

A different future

In Nepal's far west, attention from parents spurs a young girl's learning

By Ambika Pandey



Pramila Rawal (centre) traces letters in her notebook as her father Jagat Bahadur (left) and mother Sita (right) look on in their home in Badhimatika Municipality in Bajura District in Nepal's far west. Pramila has been attending the nearby Balmandir Early Childhood Development Centre for the past year. Though she struggled to adjust at first, her parents' involvement in her learning, following a UNICEF-supported parental education training, has boosted her progress in class.
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Bajura, Nepal – Any time five-year-old Pramila Kumari Rawal picks up a pencil to trace out letters or numbers in her notebook, it's a small miracle as far as her parents are concerned. Eyes trained on the movement of her hands across the page, they break into involuntary smiles.

"Look at how confidently she writes!" beams her mother Sita.

Sita and her husband Jagat Bahadur are both illiterate. Having long struggled to support their little family through daily-wage labour, they had assumed their daughter had a similar fate in store.

So, a year or so ago, when they enrolled her at Balmandir Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centre close to their home in Badhimalika Municipality in Bajura District in Nepal's far west, their expectations were low. Neither Jagat nor Sita knew much about what she would be doing there. According to Sita, they saw it more as a way of keeping her occupied during the day while they worked.

"We didn't even drop her off," Sita says. "She would walk to the centre by herself."

That lack of interest on the parents' part seemed to trickle into the child. Even as Kamala Thapa, the facilitator at the centre, tried to engage Pramila in games and activities with her classmates, she didn't appear to be enjoying herself. Not surprisingly, she was often absent from class, and had a hard time keeping up.



Sita Rawal (right) holds five-year-old Pramila in their home in Badhimalika Municipality in Bajura District in Nepal's far west. Sita and husband Jagat had taken part in a UNICEF-supported parental education training, which prompted them to better understand their role in their daughter's development and change their behaviour accordingly. ©Seto Gurans/2019

In 2018, as part of an effort to reach out to parents of children under the age of five with knowledge and practices related to better childcare, a parental education training was held for ECD facilitators in Martadi, the headquarters of Bajura District. Conducted with the support of UNICEF and its partner Seto Gurans – in coordination with the local government – the programme was made possible thanks to funding from the Swedish Committee for UNICEF.

Around 30 ECD facilitators from all over the district took part in the session, which was one of four such trainings to be run for facilitators from over 130 ECD centres in Bajura. These facilitators were then expected to go on to share the information and skills with parents and caregivers in their respective areas.

Kamala had been one of the participants in the five-day session. The training had touched on a range of subjects, including maternal and child health, better nutrition, hygiene

and sanitation, child safety and protection, and the importance of play in early learning and stimulation, among others.

Once the training concluded, Kamala employed what she had learned to conduct around 15 parental education sessions in her own community. She encouraged Sita and Jagat Bahadur to come, along with other parents from the area.

Although initially reluctant to participate, over time, Pramila's parents warmed up to the sessions. They began to understand what they were doing wrong with regards to Pramila's upbringing, and more importantly, what they could now do to set things right.

"Before we came to the training, we thought being parents was simply about feeding and clothing your child and keeping them safe," Jagat says. "But the classes showed us that we had a much bigger role than that."

The couple began to initiate small changes, starting at home. For one, they started to interact and play with Pramila more, using whatever materials were available to them to make up different games – something they had learned at the parental education classes. They also decided they had to be more encouraging of her experience at the ECD centre.

"We accompanied her to class every day, packed her a lunch. We wanted to make her feel that this was important," Sita says. She also credits facilitator Kamala's support as being a big help in the progress they were able to make in a short time. "She invited us and the other parents to visit the centre and observe how our children were doing," Sita says.

Slowly but surely, the attention from her parents and their involvement in her learning meant that Pramila began to take greater interest in the activities at the ECD centre. Within a span of a few months, she went from being reluctant to go to class to excited to see her friends every day.

"She's changed before our eyes," Jagat says. "And we want to keep it going. It's nice to think that she might have a different future in store for her now."