



The Reading for Children Programme

Being read to as a child is one of the strongest predictors of later academic success. All over the world, too many children leave primary school unable to read and write fluently. This can have a fundamental impact on their future school, work and life opportunities. The challenge to address this rests partly with schools, but also with families.

Children who have been read to before they go to school, and whose family members continue to read to them, are shown to outperform those who have not. Reading for pleasure helps to develop children's language, literacy, critical thinking, communication, social and emotional skills. Reading at home also reinforces positive relationships within the family. Put simply, being read to from an early age helps children become confident learners.

In Kyrgyzstan, several challenges keep families from reading with their children. There is a serious lack of easily available, affordable and illustrated storybooks, especially in the Kyrgyz language. Parents and caregivers lack time and opportunity due to heavy workloads. In addition, families often underestimate the significance of their role in supporting children's language, learning and development of self-esteem.

In response to these challenges, the Mountain Societies Development Support Programme in Kyrgyzstan (MSDSP KG), with the support of the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), introduced "Reading for Children" (RfC) – an initiative to rekindle a love of books and reading amongst children and their families. Ensuring access to books and helping caregivers understand why and how to read with

their children transforms interactions between family members and encourages children in their studies at school.

An assessment of the programme carried out in 2012 identified key outcomes that are highlighted in this brief. Based on these successes, the assessment recommends that the government of the Kyrgyz Republic support similar activities throughout the country.

Before the programme

Small baseline surveys conducted in Alai Rayon of Osh Oblast in 2006 and Naryn Rayon of Naryn Oblast in 2008 showed that while most families had books in their homes, only 14 percent of them had books for children. In Alai, 20 percent of parents said they never read to their

Baseline studies showed that while most Kyrgyz families have books in their homes, a small minority of them actually have books for children. And while adult literacy rates are reportedly high (99 percent) in the country, the youth literacy rates are by comparison very poor.



"I learned many useful things for me. For example, how to read and stop while reading stories, and then ask questions or help a child to ask questions. I can see how children become more interested when I now work with them."

-- A Reading for Children facilitator speaking about the training she received from the Programme

children. Public libraries were found to have almost no attractive children's books, and the few available were all in Russian.

These baseline survey results have a clear connection to the fact that while adult literacy rates are reportedly high (99 percent) in the country¹, the youth literacy rates are by comparison very poor. In the large-scale, government-sponsored Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), in which Kyrgyz students participated in 2006 and 2009, the Centre for Educational Assessment and Teaching Methods (CEATM) reported that 83 percent of the 15-year-old Kyrgyz participants did not reach the minimal international standard of reading literacy.²

How the programme works

"Reading for Children" encourages families to tell stories, look at books and read with children at home. It addresses constraints to children's early reading at home by establishing "mini-libraries" from which parents, caregivers and siblings can borrow simple, illustrated storybooks to read with young children. Mini-libraries are complemented by workshops for parents and other family members, to build their skills and confidence in interacting with their children and making reading with their children an enjoyable experience for all.

The first AKF Reading for Children programme globally was launched by MSDSP KG in 2007 in Osh Oblast, later expanding to Naryn Oblast. Its aim was to promote a love of reading and enthusiasm for books from early ages by:

- increasing access to age-appropriate reading materials;
- promoting enjoyable reading experiences between parents and young children; and
- strengthening interactions and family bonds between parents and children.

"Mini-libraries" were established within existing school or village libraries to serve as special resource centres for parents and families. Initially, each mini-library received around 500 children's books and developmental games in Kyrgyz and Russian languages. Subsequently, more than 40 book titles were developed by AKF/MSDSP KG together with local prominent authors and illustrators of children's books.

In-service librarians received training as Reading for Children programme facilitators; materials and books, including new children's books developed in Kyrgyz and Russian, filled the shelves; and the mini-libraries began to conduct a wide range of activities for children's early development, including a training workshop for parents on family reading approaches. The mini-libraries also began to host annual book festivals at the village, rayon, oblast and national levels. By 2012, 66

Cover Photo:

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1 UNICEF Country Statistics and ADB (2010) Basic Statistics 2010

2 <http://testing.kg/ru/projects/NSBA2009/>

mini-libraries had been established in Osh and Naryn oblasts and the programme had benefitted approximately 24,000 young readers aged 2-12 years (65 percent of whom were girls), and over 12,000 parents and caregivers.

The programme's scope has since broadened. Reading for Children was initially designed as an initiative to benefit children before they went to school. As the project evolved, and as families and communities moulded it to suit their needs and interests, new books were added and large numbers of school-age children started using the libraries. This enables school-age children to practise emerging literacy skills in enjoyable ways, and improves cost-effectiveness.

In the study described, amongst children of parents who had received RfC training, 75 percent who were school-age (7-12 years) reported using the mini-library regularly. Just over 50 percent of younger children (5-6 years) said they either visited the library with a caregiver, or were brought books from the library by older siblings.

Based on the initial success of AKF's Reading for Children programme in the Kyrgyz Republic, comparable programmes in nine other countries were established between 2008 and 2011: Portugal, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Russia, India, Kenya, Uganda,

Mali and Egypt. By the end of 2012, there were some 500 mini-libraries across these countries. A 30 percent increase in borrowers in 2011-2012 indicated the programme's high and growing demand.

Key successes

In 2012, an external impact assessment of the Reading for Children programme in the Kyrgyz Republic was carried out by a team led by Irina Nizovskaya of the Critical Thinking and Writing Program, an independent research institute. It sampled 13 of the 66 villages where the programme operates. In addition, two villages where the programme does not yet function were assessed, to compare and contrast the findings with those of the programme villages. Survey questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with parents/caregivers, and with teachers and librarians who facilitate the mini-libraries. Observations of mini-libraries and their activities were carried out. Children and parents were observed reading together using a structured observation tool. The key findings of the 2012 assessment are highlighted here:

Finding 1: Access to age-appropriate reading materials fosters a love of books.

- From 2007 to 2012, each of the 13 libraries were provided with

around 500 children's books, including the new book titles developed by AKF/MSDSP KG. In the impact assessment, nine of the 10 favourite books cited by parents and children were those developed by AKF/MSDSP KG.

- Parents in the RfC villages reported that mini-library books help them to read more with their children at home and that their children read more often since the mini-library was established. By comparison, 95 percent of respondents in the villages without mini-libraries reported not visiting their existing school or village libraries because children's books are not available.
- 68 percent of parents from RfC villages have up to 50 books at home compared with only 34 percent of the parents from non-RfC villages, suggesting increased interest in reading associated with the programme.

"Without a mini-library, our children would read only school textbooks."

-- A parent speaking about the Reading for Children Programme

Finding 2: The Reading for Children programme is cost-effective.

- On average, 35,000 Kyrgyz som (US\$ 750) was spent for the establishment of each mini-library, an expenditure of 140 Kyrgyz som (around US\$ 3) per family.



The Reading for Children Programme addresses constraints to children's early reading at home by establishing "mini-libraries" from which families can borrow simple, illustrated storybooks to read with young children. In-service librarians are trained as programme facilitators and help conduct a wide range of activities for children's early development.



By 2012, 66 mini-libraries had been established in Osh and Naryn oblasts and the programme had benefitted approximately 24,000 young readers aged 2-12 years (65 percent of whom were girls), and over 12,000 parents and caregivers.

- All mini-libraries scored highly on library performance: 10 out of 13 scored 80 percent or more. These high scores indicate frequent use of the mini-libraries, despite the fact that certain libraries require better heating systems during the bitterly cold winters. Where the atmosphere is emotionally warm and welcoming, families still brave the weather to visit them.
- The fact that all RfC facilitators (the mini-library librarians) are already paid, as school teachers or school/village librarians, helps to keep costs down.

Finding 3: Reading for Children facilitators play a key role in changing reading habits.

- All 13 facilitators interviewed were very keen to keep working as facilitators in RfC. They recognise the value of the training which they have received and which they provide to parents.

"I realised the importance of parents and grandparents reading to and with their children. I did not read with my children regularly before because it seemed that I did not have enough time. But now I try to read with my children every day."

-- A parent speaking after participating in an RfC parent workshop

Finding 4: Trained parents read more with their children.

- Parents rated highly the training on family reading. More than

two-thirds of parents said that they take time to read books with their children and more than four out of five parents stated that their children have favourite books. Trained parents reported discussing the stories with their children and more than four out of five parents observed that their children ask questions based on what they read together. *In contrast*, in the two villages without RfC mini-libraries or parent training, nearly half of the parents reported that their children do not read at all.

- Of parents who participated in RfC trainings about 75 percent of them reported accompanying their children to the mini-library on a regular basis; about half of them go once a week. Two-thirds of the parents borrow books for their children and about a quarter of them spend time in the mini-library reading with their children.

Finding 5: Families that read together feel stronger bonds.

- After attending RfC trainings, many parents reported that they prefer to read books with their children over spending time in front of the television.

"Before the training, I used to simply read a book, but after I attended the training, I learned to talk about the book's title, show pictures, pause when reading, ask questions, try to find answers together, and discuss."

Based on the initial success of AKF's "Reading for Children" programme in the Kyrgyz Republic, comparable programmes in nine other countries were established between 2008 and 2011: Portugal, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Russia, India, Kenya, Uganda, Mali and Egypt. By the end of 2012, there were some 500 mini-libraries across these countries. A 30 percent increase in borrowers in 2011-2012 indicated the programme's high and growing demand.

In its impact assessment of the Reading for Children project in the Kyrgyz Republic, the Critical Thinking and Writing Program (an independent research institute) reported six key findings:

1. *Access to age-appropriate reading materials fosters a love of books.*
2. *Reading for Children is a cost-effective programme.*
3. *Reading for Children facilitators play a key role in changing reading habits.*
4. *Parents who receive training read more with their children.*
5. *Families that read together feel stronger bonds.*
6. *Reading for Children helps to improve academic performance.*

- Fathers noted that they became closer to their children after attending trainings.

“The training helped us understand that the father also should read books and spend time with their children. In the past, when the children asked me to read, I used to tell them to go and ask their mother to read for them, but now I read books for my children with pleasure.”

- Nearly half of the trained parents mentioned that their children have become friendlier and more respectful towards them, and that family relationships are closer.

Finding 6: The Reading for Children programme helps to improve academic performance.

- Of the 137 trained parents sampled in the study, 90 percent reported that their children started performing better at school. Better school performance is not an explicit aim of RfC, so this finding provides anecdotal evidence of a welcome outcome to be further investigated.

Policy recommendations

Based on the programme's successes, the Aga Khan Foundation recommends that the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic allocate funding to scale up the establishment of mini-libraries and trainings for RfC facilitators and parents. Specific recommendations are as follows:

Policy recommendation 1: That the Ministry of Education and Science introduce family reading nation-wide by:

- *integrating Reading for Children training modules* into the national pre-service and in-service teacher training courses for pre-school and primary school teachers; and
- *organising storybook writing seminars and workshops*, drawing on international experience of publishing storybooks, for authors and early grade teachers.

Policy recommendation 2: That the Ministry of Culture promote children's reading through:

- *strengthening and updating book funds* and organising activities with families and children to build the habit of reading at home;
- *training for facilitators and parents* using the Reading for Children modules;
- *building the support of local and district governments and communities* for family reading initiatives, to encourage local responsibility for the establishment and activities of mini-libraries. As noted in the findings, the study identified an expenditure of *about US\$ 140 Kyrgyz som (US\$ 3) per family* for the establishment of a mini-library; and
- *actively involving mass media* to promote the idea of family reading, especially for instilling a culture and love of reading, and family practices such as

Of the 137 trained parents sampled in the study, 90 percent reported that their children started performing better at school as a result of the programme.





Nearly half of the parents – and fathers in particular – who participated in the Reading for Children workshop reported feeling closer to their children as a result of time spent reading together and talking about stories.

purchasing books and offering books as gifts.

Policy recommendation 3: That the National Writers' Union of the Kyrgyz Republic:

- *enhance children's writers' skills* in children's book development through trainings and workshops; and
- *promote local oral stories* by exploring and publishing them as books with the help of teachers, parents and children.

As for non-governmental organisations, the Aga Khan Foundation recommends that they continue to:

- highlight the importance of increasing children's access to age-appropriate storybooks and reading at home;
- publish new, high-quality children's books in appropriate languages; and
- search for and implement innovative alternative models to promote family reading.

Development Partners

- Rayon (district) education departments
- Naryn Oblast Children's Library
- Osh Oblast Children's Library
- Rayon (district) central libraries
- Village libraries
- School libraries
- National Writers' Union
- National Library
- National writers and illustrators
- Communities
- UNICEF
- Critical Thinking and Writing Program

The Mountain Societies Development Support Programme in Kyrgyzstan (MSDSP KG) was initiated by the Aga Khan Foundation in 2003 with the goal of improving living conditions in mountain communities of the country. For more information about the Reading for Children programme or to obtain the full impact assessment report on which this brief was based, please contact:

Aga Khan Foundation (Kyrgyz Republic)
 An agency of the Aga Khan Development Network
 Address: 138, Toktogul Street
 Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, 720001
 Tel: +996 312 621912/621904
 Fax: +996 312 621896
 Email: burulai.aitikulova@akdn.org
 Website: http://www.akdn.org/kyrgyz_republic

The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is a group of private development agencies working to empower communities and individuals, often in disadvantaged circumstances, to improve living conditions and opportunities, especially in Africa and Asia. Its agencies work in over 30 countries for the common good of all citizens, regardless of their gender, origin or religion. Its underlying impulse is the ethic of compassion for the vulnerable in society.

