

Evaluation of Save the Children's First Steps Parenting Program

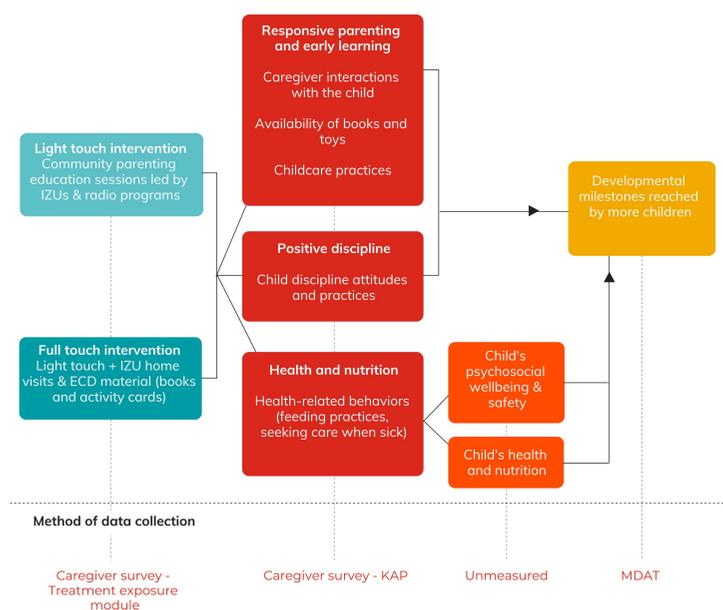
Pietro Franchi, Laura Le Saux, Maggie Vinyard, Laterite Ltd
Jean de Dieu Harerimana, Save the Children Rwanda

Introduction & Methodology

Save the Children's First Steps, or "Intera za Mbere", parenting program aims to improve parenting practices, child development outcomes, and emergent literacy in the homes of children under three years of age. The program was implemented in Gasabo, Kirehe and Ruhango districts in partnership with a local organization, Umuhuza. The cohort of families in this evaluation received the intervention between November 2019 and March 2020.

The First Steps program was delivered in two different versions: full and light-touch. Both versions are delivered by the Inshuti z'umuryango (IZU) community workforce, and include 18 in-person group parenting sessions through a radio program. The full version of the intervention includes at least one home visit by the IZU and a larger package of materials.

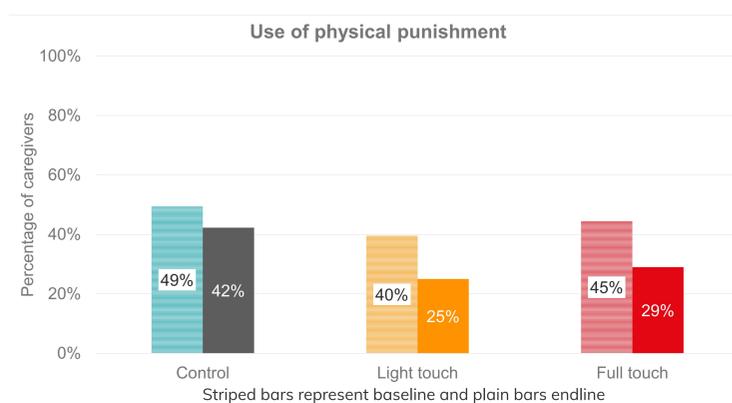
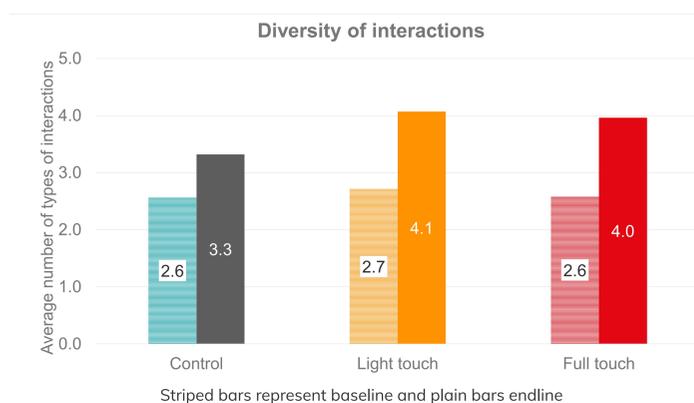
This evaluation is a cluster Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) with three arms, comparing changes in caregiver practices and child development outcomes between full and light-touch versions of the intervention and no intervention. The theory of change of the intervention, key outcomes, and method of data collection for each are shown in the figure. This evaluation followed 1,107 caregiver-child pairs interviewed at two time points, before the intervention in September 2019 and again in September-October 2021.



Key findings

Both the full and light-touch versions of the intervention improved caregiver practices, compared to the control group. In both treatment groups there was:

- a significantly larger increase in the diversity of interactions between caregivers in children, particularly among activities that were uncommon at baseline such as reading books, telling stories, and naming, counting or drawing with the child. The difference between the full and light-touch group is not significant.
- an increase in the engagement of fathers, with a larger increase in the share of fathers engaging in at least one type of interaction with their child in the last three days in the intervention groups (+8 percentage points (pp) for the full treatment and +13 pp for the light-touch version).
- a significantly larger decrease in caregivers' use of physical punishment and increase in use of non-violent discipline practices between baseline and endline in the full and light-touch treatment groups compared to the control. The difference between full and light-touch groups is not significant.
- a smaller increase in caregivers leaving children at home for more than one hour among treatment than control groups - despite the fact that children were older at endline.



- The evaluation did not any significant effect of the intervention on child development, measured by the change in Malawi Development Assessment Tool (MDAT) scores.
 - Caregiver practices may take some time to translate into changes in developmental outcomes
 - It is also possible that the MDAT tool failed to capture any improvements
- However, improvement in some caregiver practices are associated with both the intervention and improved child development, including:
 - An increase in non-violent discipline practices
 - An increase in the diversity of interactions between caregiver and child

This provides evidence for a pathway through which the intervention may affect child development, even if we were unable to detect that effect in this evaluation.

Recommendations

The findings confirm that the First Steps program positively impact responsive parenting and positive discipline practices. The evaluation indicates a mechanism through which the program likely contributes to positive developmental changes.

The light-touch version of the program is sufficient to change parenting practices. The full version of the intervention does not lead to larger improvements than the light-touch version.

The one exception was availability of books, which increased more in the full version of the intervention than control, as expected given books were part of the larger package of materials provided to the full intervention group.

Future research could further explore the impact of the First Steps program on children's developmental outcomes, potentially within a different time frame or using a different measure of child development.

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Contact details: For additional information about this research, you can reach out to Pietro Franchi at pfranchi@laterite.com, Jean de Dieu Harerimana at Jeandedieu.Harerimana@savethechildren.org