birth to the age of eight years.

Although adequate nutrition is a necessary precondition for healthy physical and cognitive development in young children, stimulation in infancy and early childhood is important for optimal brain development.

... health, protection and education in early childhood development has received appropriate attention in the national activities ... evident from the improvement made in the areas of immunisation, nutrition, primary health care, water supply and sanitation, education, etc.

Implications

The *Beyond Health, Hygiene and Nutrition* narrative provides a broader, more in-depth perspective on child development by highlighting other elements of healthy development while still acknowledging the importance of health, hygiene and nutrition. Health-related communications materials have typically focused on a detailed understanding of health, hygiene and nutrition, outlining their relevance to a child's health and development. These communications materials stand out for deviating from this narrative to encompass other areas of child development such as family dynamics and the social environment, stimulation, playfulness and so on. They showcase that while health, hygiene and nutrition are undoubtedly important for young children, a myriad of additional factors determine children's health and development.

This narrative has important implications for public understanding. The cultural models analysis found that the public strongly associated good developmental outcomes with the provisioning of a set of "basics" that include affection, shelter, vaccination and (above all) good nutrition. The field's *Beyond Health, Hygiene and Nutrition* narrative has the capacity to help expand people's understanding of what constitute "the basics" and bring other inputs (such as stimulation and play) into that category.

2. The Positive Early Development Leads to School Preparedness Narrative

The communications materials of 10 organisations explained the link between positive experiences in early childhood and positive primary school outcomes. Specifically, these materials stated that children with increased stimulation during their early years at home and through early learning centres are more likely to have a smoother transition to primary schools and better learning outcomes overall.

ECD Programmatic Goal and Objectives: Promote all areas of development of physical, sensorial, cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, social norms and values and creativity development, child preparedness and mainstreaming in primary school.

The key focus [of the programme] is to nurture the children for their physical and mental development and to prepare them for schooling with right attitudes and habits.

Around the world it is increasingly recognised that children's early experience in effective pre-primary programmes is linked to later school success and contributes to healthy child development.

Materials from six of the organisations stated that positive early experiences would also help children to develop greater memory, more quickly grasp lessons and activities, and improve their overall learning at primary school. Furthermore, children who have been integrated into pre-primary and early learning experiences are said to be keener to attend school and less likely to drop out. This suggests they have higher rates of staying in school than children who have not had these early experiences.

Implementation of early learning centres has demonstrated significant improvement in the areas of language and communication, cognitive, social and emotional development. Besides, their capacity to cope with the school environment was also higher compared to others of similar age.

Children who participate in early childhood education are more likely to enrol and remain in primary school (and achieve better results) than those who cannot access comprehensive early childhood care.

Implications

The *Positive Early Development Leads to School Preparedness* narrative creates a causal relationship between the earliest years of life and later learning, demonstrating that greater investment in the early years can prepare children better for the jump into academic studies. The materials analysed highlighted how developmental milestones attained during early childhood hold future benefits for children when they reach primary school.

This narrative is particularly important in relation to the cultural models finding that many members of the public, as well as members of the ECD sector, shared a dominant perception that real learning begins in school. This belief is problematic because it weakens support for ensuring access to quality early learning for young children. In countering this belief, the *Positive Early Development Leads to School Preparedness* narrative highlights how positive early childhood development continues to benefit children and why investing in sound early-years support is so essential to children's future, including through investments in quality early learning opportunities for all children.

Communicators can further strengthen the narrative by explaining the mechanisms behind the link between early childhood development and later school performance, including how problem-solving play and caregiver-child interactions play a role in early brain, emotional and skills development. Helping people understand how strengthening early developmental processes can lead to improved outcomes later in life can build support for the idea that all children should regularly be able to access those kinds of experiences both at home and in their communities.

3. The Healthy Mother for a Healthy Child Narrative

Though not as dominant as the two narratives described above, there was a consistent theme across the materials from six organisations that addressed the impact of prenatal and postnatal maternal health on early childhood development. In these materials, messages on prenatal and postnatal care, newborn care, child growth and monitoring are integrated, and mothers are encouraged to regularly visit health service providers from the moment of conception, allowing for early identification of pregnancy-related disorders.

*Child development starts from the mother's womb. For this reason, it is important to ensure proper care for the mother.**

*To ensure safety and wellbeing for both mother and child, it is very important that expecting mothers visit health service providers at the first sign of risk symptoms, and take care of themselves as per doctor's instructions.**

Figure 10: Healthy Mother for a Healthy Child



Family is recognised as an important component of maternal health. Five organisations discussed how family members such as husbands and parents-in-law could provide valuable support for mothers' physical and mental wellbeing both during and post-pregnancy. They were encouraged to tend to the mother's needs, interact positively with her and encourage her to eat healthy foods and exercise.

During pregnancy, ensure a harmonious and happy family environment for the mother. This will ensure the child's proper growth and development.

Figure 11: Healthy Mother for a Healthy Child



Six organisations highlighted the importance of diet and nutrition for maternal health and child development. This is also important as mothers are the primary source of food and nutrition for the child during their first few years.

Implications

The *Healthy Mother for a Healthy Child* narrative emphasises the importance of valuing mothers and treating them as equals in the home. As with the *Zero to Three* narrative described above, this narrative featured only among a minority of organisations – just six of the overall sample of 23. Considering the role this narrative can play in reshaping traditional family dynamics in order to better integrate maternal care, more organisations can and should tell this story to emphasise that young children's health and development is related to their mothers' wellbeing and to promote better maternal health and care, including at home. Organisations can explain the relationship between complications and maternal wellbeing, while also addressing postpartum depression. Putting an emphasis on maternal health for children's wellbeing also reflects experts' understanding that brain development starts *in utero*, with connections across different regions of the brain growing and strengthening rapidly during gestation. Coupled with the *Embedded Gender Equality* narrative, the *Healthy Mother for a Healthy Child* narrative has the potential to deepen public support for resources and programmes designed to ensure maternal health.

Conclusion

The first of its kind in Bangladesh, this Field Frame Analysis focuses on assessing how young children's development is presented in the communications materials produced by leading ECD organisations in Bangladesh. It identifies the most dominant narratives evident across and within these materials as well as which aspects of early childhood development advocates focus on in their communications with the public.

Among the notable findings are that many or most organisations in the sector promote an equal model of gender, both in terms of how young boys and girls are raised and supported, and about the role that fathers and other male relatives can play as active caregivers for their children. Organisations also point to a set of important inputs for children that include stimulation and early learning activities, and emphasise that positive early experiences lead to better outcomes later in life, both in school and beyond. Many organisations also draw consistent attention to the importance of both prenatal and postnatal maternal health, and link it to the health and development of the child.

This report also provides a critical assessment of how these and the other narratives identified are likely interpreted by members of the public and others, based on their own dominant understandings of early development. It also identifies patterns in the communications materials that share similarities with findings in the companion cultural models report. Among these was a shared attention to the importance of children's play – a positive, shared pattern in people's thinking across all three of the cultural models research populations that is also being reinforced by the ECD sector in their communications materials.

Comparing this report's findings with those of the cultural models research also revealed a set of overlaps that are much more challenging. As in this field frame analysis research, the cultural models research found that most people give central focus to the role of mothers, parents and families in raising children, but much less attention to the role that community and other public institutions play in supporting early development. This narrow focus on the family suggests the need to strengthen communications around the role that public institutions can play in supporting and empowering mothers, parents and other family members in their roles as caregivers and facilitators of children's healthy development.

Comparing overlaps between the field frame analysis and cultural models research also identified a second challenge: the inconsistent definition of the age parameters of early childhood. The point is especially notable because of how it intersects with a strong underlying pattern prevalent in Bangladesh

of “ageing up” issues around children’s development – that is, of assuming that the most important developmental and learning processes occur later in childhood. This process of “ageing up” draws people’s attention away from early childhood and leads to an undervaluing of the importance of the early years. To the extent that messaging about “early development” is variable and inconsistently defined, it allows this default to the older years to continue unchallenged. While attention to the importance of *Zero to Three* by some organisations provides a partial counter to this ambiguity, it remains an important challenge for the sector to build further consensus on defining early childhood in a way that is consistent with current scientific understanding and draws attention to children’s critical early years.

Comparing the results from this field frame analysis study with the cultural models findings also showed a third challenging overlap between both data sets: a limited attention to brain and emotional development in young children, and to the kind of fundamental skills that require active stimulation and development in each. This overlap suggests the need to identify ways to more consistently and effectively help people understand how both brain and emotional development happen and what kinds of core skills are involved in each. These include children’s executive function and self-regulation skills, which undergo critical development in the first three years and are fundamental to all subsequent cognitive and emotional development.

Returning to this report’s findings, there is a final area that warrants further comment – the lack of strong, shared attention across the communications materials to the impact of children’s exposure to adversity and a range of risk factors. Only a small subset of organisations, four in total, gave attention to the negative impacts of violence within families, including violence against children, and its negative impacts on children’s development. Likewise, there was very limited attention given to a broad range of other risk factors that children can face, including neglect, family dissolution, and depression, substance abuse and mental health issues among caregivers. In light of what current scientific knowledge says about the impacts of chronic and severe stress on children’s physical, brain and emotional development, this stands out as an area of concern where ECD organisations can do more to support caregivers and families, as well as community members, policymakers and those who work with children and families, to better understand the need for supports and interventions.

Overall, the communications materials sampled for this report focused on presenting parents and other caregivers with a positive model for how to support children’s optimal development. Promoting positive family environments, an engaged role for fathers, the benefits of play, stimulation, social interaction, early learning opportunities and the importance of maternal health all send critically important messages to caregivers and others about what it looks like to create a positive, caring and supportive environment for young children. These constructive narratives should continue to be told. At the same time, strategies should be identified that can support

ECD communicators as they also work to expand people's understandings of the important challenges that many children face, and of the need to build a robust system of interventions to support those children and families who face the greatest adversity.

As the government of Bangladesh has shown a keen interest in implementation and research in the field of early childhood development, it stands to reason that organisations currently involved in this field, including BRAC IED, will benefit greatly from the findings and implications uncovered through this research. By utilising the findings from this field frame analysis study, the government and other stakeholders can begin to tell a more complete story about early childhood development in Bangladesh that builds on the strengths of the current narrative trends identified and also includes equally essential narrative features that have often been weak or absent. Going forward, more research is needed to develop and test the necessary tools and strategies that can complement efforts to expand the narrative around early development in Bangladesh and strengthen the sector's overall communications capacity.

ABOUT THE FRAMEWORKS INSTITUTE

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by framing the public discourse about social problems. Its work is based on Strategic Frame Analysis®, a multi-method, multidisciplinary approach to empirical research. FrameWorks designs, conducts, publishes, explains and applies communications research to prepare nonprofit organisations to expand their constituency base, to build public will and to further public understanding of specific social issues – the environment, government, race, children's issues and health care, among others. Its work is unique in its breadth, ranging from qualitative, quantitative and experimental research to applied communications toolkits, eWorkshops, advertising campaigns, FrameChecks® and in-depth FrameLab study engagements. In 2015, it was named one of nine organisations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Foundation's Award for Creative and Effective Institutions. Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

ABOUT BRAC INSTITUTE OF EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (BRAC IED)

BRAC Institute of Educational Development (BRAC IED) is an institute within BRAC University committed to creating an engaged, empathetic and empowered generation. It works with populations from birth to age 18 by pioneering solutions and providing leadership across three areas of focus: *Teaching and Learning*, *Mental Health*, and *Early Childhood Development and Play*. Its work across all areas spans research, model development, direct service delivery, programme evaluation, advocacy and capacity building. To reach children who are socioeconomically disadvantaged or displaced, the institute ensures that the solutions they design are low-cost and adaptable to different cultural contexts. Learn more at www.braced.com.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the FrameWorks Institute.

Please follow standard APA rules for citation: Sarwar, S.S., Mehnaz, A., Parvin, W., Mas-ud, A. A., Khanom, F., Zaman, S.S., Nichols, J., Dutta, M. and Lindland, E. (2019). *Narratives of Early Childhood Development in Bangladesh: A Field Frame Analysis*. Washington, DC: FameWorks Institute; and Dhaka: BRAC Institute of Educational Development.

Appendix: Organisations Sampled

For this field frame analysis study, communications materials from 23 organisations that are active in the field of early childhood development (ECD) in Bangladesh were analysed. Of these 23, nine were international organisations, one was a United Nations organisation and the remaining 13 were national organisations. The 13 national organisations sampled for this research are active in different areas of early childhood development, with different focal areas of interest.

- Two organisations lead in the field of early childhood development, focusing on education, health, legal support and raising awareness. They also empower and assist vulnerable groups of children and their families to prevent domestic violence.
- One organisation is a literacy-promoting non-governmental organisation in the early childhood development sector, with a focus on pre-primary education programmes.
- One organisation is a leading legal service that supports women and men living in poverty and contributes towards eliminating violence against children in families, educational institutions, communities, public spaces, workplaces and orphanages.
- One organisation is a network for other organisations focused on children's rights that is mandated to monitor the children's rights situation in Bangladesh and advocate for relevant policy change.
- One organisation carries out projects in the slums and northern part of the capital Dhaka with the aim of improving access to quality education.
- One organisation focuses on strengthening education-sector planning and policy implementation.
- Two organisations provide medical treatment which includes: physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, treatment of combat-based injuries, and rehabilitation and support services for disabled people, in collaboration with other organisations. They also conduct research,

carry out advocacy work, build networks and raise awareness on disability issues regionally, nationally and internationally.

- One organisation is a national-level institute working for the improvement of health and nutrition of children and mothers in Bangladesh.
- One organisation focuses on achieving greater human development through training, such as parenting skills and tasks, counselling clinics for children and parents, community-based initiatives for socialisation and values development of children, especially for young children and children with special needs.
- One organisation runs community- and factory-based child care centres which provide age-appropriate stimulation and care for the children of working women and factory workers.
- One organisation is an autonomous body operating under the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs. It acts as a national academy for children with operational areas in early development, pre-primary education, health and nutrition.

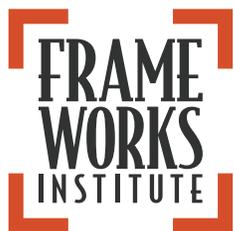
The nine international organisations sampled for this research are active in different areas of early childhood development.

- Six have a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach in dealing with matters related to early childhood development, including in the areas of education, health, early learning, family dynamics, and child rights and protection, among others.
- One organisation is a global institute focused on public health research.
- One organisation works to promote the right to a quality and inclusive education for all children. It also aims to improve health education, care and public health services in the area of early childhood development.
- One is an educational organisation, mainly focusing on pre-school-aged children, whose mission is to help children grow smarter, stronger and kinder.

Finally, one organisation is a UN body that provides humanitarian and developmental assistance to children and mothers in developing countries. It is a member of the United Nations Development Group.

Endnotes

1. These findings are summarised in the companion report *Early Is Key: Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Non-Expert Understandings of Early Childhood Development in Bangladesh*. Lindland, E., Khanom, F., Zaman, S. S., Dutta, M., Ahmed, N., Mas-ud, A. A. and Mim, S. A. (2019). *Early Is Key: Mapping the Gaps on Understandings of Early Childhood Development in Bangladesh*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute; and Dhaka: BRAC Institute of Educational Development.
2. All quotes from the sampled communications materials are in italics. Those marked with an asterisk (*) were translated from the original Bengali. The remainder were originally in English.
3. Alongside the public and ECD personnel, factory leaders were chosen because of the important role the ready-made-garment sector plays, providing childcare in their factories, as mandated by Bangladeshi law.



Narratives of Early Childhood Development in Bangladesh: A Field Frame Analysis

April 2019