

# Role of Parents in Early Years

Amrutha Murali

As the first point of contact for many families, Anganwadi teachers are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between parents' understanding and the developmental needs of children during the crucial early years. In this article, the author shares some of Makkala Jagriti's easy-to-follow, successful attempts to engage and involve parents in providing a nurturing environment for their children.



Figure 1: Anganwadi teachers are being supported in conducting effective sessions with parents.

Parents play a pivotal role in every stage of a child's life, but their influence is most profound during the early years. These formative years, from birth to six years, lay the foundation for a child's cognitive, emotional, and social development. Twenty years ago, children benefitted from growing up in joint families, where they were exposed to multiple caregivers and rich interactions. However, the advent of technology and the shift toward nuclear families have created a gap in basic human connections, leaving children vulnerable. Take, for instance, a common scene today – a child seated with a device larger than their hand, engrossed in its screen, while the caregiver mechanically feeds them. This scenario, whether in disadvantaged communities or affluent households, illustrates the diminishing quality of parent-child interaction.

At *Makkala Jagriti*,<sup>1</sup> we work to enhance the quality of early childhood education and care provided by *Anganwadis*. Our approach involves engaging with Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) functionaries, teachers, helpers, and most importantly, parents, to ensure holistic support for children.

## The Anganwadi context

Children attending *Anganwadis* often come from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, where parents typically have little to no formal education. With their primary focus on earning a livelihood to support their families, the care and developmental needs of their children often take a backseat. Many parents are unaware of the critical importance of the

early years in shaping their child's learning journey. They often have the misconception that learning begins only once a child starts school, overlooking the foundational role of early experiences. Therefore, it is vital to help parents understand their significant role in creating a safe, nurturing, and responsive environment, which can profoundly influence and transform a child's developmental trajectory.

The responsibility of creating this awareness among parents falls upon the *Anganwadi* teachers. Building the capacity of *Anganwadi* teachers is pivotal in empowering them to engage with parents effectively and conduct meaningful meetings that emphasise the parents' role in their child's early development. As the first point of contact for many families, *Anganwadi* teachers are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between parents' understanding and the developmental needs of children during the crucial early years.

## Some strategies

### Engaging parents

*Anganwadi* teachers are provided with structured training sessions and mentoring to strengthen their knowledge, skills, and confidence to conduct meetings with parents. We prepare them to facilitate discussions on topics, such as brain development, the importance of play, and domains of early childhood education. By grounding these sessions in real-life examples and practical strategies, teachers translate abstract concepts into relatable and actionable ideas for parents.

Importance of play: An activity

To illustrate the importance of play and positive experiences in early brain development during parent meetings, a simple and interactive activity is conducted. Parents are divided into two groups, each provided with a drawing of an outline of the brain, which has scattered dots. The *Anganwadi* teacher/facilitator narrates two contrasting stories, pausing at key moments for the parents to do the activity.

Group 1: The Nurturing Environment

This child experiences:

- Responsive caregiving: The parent soothes the child when they cry. Adequate care is given to what the child needs.
- Quality playtime: Parents play peek-a-boo, engage in pretend play, and sing rhymes. There is freedom for the child to engage with toys and play materials.

- Language-rich interactions: Parents and caregivers talk to the child often, narrating daily activities or reading simple stories.
- Safe environment: The child has a clean, safe space to explore freely.

Each time a positive experience is described, the group connects two dots within their brain outline. By the end of the story, their brain has multiple interconnected pathways, representing a strong neural network.

Group 2: The Neglectful Environment

This child faces:

- Lack of interaction: Parents are too busy or not present, providing minimal engagement.
- Inconsistent responses: When parents are not consistent with their rules and expectations – agreeing to something at one time and refusing it at another.
- Absence of play: There are no toys or interactive activities to stimulate the child.
- Stressful environment: The household is chaotic, and the child experiences shouting or neglect. Many times, the child becomes the caregiver of younger siblings.
- Limited language exposure: Communication is minimal, often limited to instructions or reprimands.

Here, the parents connect the dots less frequently, resulting in a fragmented network by the end of the story.

After the stories, the facilitator compares the two brains, emphasising how positive experiences contribute to stronger, healthier brain development.

By the end of the activity, the brain representing the child in a nurturing environment is visibly more connected compared to the other, creating a stark contrast when the two brain images are placed side by side. This visual often



Figure 2: Parents engaged in the 'brain activity' representing the neural network.



Figure 3: A parent helps their child identify and describe vegetables at home.

elicits a collective gasp from the parents at the detrimental impact a non-nurturing environment can have on a child. The exercise has proven to be deeply impactful, with many parents becoming emotional and openly sharing their resolve to change their ways, pledging to be more present and respectful of their child's developmental journey. The powerful visual representation helps parents understand the profound influence of responsive caregiving and positive interactions on their child's brain development. It drives home the critical role they play in shaping their child's future by fostering a safe, enriching, and loving environment.

### Changing perceptions about learning

'Learning begins in school' is one of the core challenges *Anganwadi* teachers address by shifting parents' perception of learning. We train teachers to sensitively tackle this misconception by emphasising the importance of the birth-to-six years developmental window. Teachers are provided with tools and simple resources to demonstrate how daily interactions, responsive caregiving, and play can significantly enhance a child's learning and development.

Teachers help allay parents' doubts about their ability to support their children, reassuring them that meaningful engagement does not require academic knowledge but rather a willingness to connect through play and conversation. Parents are encouraged to engage in simple, everyday activities that promote their child's development. For example, they can sing rhymes, narrate daily activities while cooking or cleaning, or point out colours, shapes, and objects during a walk. Playing simple games like *peek-a-boo* or *I Spy* fosters interaction and builds language and social skills. Storytelling or looking

at picture books together enhances imagination and vocabulary.

Through their interactions with parents, teachers can share simple, practical ideas that ease the burden on caregivers while promoting the child's development and strengthening the parent-child bond. For instance, during parent meetings or home visits, an *Anganwadi* teacher can demonstrate how routine household activities can engage children constructively. For example, when they bring in vegetables from the market, they can involve the child by asking them to sort vegetables into separate piles. This activity is simple, keeps the child engaged and helps develop in them important cognitive skills, like sorting and categorisation.

Encouraging children to help with small tasks, like taking out plates for eating or folding clothes builds their confidence and fine motor skills. These activities are easy to incorporate into daily routines and help parents create a nurturing, stimulating environment that supports their child's growth. These activities not only engage children constructively but also strengthen the parent-child bond without demanding extra time from caregivers.

Teachers can invite parents to try similar activities during the session or share their own creative ideas. This builds confidence and encourages parents to see themselves as active contributors to their child's learning.

Rachamma, a parent, shared how attending the monthly meetings has transformed the way she engages with her son, Rohan, at home. Inspired by the play-based activities at the *Anganwadi*, Rohan often brings his learning home, demonstrating games and activities focused on developmental domains and inviting her to join in. These shared moments have not only strengthened their bond but also boosted Rachamma's confidence in supporting his growth.

The insights gained during parent meetings have provided Rachamma with practical ideas for simple, enjoyable activities she can do with Rohan, such as storytelling, singing songs, or playing games that promote his motor skills and cognitive development. By actively involving herself in these activities, she feels more connected to Rohan's learning journey and takes pride in the progress she observes. This hands-on engagement has given her a deeper appreciation of the critical role that play and interaction have in shaping Rohan's developmental milestones.

## Setting up a toy library

During home visits, it is often noticed that the children, after the *Anganwadi* hours, spend excessive time on screens (TV or mobile). To address this, a toy library can be introduced, while equipping *Anganwadi* teachers with the tools and knowledge to establish and manage these libraries effectively. Teachers connect with the local community for support, gathering donated toys and resources, and create a system that allows parents to borrow developmentally appropriate play materials for home use.

Parents can visit the *Toy Library* and borrow toys for their children to use at home for a week. This initiative not only expands the variety of toys available to children but also reinforces and extends the learning they experience at *Anganwadis*, allowing the continuation of their development at home. The *Anganwadi* teacher keeps a detailed record of the toys borrowed, ensuring they are well-maintained and returned on time. This system instils a sense of responsibility in children, teaching them the importance of taking care of shared resources.

During parent meetings, *Anganwadi* teachers can explain to parents that through play, children learn problem-solving, develop creativity, and strengthen their relationships with caregivers. For example, the toy library has puzzles, blocks, peg boards, beads, stacking cups, etc. Teachers describe to parents how playing with toys, like blocks or puzzles, helps children acquire the skills of problem-solving and independence; how using beads for activities like colour sorting and counting, helps develop fine motor skills and early arithmetic concepts.

### Anganwadi Habba

As part of our ongoing efforts to redefine the role of *Anganwadis*, we believe that teachers play a pivotal role

in shaping how parents perceive *Anganwadis*. One of the key initiatives we have introduced is the *Anganwadi Habba* (festival), a celebration designed to transform *Anganwadis* from places of mere care to centres of active learning. This event serves as a platform to showcase the potential for learning and development that can take place within these centres, emphasising the importance of early childhood education.

Teachers set up stations to showcase various developmental activities, such as language development exercises, creative arts, physical play, and cognitive games. Parents experience these activities firsthand and become aware of the learning potential within the *Anganwadi* setting.

Parents understand the value of play-based learning, positive discipline, and simple daily activities like storytelling to support their child's growth. The event fosters collaboration between parents, teachers, and the community, empowering families to actively contribute to their child's education and build strong support networks.

## The path ahead

The role of parents in the early years cannot be overemphasised. By raising awareness, and providing practical engagement ideas, we can empower parents to become active participants in their child's development. Together, we can create nurturing environments that enable children to reach their full potential.

<sup>1</sup> *Makkala Jagriti is a Bengaluru-based NGO working towards the holistic development of children and diverse groups to build a sustainable and equitable society.*



**Amrutha Murali** leads early education efforts at *Makkala Jagriti*, where she is dedicated to providing quality education to children in *Anganwadis*. She has been a Fellow at Teach for India and has over 10 years of experience working with children and teachers in government schools.

**Contact:** [amrutha@makkalajagriti.org](mailto:amrutha@makkalajagriti.org)