

**Improving Early Childhood Outcomes for Children and Families: Lessons from our KidSTART Journey**

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*Abstract: This paper shares the experience of the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) in implementing the KidSTART pilot in 3 regions. KidSTART aims to provide upstream and holistic wrap-around support for young children from low-resource families. In implementing the pilot, ECDA adopts an evidence-informed approach, integrating evidence-based programmes, practice-based processes, client-centricity, as well as professional values. ECDA's experience provides some learning points for pioneering new upstream programmes for young children from low-resourced families.*

*Keywords: KidSTART; early childhood; low-resource families; evidence-informed approach*

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## **1. Introduction**

The Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) implemented the KidSTART pilot in July 2016 to provide children and caregivers from low-income families with new forms of support, coordinating and strengthening support across agencies and monitoring the developmental progress of children from birth to 6 years old.

## **2. Evidence for an Upstream Early Years Support Programme for Children from Low-Resource Families**

### *Importance of the early years*

Neuroscience informs us that cognitive, emotional and social capacities are inextricably intertwined in the brain, and the emotional and physical health, social skill, and cognitive-linguistic capacities that emerge in the early years are all important pre-requisites for success later in life (Center on the Developing Child, 2017a).

The interactive influences of genes and experience shape the developing brain (Center on the Developing Child, 2017b). During the first few years of life, new neural connections are formed through rapid proliferation, and are subsequently pruned so that brain circuits become more efficient. Early experiences affect the nature and quality of the brain's developing architecture by determining which circuits are reinforced and which are pruned through lack of use. A major ingredient in this process is the "serve and return" relationship between children and their caregivers. If these responses are absent, unreliable or inappropriate, the brain's architecture does not form as expected, and this can lead to disparities in learning and behaviour. These early disparities can have an adverse effect on children's lifelong outcomes.

### *Providing upstream intervention for young children and caregivers from low-income families*

Various studies have found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to lag behind their peers in their development in early childhood, in academic performance in formal school and will likely not fare as well in their careers. (Babcock, 2014).

A family with low resources or facing challenges can affect a child's development in three primary ways by: (a) placing significant psychological distress on a child's caregiver(s), negatively affecting their caregiving capacity and hence impacting the "serve and return" relationship; (b) making it difficult for caregivers to make greater investments in the

development of their child (such as in providing access to learning materials); and (c) more likely exposing children to ongoing traumatic experiences (such as family violence or reduced parental responsiveness), and the prolonged toxic stress can affect the developing brain and hormonal systems with lifelong consequences (Moore, Arefadib, Deery, Keyes, and West, 2017).

To address the impact of adverse experiences on child development, interventions could target mediators in the pathway – namely home stimulation, parental styles, pregnancy factors, and maternal mental health, which are leverage points for intervention (Hackman, Farah and Meaney, 2010).

### *The KidSTART Model*

It was with the aforementioned literature and evidence in mind that ECDA designed the KidSTART programme to provide support beginning from pregnancy (in partnership with the KIDS 0-3 programme<sup>1</sup>), and to target the following areas:

- Promote child health and development: Equip parents with practical knowledge and skills in areas such as nutrition, antenatal and postnatal care and support, and child development milestones;
- Build strong parent-child bonds: Equip parents with knowledge and skills to better interact with their children and strengthen the ‘serve-and-return’ relationship;
- Support maternal well-being: Conducting maternal mental health screenings and ensure referrals to available support if required; and
- Family functioning: Ensure families are linked up to existing support services in the community if required.

KidSTART is delivered in settings which are natural and familiar to children, such as in their homes, the community and preschools. KidSTART comprises three key programme components: KidSTART Home Visitation Programme (HVP), KidSTART Groups (KSG) and KidSTART Enhanced Support to Preschools (ESP). KidSTART HVP<sup>2</sup> provides regular home visits to parents or main caregivers and their infants from the antenatal stage until the child is three years old, and parents receive support in skills and practical knowledge across areas of

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<sup>1</sup> The KIDS 0-3 programme refers to the Temasek Foundation Cares Kids Integrated Development Service 0-3 programme led by KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital (KKH), in partnership with AMKFSC Community Services Ltd (AMKFSC), and funded by Temasek Foundation Cares.

<sup>2</sup> Depending on the point of intake, the home visits are conducted either by home visitors from KKH or ECDA.

child growth, development, health and nutrition. KSGs are weekly community-based playgroup sessions for parents or main caregivers and their toddlers aged 1 to 3 years, which build up parental skills in child development and parent-child bonding through evidence-based curricula of structured and purposeful play. KidSTART ESP provides selected preschools with additional resources to improve engagement with parents, connect them to external resources, and improve their child's school readiness.

### **3. Using an evidence-informed approach in piloting KidSTART**

An evidence-informed approach increases the likelihood that intended programme outcomes are achieved (Centre for Community Child Health, 2017). Such an approach comprises three key areas: evidence-based programmes, evidence-based processes, and client and professional values and beliefs (Centre for Community Child Health, 2017).

#### *Evidence-based programmes*

ECDA adopted several evidence-based curricula and approaches in implementing KidSTART, including the "Parents as Teachers" and "Abecedarian Approach" from the United States, and "SmallTalk" from Australia, as they have been shown to facilitate upstream child development intervention at the earliest age possible, language acquisition and serve-and-return interactions between children and their caregivers. However, as the programmes were developed in different cultures and overseas contexts, ECDA translated and adapted the content and materials to meet the needs of Singaporean families, who speak multiple languages and have differing understandings and norms for early childhood development or parenting. ECDA also put in place processes to ensure and track fidelity and conducted a one-year formative evaluation to identify key facilitators and address barriers to implementation.

#### *Evidence-based processes*

It is equally important to look at the practices and processes of how services are delivered, in addition to what is being delivered, to ensure effectiveness. Evidence-based processes refer to the way in which service providers and the service system as a whole engage and work with families, individually and collectively (Centre for Community Child Health, 2017).

ECDA recognises the importance of working closely with community partners to strengthen the ecosystem of support and outreach to families. Our KidSTART experience highlights the importance of identifying and working with and through local intermediaries who have good rapport with target group families. These local intermediaries could vary from community to community, and include local grassroots leaders, informal groups, volunteers, or fellow residents who serve as local ‘connectors’ and/or have benefited from programmes. To reduce ‘engagement fatigue’ and minimise overlap in service provision, we put in place data-sharing mechanisms and coordinated outreach efforts with agencies delivering similar or complementary programmes in the neighbourhood. Examples include organising a community event to jointly showcase various programmes that target families with young children, and having one main agency to interface with families.

Apart from working with partners in the community to support the child and family, successful and sustained engagement with individual families is a precondition for delivering programmes with effective outcomes (Centre for Community Child Health, 2017). KidSTART recognises that building successful relationships and working in partnership with parents to support their child’s development is key. All KidSTART practitioners<sup>3</sup> receive initial training and ongoing mentoring to enhance their knowledge in health, early childhood and social work to support the needs of families, as well as their skills and motivation in building rapport and engaging families to continuously deliver high quality services.

#### *Client and professional values*

Client-centricity and professional values also play a crucial role in determining what goals are important, how interventions and programmes are delivered to meet clients’ needs and how effective these are. For services to be effective, they must empower and engage clients, reflect the values of clients and the outcomes that are important to them (Centre for Community Child Health, 2017).

The guiding approach in KidSTART is that parents know their children best, and have aspirations and goals for their children. Empowering parents with knowledge and skills is more effective and sustainable in promoting the development of children with lifelong consequences. KidSTART practitioners therefore adopt a strengths-based approach to recognise and affirm

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<sup>3</sup> KidSTART practitioners refer to Home Visitors delivering the KidSTART Home Visitation Programme, KidSTART Group Facilitators delivering the KidSTART Groups and Child Enabling Executives in the selected preschools under KidSTART Enhanced Support to Preschools.

parents, and support them in developing the skills to interact and engage their children positively. To ensure practices and processes remain relevant and address the needs of children and families, practitioners obtain regular feedback from parents on the programme and their experiences.

*Case Study: An Illustration of KidSTART's approach*

Mdm Zalina's<sup>4</sup> KidSTART journey is a good illustration of KidSTART's approach. When she first joined KidSTART, Mdm Zalina was a full-time caregiver for her 2 children, Ismail aged 2 and Danish aged 11 months. She shared with her KidSTART practitioner her concerns with Ismail's speech delay as he was not able to utter any words at the age of 2. Mdm Zalina also felt helpless when Ismail and Danish threw temper tantrums or displayed acts of aggression. As her husband was working as a part-time mover whilst awaiting sentencing for an alleged offence, Mdm Zalina was also keen to enrol both children in preschool so that she could seek employment and increase their household income. She was not aware of Family Service Centres and their services.

Since joining KidSTART, Mdm Zalina received regular home visits by a KidSTART practitioner who empowers and supports her in enhancing her children's learning and development by using activities from "Parents as Teachers" and strategies from the "Abecedarian Approach". The KidSTART practitioner encouraged Mdm Zalina to incorporate language into her daily routines with the children, and adapted the activities based on available items in her home. To address Mdm Zalina's concerns, the KidSTART practitioner also referred Ismail to KK Women's and Children's Hospital to receive treatment for his speech delay. Mdm Zalina started engaging her children in constant communication and purposeful interactions. She also became more attuned to her children's needs, and worked hard at helping her children meet developmental milestones and address their health needs. Mdm Zalina was pleasantly surprised with their progress, especially when Ismail began speaking more words. She was also more confident in managing both her children's temper tantrums.

KidSTART also worked closely with the Family Service Centre Social Worker to support the family's social functioning and well-being. Ismail and Danish were successfully enrolled in a preschool, and Mdm Zalina received higher subsidies to alleviate the financial burden. With support from her Social Worker, she successfully appealed to commute her

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<sup>4</sup> All names have been changed to protect their privacy.

husband's sentence to home detention, so that he could be at home with the family, and help care for their children.

Mdm Zalina's social support network also increased with her active participation in KidSTART's Group Connect sessions<sup>5</sup> held in the community. Her new friendships led to an informal mutual help arrangement where they babysit one another's children if someone needed to attend to emergencies, or simply just needed an extra pair of hands.

When she graduated from KidSTART, Mdm Zalina shared her confidence in applying the knowledge and strategies gained on her newborn baby.

#### **4. Implications for social services**

The KidSTART journeys of Mdm Zalina and many other KidSTART families have shown us the importance of focusing on children and their needs, of partnering parents in developing their children, and of adopting a strengths-based approach so that their values and the outcomes that are important to them are considered. Whilst we look to evidence-based programmes that have worked overseas, it is important to adapt overseas programmes to our local context so that our local families can benefit from the interventions.

It is critical that practitioners are well-trained and equipped to support target families. KidSTART practitioners need to have broad-based knowledge and skills across healthcare, child development and social work. Training in multi-disciplinary domains, supervision and coaching structures were set up to ensure that KidSTART support is rendered effectively and with fidelity.

The KidSTART experience has also shown the importance of building an ecosystem of support for families, so that their needs can be addressed holistically and more sustainably. While KidSTART's work is centred on the child and their needs, we work in close partnership with community partners and social service agencies to support the entire family system. We do so through case discussions with partners to share about the family's needs and coordinate the support for the family. Working with partners such as FSCs, SSOs and grassroots, builds capabilities across disciplines and unifies agencies as we all work towards the common goal of uplifting the child in the context of his/her family. Such partnerships have also allowed us to

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<sup>5</sup> Group Connect sessions are organised by KidSTART for parents (or main caregivers) on the KidSTART Home Visitation Programme for peer support.

deliver services to families more effectively, by tapping on each other's strengths and experiences; and to support more children and families.

The insights gained from KidSTART's implementation have highlighted the importance of adopting an evidence-informed approach when trying new programmes or interventions. We have also learned to start small, so that adjustments can be made where needed, and we can be agile in adjusting to ground realities.

## **5. Conclusion**

Most children are well-supported by their parents in their development, but children from low-resource backgrounds sometimes face impediments to their development. There is strong evidence on the need and impact of providing upstream support for these children and their families.

KidSTART is the Singapore government's initiative to provide additional support for children from low-resource families by walking alongside parents – creating awareness of the importance of the early years, providing the knowledge, skills and resources to optimise child health and development, and to encourage and support them to be their children's role models in an on-going and lifelong parenting journey.

When we invest wisely in children and families, the next generation will pay that back through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship. We hope that through KidSTART, ECDA can achieve its mission of giving every child a good start in life.

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