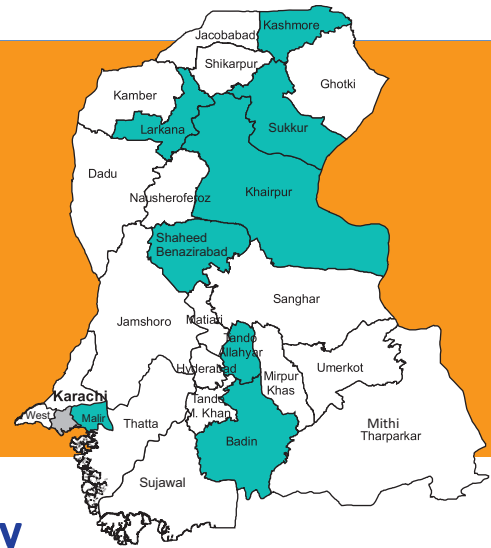


POLICY BRIEF

This brief is intended to provide a snapshot of Early Childhood Education classrooms in the Sindh to help inform the Government of Sindh's ongoing reform and COVID-19 response assurance efforts. It presents findings from Early Learning Partnership Phase II Research conducted by Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi in eight districts of Sindh.



Study background, purpose and methodology

Within low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), potentially as many as 250 million (or 43% of children) are at risk of not reaching their developmental potential. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these failings as it led to school closures and significantly disrupted pedagogical structures in early childhood education (ECE) which heavily rely on face-to-face interactions with children and their caregivers. The pandemic-induced lockdowns had the adverse effect of making ECE inaccessible to a significant number of children, within an observable trend of pre-primary education being relatively neglected and marginalized compared to other levels of education during this period. This effect was particularly pronounced in Global South settings, such as in the province of Sindh, Pakistan where young children from marginalized families and communities tend to bear a heavy 'pandemic burden'.

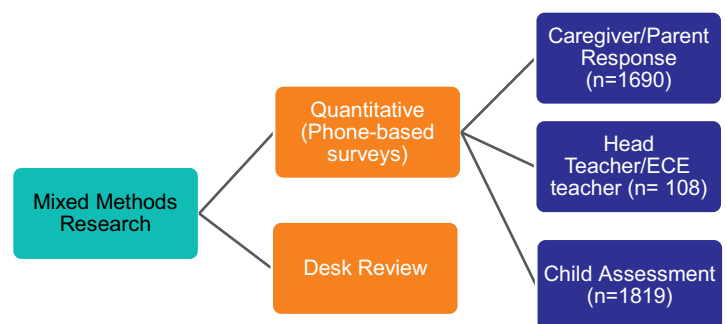
It is against this backdrop, that this study aims to investigate and provide evidence of the short- and medium-term effects of COVID-19 on early learning in Sindh. The key research questions guiding this study are related to the seven thematic areas:

- **Prioritization:** How has the government prioritized early years learning in their response measures for COVID-19
- **Coherence of response:** Has the response been systematic and coherent or has it been incremental, haphazard, and arbitrary?
- **Learning at home:** What are parents' practices on engaging children in learning? What type of learning are they encouraging (e.g., rote memorization, learning through play and inquiry)? What, if any, is the uptake of distance learning measures?
- **Teachers:** To what extent are ECE teachers being deployed to support learning during school closures?
- **Equity & Inclusion:** How are children's learning

opportunities during the pandemic affected by gender, disability, socioeconomic status, pre-pandemic enrollment status (in-school vs out of school), geography (urban vs rural)?

- **Return to school:** How are decisions taken at system and household level to reopen schools and bring children back to school, respectively?

The research objectives are pursued by adopting a mixed-methods approach with findings from a quantitative survey supplemented with desk-based research. For the purpose of the study, and building upon the work undertaken in ELP Phase I, the global Measuring Early Learning Quality & Outcomes (MELQO) modules were aligned and adapted to the local context. Four tools were selected to capture a range of information on ECE service-provision, staff support, resilience, socio-emotional conditions, learning environments, and learning outcomes for children at home. To further augment the analysis, a tool on Child Functioning was also adapted from the Washington Group on Disability Statistics (WG) modules to investigate the specific challenges faced by children with special needs in early years. These tools were administered across eight districts to 1819 children, 1690 parents/caregivers, 108 head teachers, and 90 teachers.



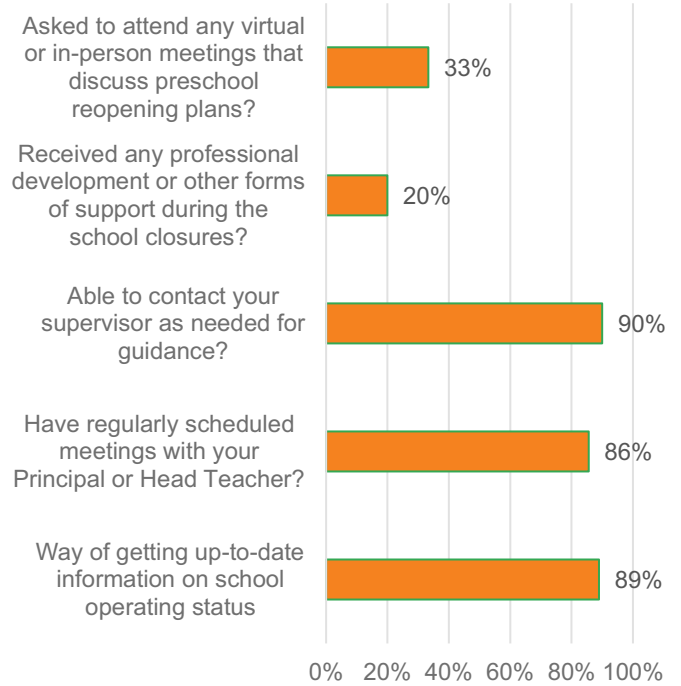
Key Findings

Teacher Support and Professional Development

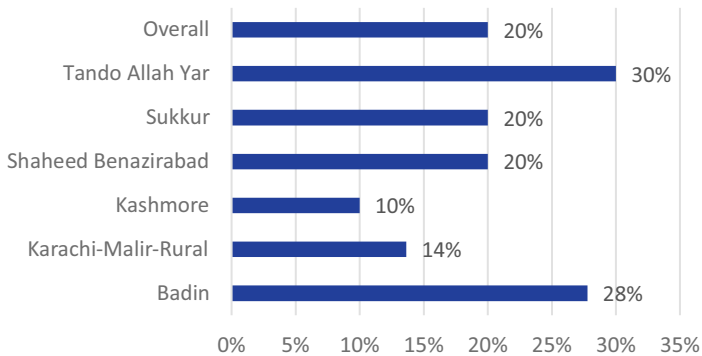
With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan, both the federal and provincial governments took on a proactive approach towards education. However, the ECE subsector ended up being relatively neglected at the beginning of the pandemic. The first resilience plan, developed by the federal government for continuation of educational activities, did not identify early years as an action area. However, as the lockdown situation unfolded across the province, provincial systems actors adapted a leading role in the response strategy, thus increasing the ownership for ECE in the province during the pandemic.

Evidence from the study shows that, on average, only 1 in 5 surveyed teachers received any form of professional development/other support during closures.

Teacher Support during lockdown (n = 90)



Teachers who have received any professional development/ other support during school closures (n = 90)

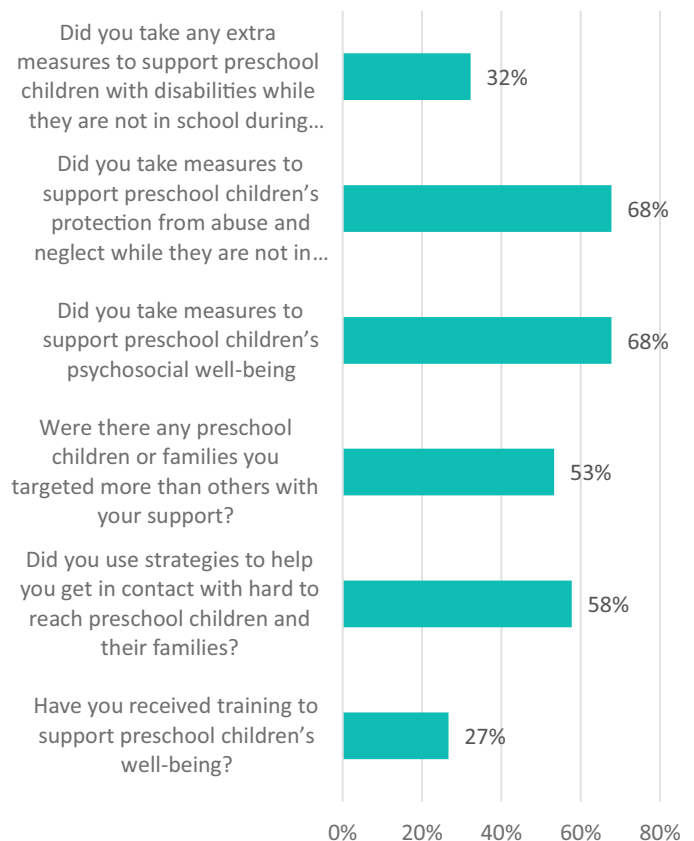


Data from the teacher survey sheds some light on the kind of support which was available to teachers during the pandemic-induced lockdown and is summarized in the following figure. A significant majority of teachers in all districts has been able to get up-to-date information of schools operating status, has regularly scheduled meetings with their principal/ head teacher and has been able to contact their supervisor for guidance. However, the situation is less encouraging when it comes to professional development, teachers' feedback on preschool reopening plans and trainings on providing learning support to children.

Another aspect of ECE staffs' work during the pandemic is their engagement with the parents and how transferred the information and training provided by the government to the parents. Therefore, support and training for ECE staff is further reflected in how they engage with parents and children.

Here there are major gains with regards to inclusivity and equity in teacher support for children. Across all districts, a majority of teachers reported using strategies to engage with hard-to-reach children and their families. Thus, there is a significant number of students who were regularly engaged with by teachers during the lockdown.

Support provided to Teachers & Teacher's Support for Children (n = 90)



On the financial support extended to the ECE staff, more than 96% of the teachers reported receiving their salaries during the lockdown period. A breakdown by district provides some further elaboration in this regard. In some districts, such as Shaheed Benazirabad and Sukkur, all teachers reported receiving full salary and did not report any need for special support from the government. Then there were other districts such as Tando Allahyar where 91% of the teachers reported receiving a salary. Overall, 4% of the teachers reported receiving special support from the government, thus bringing to light the possibility that extra financial support was available. However, the disbursement criteria for this special financial support could not be ascertained.

Financial Support for ECE staff During Lockdown		
	When schools were closed, did you receive a salary?	Did you receive any special supports from the government or your school during this time?
Badin	94%	0%
Karachi-Malir-Rural	95%	5%
Kashmore	90%	0%
Shaheed Benazirabad	100%	10%
Sukkur	100%	0%
Tando Allah Yar	90%	10%
Overall	96%	4%

Experience of Children and Families

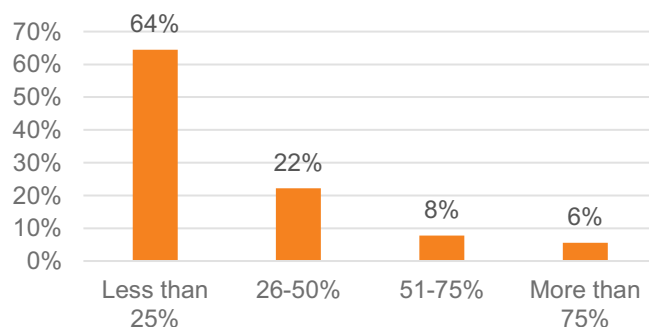
Participation in Distance Learning for ECE during COVID-19

While children in primary grades were offered some form of distance learning opportunities in addition to regular contact with teachers for assignments/homework, a similar approach was lacking for children in ECE during the early days of the pandemic. However, this changed and there were some improvements seen during the course of the pandemic as more initiatives aimed at ECE children were introduced at the provincial level.

Although a majority of sampled teachers reported assigning home learning activities to ECE students during the lockdown period (78%), there was some ambiguity on the uptake of distance learning activities. More than half of the surveyed teachers estimated that less than one-fourth of the children in their ECE classrooms participated in distance learning activities.

This meant that as per the views of these teachers, only less than half of the school going ECE population was utilizing the distance learning facilities through digital mediums such as TV/smartphones/computer etc. A mere 6% of the teachers thought that over 75% of their class had participated in the distance learning activities.

If you had to guess, what percentage of the students in your class participated in the distance learning activities offered by your school or the government? (n = 90)

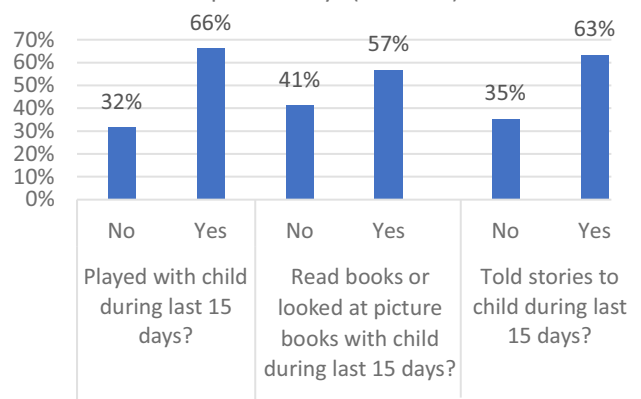


Learning Activities at Home

As play-based learning is increasingly being recognized as a major component of learning in early years and a crucial factor in child development, its presence in official ECE pedagogy is slowly emerging. In this regard, parental engagement has a key role to play. Play-based learning is a process that continues in both official ECE classroom settings and at home. This is particularly the case in lockdown situations where young children do not have access to ECE classroom settings which encourages learning and discovery. Thus, play-based learning at home with parental engagement becomes a substitute learning outlet, and a much desired one where parents' bond with children is being strengthened.

Evidence from our study indicates a relatively high uptake of play-based learning with 66% caregivers reporting to have played with their child during the past 15 days. Similarly, 57% of caregivers claimed to have read books and 63% reported to have told stories to their child during the last 15 days.

Caregivers' Engagement in Learning Activities in past 15 days (n = 1690)

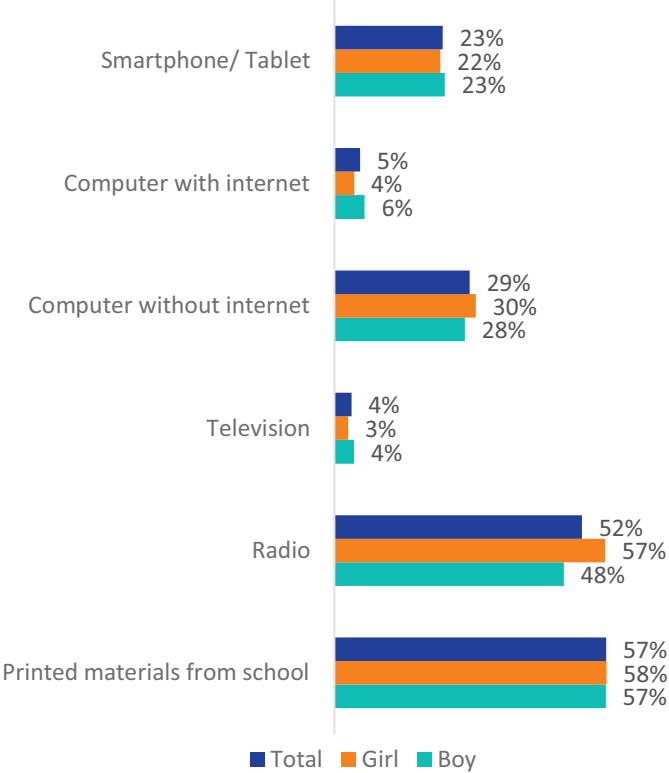


When divided across gender, a clear discrepancy emerges. Parental engagement for boys is consistently higher than that for girls across all three questions. This points to a gender-gap in early years shifting from school settings to home environments during the pandemic. Girls are left relatively behind even in play-based learning, which would subsequently reflect in learning and development outcomes. It is therefore pertinent to note how parental engagement can be made gender-inclusive. Nevertheless, **there is a clear reason to believe that “parental engagement in play-based learning” can be termed as the “COVID Dividend”.**

Caregivers’ Engagement in Learning Activities in past 15 days			
Child’s Gender	Played with child during last 15 days?	Read books or looked at picture books with child during last 15 days?	Told stories to child during last 15 days?
Girl	64%	53%	61%
Boy	69%	61%	67%
Total	66%	57%	63%

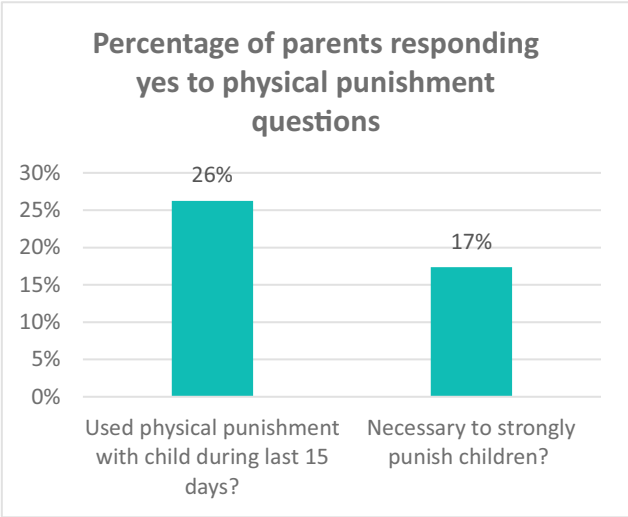
On the other hand, access to distance learning was limited. As data suggests, children's access to distance learning is dependent on their socio-economic background, among other things. Keeping this in mind, the overall uptake for distance learning options was limited as shown in the Figure below. The highest uptake for learning materials came in the form of printed materials from school (57%). Distance-learning initiatives through computers with internet connection were accessed by a mere 5% of the children, and only 23% accessed distance learning on a mobile phone or tablet. The lack of universal internet coverage was a major hindrance, as 93% of households reportedly did not have an internet or wifi connection. Outside of printed materials provided by schools, the second largest source of free learning material accessed by children was the radio, with as many as 52% of the children accessing it. Extrapolating these trends to the school-going ECE population in these districts, hundreds of thousands of ECE students have accessed free learning materials through printed materials provided by schools and TV. This is positively encouraging and shows the huge impact and potential of these interventions along with providing us with lessons for similar interventions in future. However, access to free learning materials also comprises of a positive gendered dimension as the following figure demonstrates. This is particularly marked with regards to access to radio with 48% parents of boy reporting access to this free learning resource, compared to 57% for boys.

Did the child access free learning materials in the past 15 days? (n = 1690)



Child Disciplining

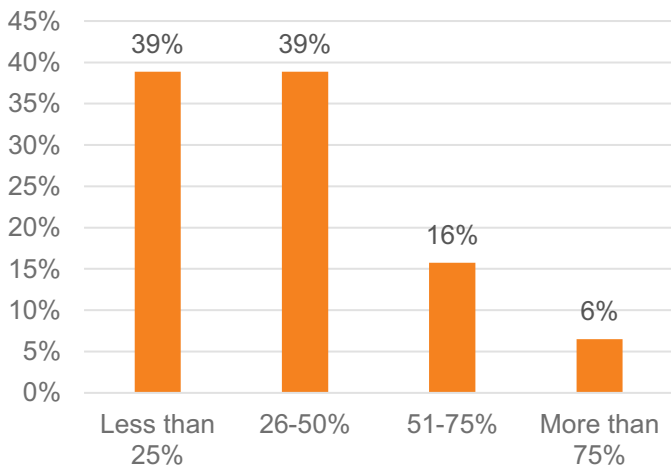
While learning activities have been regular across households, indicating the rise of playful parenting in early years, the data also indicates continuing traditional disciplining norms. This is particularly alarming in the case for physical punishment. The practice is corroborated with another reinforcement question pertaining to the beliefs/norms with regards to child disciplining; 17% of the parents reportedly believe that it is sometimes necessary to physically punish children. There is a clear tension when juxtaposed against the evidence on playful learning activities that reveal just the opposite and optimistic behavior around playful parenting and engagement with children.



Return to School

When it comes to return to school after the lockdown, the responses were mixed. Evidence from the data shows that in nearly one-third of the schools, head teachers reported that more than half of their ECE class did not come back to the school. This hints at enrolment loss and a significant drop-out ration.

What percentage of your ECE class attended after school reopening? (n = 108)



Child Development

In order to measure children's development, enumerators assessed children one-on-one using an assessment tool which is part of the MELQO. This tool assesses four domains: early literacy, early math, executive function and socioemotional development of children ages 3-7 years. Each domain included tasks for the children to perform to assess their overall development as summarized in Box 1.

Box 1: What do we try to assess to measure children's learning development?

Early literacy skills

- Do they know the name of different objects?
- Do they know the name and sound of letters?
- Do they understand stories?

Early numeracy skills

- Do they know how to count?
- Do they identify numbers and compare them?
- Can they do simple additions

Executive function

- Can they follow simple and more complicated instructions?
- Can they repeat sequences of number forward and backwards?

Socioemotional development.

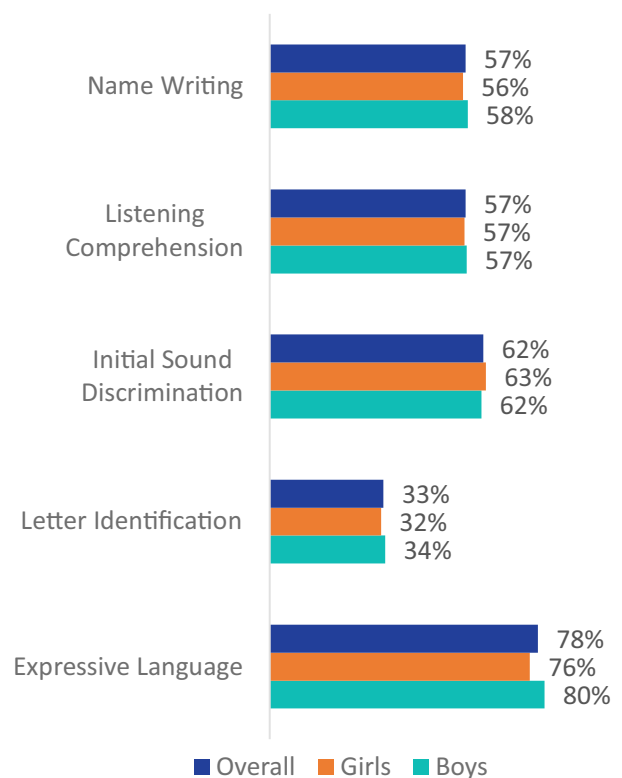
- Are they able to take perspective or feel empathy for others?
- Do they understand and can express their own feeling?

a. Early Literacy Skills

Children were most successful with expressive language, which means being able to label objects or describe act asked children to identify parts of the body that the enumerator pointed to. 78% of children answered this task correctly, with boys outperforming girls by a small margin of 4%. Listening comprehension involved children listening to a story and then answering questions, which 57% of the children performed correctly.

Letter identification was the most challenging for children, with an average score of 33%. That means that children were able to identify on average 5 letters out of 15 presented. More than half the children were able to correctly write their name. It is pertinent to note here that there was a gender-wise balance in terms of literacy skills for both girls and boys.

Percentage of Children Correctly Answering Language and Literacy Items



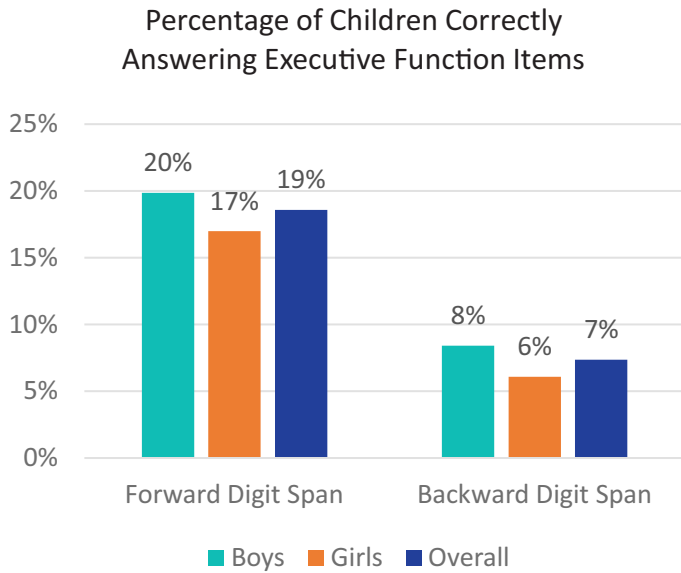
b. Early Numeracy Skills

When it comes to numeracy, overall children performed well. Most children (69%) were able to count as high as 9. Large percentages of children also answered items correctly for simple addition (61%).

However, there was intra-gender differences. A higher percentage of boys performed the numeracy task successfully in comparison to girls. Whether this is reflected further in higher grades is yet to be seen.

c. Executive Function

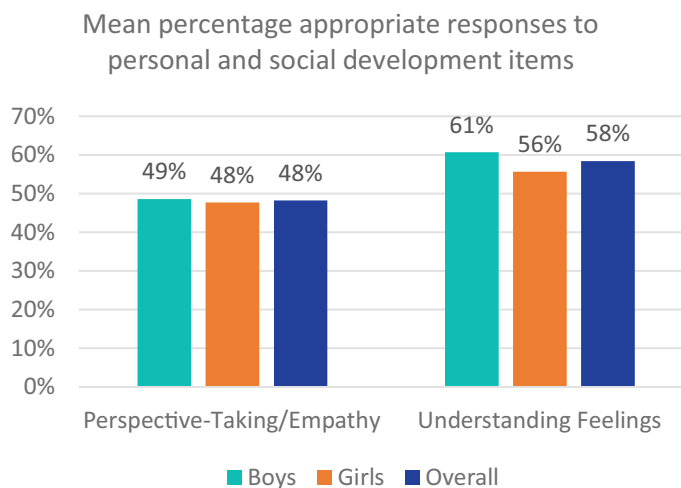
Executive function skills are crucial for child development since these are the skills needed to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, make connections and control and regulate thoughts, emotions and actions. In this domain, generally children achieved low scores when asked to repeat numbers in the same order. Their scores were further reduced when asked to say them backwards.



d. Socio-emotional development

Socio-emotional development involves the ability to regulate behavior and interact with others. This domain only included two tasks: understanding feelings and perspective taking. In understanding feelings children had to explain what makes themselves feel happy and unhappy. In perspective taking children had to identify how a crying boy was feeling and what to do for help him feel better.

Nearly half of the children (48%) gave appropriate answers for perspective taking/empathy. Most (58%) were able to name things that made them happy and unhappy.



Most of the information about children's personal and social development is found in the caregiver survey results. Selected items are displayed in the table below. Areas where large percentages of children are reported by the parents to always behave in a pro-social manner include getting along with others (75%), having a good concentration (77%), and taking responsibility for their own actions (86%).

	Boy	Girl	Overall
Has good concentration	77%	78%	77%
Remembers all the instructions when asked to do several things?	57%	57%	57%
Plans in advance before doing things?	81%	82%	82%
Stops an activity when told to do so?	70%	70%	70%
Keeps working at something until s/he is finished?	72%	75%	73%
Takes the responsibility for his/her actions?	86%	86%	86%
Gets along with other children?	74%	77%	75%
Adjusts easily to transitions? (for example, a new teacher or classroom)	82%	82%	82%
Calms down after being very active?	48%	55%	51%

Child Functioning Module

Children with disabilities can be among the most marginalized and forgotten in a pandemic or other emergency situations. We developed a shortened version of the Child Functioning Module to understand the prevalence of and types of disabilities that children in Sindh experience. This adapted version is based on the overlapping questions in the questionnaires for 2-4 years old and 5-17 years old and covers five functionings including seeing, hearing, walking, communication and learning. As shown in the Table below, we find that the disability prevalence among our sample was 4.6% i.e., there are 4.6% children in our sample who were suffering from at least one type of disability.

	Number	Percentage
No Disability	1785	95.4%
With Disability	86	4.6%

With regards to the disability status by functioning type, we see that there were 0.7% who had a visual impairment, 1.9% with hearing impairment, 1% with moderate/severe walking difficulties, 4.2% with moderate/severe difficulties in communication and 12.5% with moderate/severe difficulties in learning.¹

1. These percentages will not add up to 4.6% as these are showing the disability status by each type of functioning. As mentioned earlier, there will be some children with multiple forms of disabilities. Thus, adding the percentages by each type will lead to double counting and will overestimate the disability prevalence in our sample.

	With Disability	No Disability
Seeing	0.7%	99.3%
Hearing	1.9%	98.1%
Walking	1.0%	99.0%
Communication	4.2%	95.8%
Learning	12.5%	87.5%

We also find significant differences when disaggregating the disability status by gender. There were 3.7% girls in our sample who were children with disabilities. In comparison, there were 5.3% boys who had a disability. While both genders had at least 3 percent disability prevalence in their respective subsamples, the prevalence rate is higher for boys. This is captured in the table below.

	With Disability	No Disability
Boy	5.3%	94.7%
Girl	3.7%	96.3%

Conclusion and Next steps

The key research questions guiding this research are related to ECE in COVID-19 in terms of response, prioritization, learning at home, staff support, and eventual return to school. The study deployed a mixed-methods approach with quantitative data spread across 8 districts, 1600+ households, and 100+ schools in Sindh. Our findings provide some key insights into the early learning situation in Sindh.

- **Prioritization:** While the government actors have over the past few years worked well to transform ECE up to modern standards, our findings show that there are still some major milestones to achieve. The limited prioritization of ECE during the pandemic and the learning losses shown in our findings highlight the need to develop a more coherent, entrenched, and formalized ECE-specific strategies at a systems' level that can mitigate the negative impact of emergency situations and ensure high outcomes in other times.
- **Coherence of response:** At the systems' level, there is not a separate budget head for ECE in the province during the latest fiscal year and nor was ECE included in the resilience plans built by the federal government for school education during the pandemic. Key informants pointed out the difficulties in collecting data for early years, where an assessment system is not fully developed in the province as yet.

- **Learning at home:** There is inherent potential in play-based learning. The high prevalence of play-based learning at home with parents, with guidance from teachers, is a major positive outcome particularly due to the increasing recognition that play is gaining within ECE pedagogy worldwide. More than 66% of the parents engaged with their children in play-based learning activities including storytelling and book reading to keep them stimulated. There is thus an opportunity to engage parents further to ensure that the learning environments for children are well-developed at both the class-room and household level.
- **Teachers:** Despite the challenges faced during the pandemic, there is evidence of teacher engagement. 47% of the teachers reported meeting parents regularly 68% of the teachers reported taking measures for children's psycho-social wellbeing during the pandemic and as many as 78% of the teachers reported assigning activities to children during lockdown. This is despite the fact that only one-fifth of the teachers received any professional development during the pandemic. There is thus scope for further progress in this regard.
- **Equity & Inclusion:** Our findings with regards to households show that access to distance learning during this period was limited. One of the key mediums for distance learning is the internet but 32% of households reported not having an internet or wifi connection. Nevertheless, the participation in distance learning via radio, and printed materials was comparatively high, indicating a sustained effort by the ECE service-providers to keep children engaged. 57% of the children accessed free printed materials during this period and 52% had access to resources on radio. While there is reason for optimism with regards to government's efforts in ECE during the pandemic, there are also challenges.
- **Return to school:** Evidence from the data indicates enrolment loss and a significant drop-out ratio, which in turn requires a systems-level response to early learning in the province.

