

**Saving Brains Project: Maternal, Newborn Health and Early Childhood Development in Rural, Low Literacy Settings of Ethiopia**

*Implemented in Arsi Negele Woreda, Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia  
(October 2014 to September 2016)*

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Christian Children's Fund of Canada (CCFC) piloted a two-year project titled "Maternal, Newborn Health and Early Childhood Development in Rural, Low Literacy Settings of Ethiopia," (commonly known as the "Saving Brains Project"), from October 2014 to September 2016.

CCFC designed, planned and provided technical support through the process of implementing, monitoring and evaluating the Saving Brains Project, while BBBC was responsible for direct implementation.

The Saving Brains project was implemented/piloted in Arsi Negele Woreda (Woreda), West Arsi zone, Oromia Regional State in Ethiopia. The collaborators for the project were from the government office, mainly the District Health Office, and there was an expert (professional) from Addis Ababa University; the project was also technically supported by the Hincks-Dellcrest Centre in Toronto, Canada. The project was undertaken with financial support from Grand Challenges Canada and the Government of Canada.

The project was piloted with a proof-of-concept to test the feasibility and effectiveness of two knowledge-delivery mechanisms:

- Pictorially illustrated through a Learning Through Play (LTP) calendar
- Through an audio-visual early-brain development education program in rural, low-literacy communities

The idea was to determine if the knowledge-delivery mechanisms are effective in improving parents'/caregivers' knowledge, skills and behaviour in child-rearing as well as to demonstrate if this has a positive and measurable change on physical, cognitive, language and socio-emotional development of children 0 to 3 years of age.

The goal was to improve the health, physical, cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional development of 3,000 children, aged 0 to 3, in 2,500 households by enabling parents to protect and nurture early-brain development during both the prenatal and early-childhood periods.

The final evaluation (the post-intervention evaluation) applied quantitative (household surveys) and qualitative data collection methods (focus group discussions and in-depth interviews). It also collected data on key physical measurements/anthropometry, including height, weight and head circumference and MUAC from all children during the data collection in both control group (non-intervention areas) and intervention groups (in the communities where the project interventions have been taken place). The evaluation took place in the last months of end of the project period, between August and September 2016.

The result of the evaluation shows the project achieved its objectives, and the knowledge-delivery mechanisms, namely the Learning Through Play (LTP) and audio-visual early-brain development education program, was effective in improving parents'/caregivers' knowledge, skills and behaviour in

child-rearing. This has been evidenced by benefits to physical, cognitive, language and socio-emotional development of children 0-3 years of age.

- The proportion of parents who answered correctly to more than 50% of the LTP (Learning Through Play) questions on parental knowledge assessment was 51.80% and 99.40% in the control and intervention *kebeles* (sub-districts), respectively, which showed statistically significant difference in the knowledge of parents related to antenatal care, delivery and postnatal care between the control and intervention groups.
- About 9.54% of parents in the control area, and 97.09% of parents in intervention area, practised proper parenting (early stimulation and attachment) for their children.
- The proportion of children under 3 years of age who showed normal problem-solving ability (cognitive function of a child) was significant between the control group (31.5%) and intervention areas (63.9%).
- The communication skills of children in the intervention areas was 84.90%, as compared to the control areas or groups of 46.9%.
- The proportion of children with normal gross motor skills in the control groups was 36.40%, as compared to the intervention groups, which was 68.2%.
- About 17.0% and 46.20% of children (0 to 3 years of age) had normal fine-motor skills in control and intervention areas, respectively. However, there was no significant difference between the control and intervention groups concerning wasting and underweight prevalence among children.
- The proportion of children with normal personal-social development skills was 42% in control and 74.4% in the intervention groups.
- The proportion of children with normal social-emotional skills in the control groups was 51.5% and that of in the intervention groups was 83%.

Based on the findings of the evaluation, it has been recommended that the knowledge-delivery approach: Learning Through Play and dissemination of audio-visual messages should be scaled up in other part of the country to make the early-child development program more effective and impactful.