

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES IN SRI LANKA

Findings from a telephone survey conducted in August 2021



OVERVIEW:

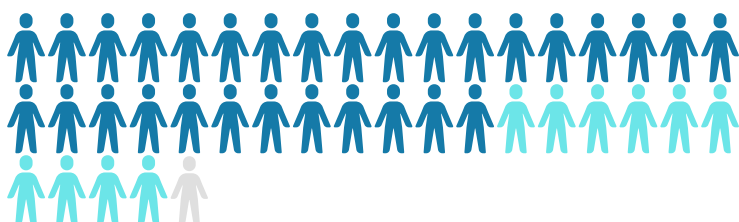
Early childhood development (ECD) services in Sri Lanka have suffered major disruptions since the onset of the pandemic in early 2020.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the prolonged closure of ECD centres in the country since March 2020 and the multiple lockdowns that have been enforced over the last two years have impacted child development outcomes.

In August 2021, the World Bank partnered with the Marga Institute to carry out a telephone survey to obtain a more holistic understanding of how the pandemic has affected child development outcomes and the provision of ECD services in the country. Additionally, the team sought to understand how the findings of this survey can inform the strengthening of ECD services during and after shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic, to sustain and improve child development outcomes.

Survey Structure and Sample

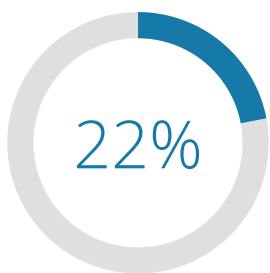
The study gathered information from three categories of respondents: 300 primary child caregivers (parents/grandparents/guardians), 100 ECD teachers and 10 ECD officers distributed across 15 districts covering all nine provinces. While the survey was originally developed by the World Bank for primary caregivers, the country team developed two more modules for ECD teachers and ECD officers. The sample framework for the survey was provided by the National Secretariat of Early Childhood Development, in the State Ministry of Women and Child Development, Pre-Schools and Primary Education, School Infrastructure and Education Services, and the World Bank team. The sample was selected proportional to the geographical distribution of 22 percent urban, 50 percent rural, and 28 percent plantation regions. While this limited sample is not representative of all of Sri Lanka, the study does provide some relevant information on the status of ECD services and pandemic responses in different parts of the country.



 Caregivers  Teachers  ECD Officers

KEY FINDINGS

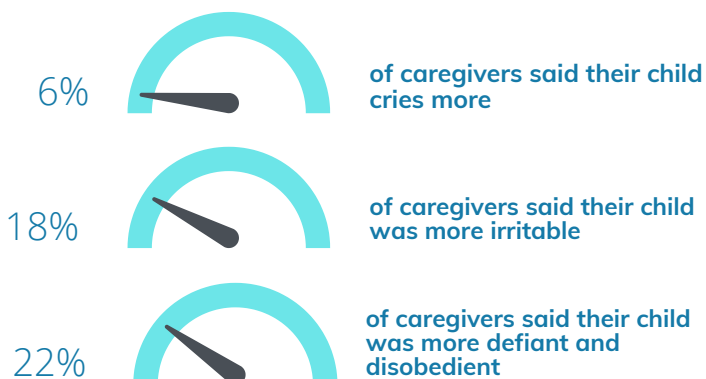
The Impact on Child Health and Behavior



Children who missed clinic appointments during the pandemic

In many parts of the country the lockdowns disrupted routine healthcare services, leading to delays in child vaccinations, checkups and nutrition support programs. Overall, 22 percent of caregivers indicated that their children have missed clinic appointments due to the pandemic. Many children also missed out on nutritional supplements and support provided by the government. 25 percent of the families had received Thriposha (nutritional supplement) and 7 percent received school meals (dry rations pack) during the pandemic. The data suggests that children may have experienced food security challenges during the pandemic. Approximately 10.7 percent of families received the emergency support dry ration pack given by the government, and 19.7 percent of families took loans for consumption purposes.

Many caregivers also noticed differences in child behavior during the pandemic.



With no access to preschool or childcare services, caregivers were left with the task of entertaining and educating young children at home. Overall, the results indicate a good level of engagement between caregivers and children. Most caregivers have made an effort to provide stimulation for young children, and to source learning material from in and around the home.



89 percent said their child has access to natural resources from the garden



85 percent said their child has access to craft material



95 percent had played with the child, sung songs, told stories, and read books



87 percent said they played outdoors with their child

94 percent of caregivers said that their child or someone from their household had maintained communication with teachers or community volunteers. 37 percent said that they had contacted teachers through SMS, Zoom, or WhatsApp.

Teachers also noted a difference in child behavior during the pandemic. Many teachers said they observed decreased activity and skill use, decreased camaraderie and cohesiveness among children, an addiction to cell phones, impatience, and a lack of good habits. Teachers also felt that the long periods of isolation have had a psychological impact on children, and that some children have become more backward and shy during this period. The lack of access to education was also seen as having detrimental impacts on child development.



"My child's weight is low. The midwife gave instructions over the phone as she was unable to visit the home and weigh my child" Parent from Ampara

"Because parents go to work and ECD Centres are closed, children do not get security and proper nutrition" - Teacher from Nuwara Eliya

"My child misses preschool so much. She makes me dress up like a teacher, and she dresses up in school clothes, and we pretend that we are in her preschool. She insists on this. Otherwise, she refuses to do her preschool work." - Parent from Monaragala



Access to Learning Content



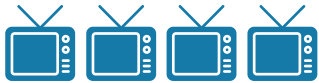
84% received printed material from ECD centers



65% used content from children's newspapers



53% accessed content on smart phones/ tablets



48% watched educational content on television



10% accessed content on internet enabled computers



8% listened to educational content on radios

Despite challenges, findings indicate that children accessed learning material through various channels. Findings indicate that 80 percent of ECD teachers have taken steps to provide material and instructions to caregivers. 47 percent of teachers (notably, up to 77 percent of teachers in the estate sector) indicated that they have visited the homes of children.

Approximately 90 percent of teachers from the estate and rural sectors had introduced alternative methods to provide education. The most popular methods include:

- Calling parents on the phone
- Teaching children how to work from home
- Sending and receiving books from children's homes
- Keeping workbooks at a shop where parents could collect them
- Visiting children's homes
- Inviting children in batches to assign work

Only 60 percent of the teachers felt that the alternate methods were successful. Many teachers in the rural sector were not satisfied with the alternate methods used to engage with children.

The Use of Online Platforms

63 percent of urban sector teachers, 33 percent of rural sector teachers, and 11 percent of estate sector teachers said that they used online platforms or mobile apps while ECD centres were closed. Over the last year there has been an increase in usage of online platforms among teachers (up from 34 percent to 44 percent). This is due to the increased use of online platforms in the estate and rural sectors (the estate sector increased from 11 percent to 29 percent, and the rural sector increased from 33 percent to 43 percent). 8 out of the 10 ECD Officers confirmed that teachers in their area used online methods. 68 percent of teachers said that they have internet coverage, though connectivity problems persist in the estate and rural sectors. WhatsApp and Zoom have been popular platforms for teachers, parents, and children to interact and receive learning content. On average 45 percent of children attended online sessions.

74% of teachers who used online platforms personally covered the internet costs

18% of teachers had received training/ instructions on conducting online sessions.

78% of teachers did not own a personal computer

97% of teachers did own a smartphone



"What teachers are doing is good. Workbooks are sent home. Everyone does not have internet facilities. Only 10 children out of 31 have smartphones at home"- Parent from Polonnaruwa

"Some parents are hard on their children and discipline the children, and as a result, the children have lost their motivation to learn" -Teacher from Colombo

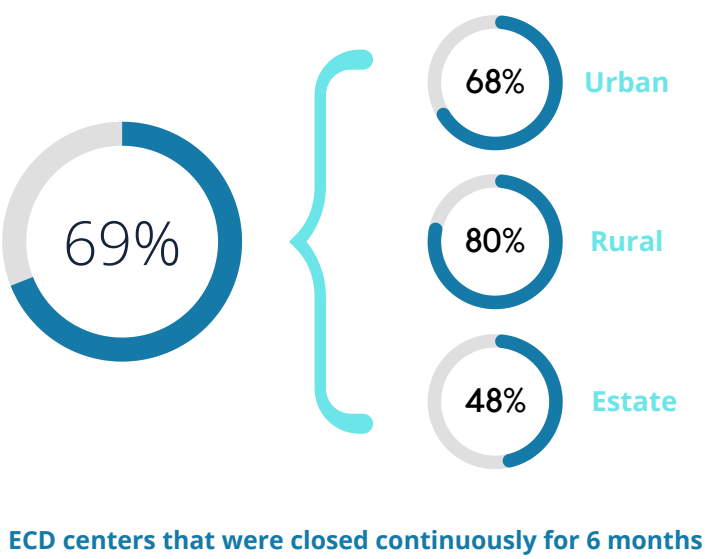
"The classroom is small. There is no room to keep a distance between children, so we have to get children in small groups -Teacher from Ampara

"We don't collect fees in our preschool. We collect Rs. 150/= to clean the place, but we have not collected fees for the last one and half years - Teacher from Ampara



The Impact on ECD Center Staff and Management

The closure of ECD centers has had a significant impact on the job security of ECD professionals. With many caregivers unable to pay school fees, some centers have been forced to shut down while others have laid off staff. 29 percent of teachers and 90 percent of ECD Officers said that they knew teachers who lost their jobs due to the pandemic. 33 percent of teachers said that they had not charged fees from students while ECD centres were closed, while 16 percent said they received at least 50 percent of the fees. 41 percent of the teachers in the urban sector, 37 percent of the teachers in the rural sector and 7 percent of the teachers in the estate sector said that they had not been paid their salaries or received an income during the months when the ECD centres were closed



Support Received from Governmental Authorities



Nine of the ten ECD Officers said that they had received educational material, study packs and teaching guidelines from the Divisional/ District and Provincial authorities. Though all ECD Officers confirmed that teachers within their Divisional Secretariats were given the relevant training and guidelines on how to conduct lessons, 30 percent of teachers said they were not contacted by ECD Officers, and 40 percent said they did not receive any teaching assistance or material from provincial authorities.

Pandemic Preparedness



74% of teachers had received training on identifying potential infections



61% of teachers had received one dose and 23% had received two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine



95% of teachers said that facemasks are used at their ECD centres



77% of teachers said they carried out temperature checks at their ECD centers

All ECD Officers said that the government had provided resources for pandemic preparedness including wash basins, hand sanitizers, and handheld thermal sensors. Almost all teachers stated that they had followed pandemic prevention measures by introducing washbasins with soap dispensers, and 86 percent of the teachers said that distance was maintained between students in the classroom. All ECD Officers said that the teachers under their purview had received pandemic preparedness training, and 9 out of the 10 officers said they were instructed to ensure COVID prevention measures were implemented in ECD centres.

Policy and Practice Implications

While notable disparities exist between children from different socio-economic levels and geographic areas, these findings do reflect ground realities and confirm that the pandemic has impacted children from all backgrounds. The findings provide a general picture of the key challenges in the ECD sector, and highlight areas that warrant further attention. The recommendations provided by teachers and ECD Officers reveal gaps in service provision, particularly related to the challenges and lack of infrastructure and facilities for online education. The potential implications on child nutrition suggest the need for urgent remedial action to prevent further damage and to reverse the negative impacts of the pandemic. As such, this survey is a good starting point to guide policy change, and also provides a basis for the development and prioritization of interventions.