

# In Brief

This report is part of an occasional series that distills learning and highlights resources around specific development issues.



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An Agency of the Aga Khan Development Network

## Linking home and school for improved literacy in Pakistan



Photo caption: Children were supported in early literacy development both at home and at school through the Early Literacy Research Intervention Project's blended-learning approach.

*Research by Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development in Pakistan and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education is showing how young children gain when parents and teachers join hands to support early literacy.*

### The challenge: Low literacy, many languages

Pakistan's progress in many areas is undermined by its low literacy levels. As of 2013, only 54.7 percent of adults could read and write – the second lowest literacy rate in Asia.

There is overwhelming evidence globally that early childhood learning is essential to later success in school. But current teaching methods in Pakistan emphasize rote learning, few teachers receive training in early literacy, and the most experienced typically teach in the upper grades.

The leap from home to school is particularly wide. While Urdu and English are the main languages used in school, at home, most children speak one of dozens of regional and provincial languages, including Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi, Brushaski, and Khowar.

Since the Government of Pakistan has committed to providing early childhood education for all, there is an urgent need for evidence-based strategies to promote early learning.

### New words, new skills

With early literacy support for home and school...

#### Children's mean scores improved by:

- 26.5% in using English words, and nearly 50% in understanding
- 39.5% in using Urdu words, and more than 60% in understanding

#### Parents and teachers report:

- Reading daily with their children
- Using everyday tasks and materials to teach numbers and letters
- Using songs, poetry and craft

## The research: A first test for family literacy in Pakistan

From 2013 to 2015, faculty from the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) in Pakistan joined forces with University of Toronto’s Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). Together, and with additional expertise from other members of the Aga Khan Development Network, they adapted and field tested the Family Literacy in Action curriculum, which OISE had earlier pioneered in Canada’s multicultural environment. This was the first study of its kind in Pakistan to assess how three- to five-year-olds would progress with early literacy support from both parents and teachers.

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**“Kids feel proud of their own work. We have learned to let the children do it themselves, not worry about how they will do it.”**

- Teacher participant

The Early Literacy Research Intervention Project (ELRIP) was piloted in Karachi and in the mountainous northern region of Gilgit-Baltistan, in six English-medium schools with a pre-primary section. Most participating children spoke a language other than English at home. In total, 36 families and 11 teachers took part.

Teachers received blended training — online and in workshops, and with ongoing mentorship in the classroom. Families learned that they could prepare their children for math and reading by counting, measuring, and reading with them during daily routines like cooking. The curriculum was expanded to include Urdu translations of songs and stories,

and accessible handouts for teachers and parents. Both were encouraged to use Urdu and the home language with children, even when the teaching material was in English. They learned to use a creative range of craft and play to teach. For example, children shaped letters of the alphabet from clay.



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**“ We support [our children] to write letters in flour. Before this, we never let them touch the flour.”**

- Teacher participant



Photo caption: Families participated in a family intervention program that included activities to help them support early literacy development at home

### **The results: New confidence, new skills, and joy in learning**

Results showed that children whose families and teachers had both participated in the training made greater gains than those whose teachers alone took part, or those who had neither parents nor teachers involved. They made the most progress in reading, writing, vocabulary, and number sense in English, and in writing, vocabulary, and letter recognition in Urdu. In understanding English words, for example, the mean scores of children in the Family Literacy program improved by 28% more than those of the control group, and 19% more than those of children whose teachers alone received training.

Both teachers and parents gained confidence in supporting children’s early learning. Parents reported using strategies such as reading from biscuit packages and counting everyday objects with their children. Teachers gained insights on best classroom practices and current research on language development. Both parents and teachers better understood that literacy starts early in life, through interactions with family and the environment.

As the first study of its kind in Pakistan, the partnership strengthened the ability of AKU-IED and OISE to expand the early literacy curriculum to meet the needs of multilingual and low-income areas. As the lead investigator, Dr Almina Pardhan explains, “We needed a range of specialists, but few had any experience in early childhood education. Over time, we developed great people who are now applying their new knowledge of early literacy in other projects and studies.”

## Looking forward: New capacity for teaching excellence

Professional development for teachers remains an urgent priority in Pakistan. Lessons from this project will help AKU-IED and its partners respond with locally-tailored curriculum that supports teachers, parents, and their children. Its research findings echo what studies elsewhere have demonstrated – that involving both parents and teachers in early learning has clear benefits. In future early literacy programs in Pakistan, ongoing support is recommended to give parents and teachers the skills and confidence needed to apply what they learn.

## Aga Khan Foundation Canada

Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC) is a non-profit international development agency, working in Asia and Africa to find sustainable solutions to the complex problems causing global poverty. Established in 1980, AKFC is a registered Canadian charity and an agency of the worldwide Aga Khan Development Network.

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The Institutional Partnership for Human Development (IPHD) is a crosscutting project of the Partnership for Advancing Human Development in Africa and Asia (PAHDAA) that is funded by Global Affairs Canada and AKFC. IPHD aims to mobilize Canadian expertise and institutions to respond to a broad set of needs within indigenous institutions in their efforts to improve human development. In total, eleven partnerships between Canadian universities and colleges and overseas institutions have been supported by IPHD.

Undertaken with the financial support of:



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