

## Starting right with Aarambh: Maharashtra's ingenious intervention to improve early growth and development of children across the state

Aastha Singh

We often find people who are proud of the work they do. And yet, it is rare to see individuals who are moved, inspired, and intrinsically motivated because they believe in what they do.

"I breastfed my first child within 30 minutes of the baby being born, and unlike the other men in my family, my husband understood why this is important" says Manisha<sup>1</sup>, a young mother who is professionally a supervisor with the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme.

"If it weren't for my training through the Aarambh programme, perhaps I too, like the other women around me, would have refrained from giving my child colostrum which is the first form of milk produced immediately after delivering a newborn."



*Eighteen-month old Gayatri Santosh Dhurve from the Peth village of Maharashtra's Wardha district is seen interacting playfully with her parents. The role of both parents is important when it comes to early childhood development of children* © UNICEF/UN/00000/Lastname

As Manisha continues to share her story, she highlights how noticing, understanding, and responding to her child's subtle signals in a timely and appropriate manner was another important facet she had to learn to implement. "Most often, parents do not know how to engage and play with a newborn baby who is too young to speak or respond. However, to ensure a child

begins to learn early, it is crucial for both parents to do this because the earliest moments of a child's life are the most important!"

Like the five other ICDS supervisors sitting next to her, Manisha contributed to the training of 3,000 Anganwadi supervisors across Maharashtra who further trained 107,000 frontline workers in delivering services to improve Early Childhood Development (ECD) practises amongst communities. They undertook this work as part of their role in the Aarambh programme.

"It is often hard to convince women into abandoning age-old myths around breastfeeding" Manisha continues. "So, we use creative ways to solve the problem! For instance, to assure women that colostrum is good for their baby, we often talk about a local (and highly nutritious) delicacy made from cow's colostrum. We try to make women see that if eating cow's colostrum is delicious and healthy; why should babies be denied the privilege? When we turn science into simple and relatable language, we see women and families adopt good ECD practises more willingly."

As Manisha's ICDS co-workers smile wide at the ingenious analogy, the pride in their eyes is unmistakable. The ladies continue to explain how metaphors, analogies, and game-based activities crucial elements of the programme are. To explain to parents why the early moments of a child's life matter the most, the frontline workers encourage parents to play a game where thread is used to create a web-like neural map representing the window of opportunity wherein a child's brain develops rapidly.



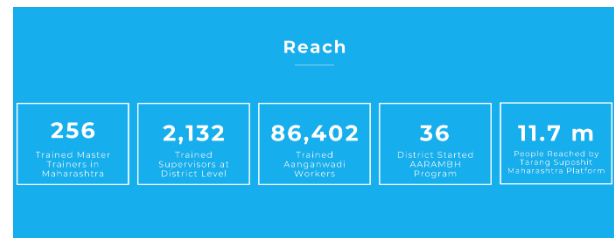
*The team of ICDS supervisors along with medical specialists from Wadia Children's Hospital, members from the UNICEF Maharashtra office and UNICEF India country office team Image credits: UNICEF/2023/ Sylvie Chamois*

The ICDS supervisors and workers fervently believe that the Aarambh programme is successful in creating footprints of change across multiple districts owing to its adaptable and integrated approach for joyful learning. Rooted in the foundation of a participatory training approach which emphasises appreciative enquiry - through demonstration, skill building, and social behaviour change communication - Aarambh has convinced families and communities of how it truly takes a village to raise a child optimally.



*An example of the ingenious learning methodology that Aarambh employs while educating parents on good ECD practises. In the above image, facilitators are seen conducting an activity where spools of thread are used to create a web-like neural map representing the window of opportunity wherein a child's brain develops rapidly Image Credits: The Aarambh for ECD [website](#)*

Implemented by the Department of Women and Child Development and the Department of Health and Family Welfare in Maharashtra in partnership with Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences (MGIMS), Sevagram, and UNICEF, the programme aims to leverage existing government systems and services to ensure optimal growth, development, nutrition, and health for each child, especially during the first 1000 days of their life (from conception to the child's second birth anniversary).



*The Aarambh programme has successfully created footprints of change not merely in the lives of its beneficiaries but also for the families of its implementers.*

The programme is rooted in WHO, UNICEF, and World Bank's nurturing care framework for early childhood development which provides a road map for action to help children not merely survive, but truly thrive. This is important because research suggests that in low- and middle-income countries, about 250 million children under 5 years of age are at risk of not reaching their full developmental potential.<sup>2</sup>

Children who do not receive adequate health, nutrition, early stimulation, learning opportunities, care and protection, all identified as elements of 'nurturing care', tend to have lowered cognitive, language, and psycho-social outcomes as well as executive functioning.

To mitigate these consequences and ensure no child is left behind, government ministries, MGIMS Sevagram and UNICEF actively collaborated to develop a proof of concept. From the pilot to the scale up stage, UNICEF offered support on planning, operationalisation, module development, capacity building, advocacy, and leveraging funds for implementation.

The Hindi term Aarambh literally translates to 'a new beginning'. And in many ways, Aarambh does justice to its name by offering a new model of programming and service delivery – one that stands strong on the pillars of convergence, collaboration, and integration.

As a result, women like Manisha – and the many others who have been trained by her and her ICDS co-workers – now have the tools and information to translate critical elements of nurturing care into action while also highlighting the role that fathers, grandparents, and other family members must play in this journey.

"We now see things we (and communities) had never seen before" says Aarti, another ICDS supervisor sitting next to Manisha. "Aarambh has

given us direction on how to understand the feelings of a child and play an active role in their development.

When we convey small details to parents like how to talk to and play with a baby or why giving them skin-to-skin contact is crucial, parents understand how to be with their child on a deeper level. These practises help parents feel closer to their baby while also bringing families together.”

Aarti further reflects on how “earlier, the common notion was that females or mothers should be responsible for giving care to a child. However, after Aarambh, we also see fathers and men getting involved. In the pursuit to protect their children, parents would often also limit their child and curb their movement.

Now, they understand why engaging in play, curiosity, and exploration is important for their baby’s development. So, from scolding children for scattering things, parents now join in with their child to play and have fun!” Aarti says with a chuckle. “So essentially, we’ve found that the first step to ensuring a child’s healthy and happy future is transforming the parents’ thought process.”



*A father and his son posing for a perfect photo during a home visit by an ICDS frontline worker in Babhulgaon village situated in Maharashtra's Yavatmal district.*

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After offering the roadmap for a preventive approach that can transform the early years of a child’s life, UNICEF Maharashtra and its partners are working towards scaling up Aarambh across all districts in the state. And like Manisha, Aarti and their ICDS co-workers would confess, these ripples of change are just beginning and will continue to steadily rise.

*\* All quotes have been translated to English from Marathi*

*Towards facilitating ECD social behaviour change on a community level; the Aarambh programme developed a powerful (and young!) mascot. [Hear more about good ECD practices directly from this mascot, Tara](#) who is a 3-year-old girl from Yavatmal district, Maharashtra.*

Along with a local anganwadi Tai , Tara goes about spreading awareness on the primary tenets of Early Childhood Development. An initiative by Department of Women and Child Development, ICDS, MGIMS Sewagram , RJMCHN Mission & UNICEF Maharashtra, Tara is a creative representation, ambassador for Aarambh /ECD of the full potential a child can achieve if the correct principles of Early Childhood Development are applied.

The stories of Tara highlight important aspects such as mandatory breastfeeding, importance of fathers spending time with children, activities that enhance a child's cognitive skills and so on. Tara is now reaching every home through various channels of social media.

The stories of Tara are based on real experiences and interventions from the field by thousands of anganwadi workers across the state of Maharashtra.

**For more information, please contact**

Sylvie Chamois [schamois@unicef.org](mailto:schamois@unicef.org)