

Bringing alive the ‘Early Childhood’ opportunity

~ *From intent to impact* ~

In India, a child is born almost every second ... *and then?*

Reality

Early childhood (0-8 years) is burdened with ignorance, vulnerability, stress and anxiety, which limits the child’s growth and learning potential.

India has been experiencing rapid and remarkable change since the turn of this century. While these times are promising, they are also overwhelming for parents, carers and educators at all levels.

Rural and Urban poor: Fear of missing out while others move ahead, not having access to good education, pressure about tuition classes as early as 2 years, anxiety of their child being left behind and trapped in poverty like themselves, guilt about not giving their child a better foundation for the future than themselves.

Semi-Urban and Urban: Constant comparison and competition,¹ increased pressure of success, digital age concerns,² mental health issues³ and an uncertain future.

Irony

We have the answers on paper,
but not the application in practice.

There has been significant focus on ‘early childhood’ over the past decade, with policies and frameworks providing guidance towards addressing the challenges and opportunities of ‘early childhood’ development . Even the recently updated, National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage 2022,⁴ has made valuable additions⁵ to the approach to ‘Early Childhood’ to

¹ [Shantanu Guha Ray. ‘Bogged down by examination anxiety, parental pressures, Indian children have lost the ability to dream’ Firstpost 18 June, 2017](#)

² [de Wit EE, Adithy, Chakranarayan C, Bunders-Aelen JFG, Regeer BJ. “Learning About Parenting Together: A Programme to Support Parents with Inter-generational Concerns in Pune, India.” *Contemporary Family Therapy*. 2018;40\(1\):68-83. doi: 10.1007/s10591-017-9429-7. Epub 2017 Sep 18. PMID: 29568160; PMCID: PMC5847135.](#)

³ [Natrajan, R., Thomas, V. “Need for Family Therapy Services for Middle-Class Families in India.” *Contemporary Family Therapy* 24, 483–503 \(2002\) <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1019819401113>](#)

⁴ [National Curriculum Framework - Foundational Stage, 2022](#)

⁵ [Rinchen Norbu Wangchuk. “Why Play? How India’s Children Can Learn Better With The National Curriculum Frameworks.” *The Better India* 1 Dec, 2022](#)



help build a strong foundation not only for our children but also for parents and carers, in keeping with these dynamic yet vulnerable times.

However, These insights and frameworks cannot remain on paper alone - they need to reach our children, carers, educators and stakeholders of India's future - everyone can and must benefit from them within this crucial window of opportunity during the early years (0-8 years).

Opportunity

To make the most of 'Early Childhood' (0-8 years) to build a strong foundation for the child's future.

It's a 'Nation building' opportunity:

We cannot afford to miss this opportunity, which comes only once with each generation. Our timely realization and action can help our children adapt to and thrive in a future filled with unpredictable challenges, yet glorious possibilities.

We invite you to join this **social mission to celebrate and harness the 'Early Childhood' opportunity**. This mission can help shape our nation's future over the coming decades, towards progress rather than distress.

Vision

Where the experience of early childhood (0-8 years) enables every child in India to grow and learn to their full potential empowering them to thrive in their future.

Mission

- Create awareness about the 'early childhood' opportunity.
- Share resources, knowledge, and tools to inspire and align action towards this opportunity.
- Facilitate partnerships to drive, sustain and scale action for impact.



Perspective change

It all starts with a change of perspective...

The Insight:

Early childhood is approached with anxiety and stress because most approach this phase through the lens of ‘scarcity’ - **the child is not enough, we are not enough**. This negative approach shackles childhood and limits its full potential as a rich source of learning and growth.

Proposition:

Moving from a scarcity mindset to an ‘abundance’ mindset, while approaching early childhood.

When seen through the right lens - **childhood is full of abundance**. Children come ready to grow and learn,⁶ and every interaction and experience, helps them do this. All stakeholders have to recognise this abundance and celebrate it to help nurture the child’s true growth and learning potential. **Without this larger awareness and positive approach, our children’s growth will be limited.**

Idea:

Bachpan Manao, Badhte Jao. Celebrate Childhood, Cheer Growth.

Childhood is filled with joy, wonder, excitement, and an unlimited appetite for life. It’s well established that children can learn best from the experience of early childhood itself. However, adult carers need to recognise and respect this abundance. It’s time to join children in this celebration of growth and learning. It’s the ideal way to build the strongest foundation for their future. That’s what this social mission is about.

⁶ [Committee on the Science of Children Birth to Age 8: Deepening and Broadening the Foundation for Success: Board on Children, Youth, and Families; Institute of Medicine; National Research Council; Allen LR, Kelly BB, editors. Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation. Washington \(DC\): National Academies Press \(US\); 2015 Jul 23. 4. Child Development and Early Learning. Available from: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK310550/](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK310550/)



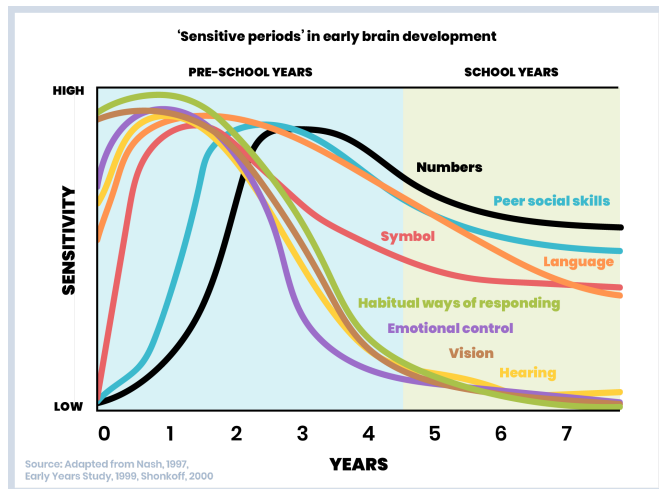
Opportunity Areas

To recognize this abundance, we must first become cognizant of the following:

1. [The first eight years of childhood are a critical window of opportunity](#)
2. [Holistic development can be a lifelong advantage](#)
3. [An abundance of learning opportunities exist all around](#)
4. [Play is the way](#)

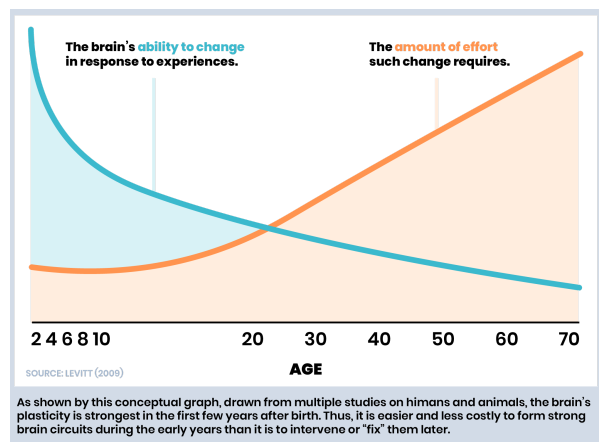
1. The first eight years of childhood are a critical window of opportunity.

- a. **Higher sensitivity to learning across key developmental areas in the early years, compared to school years.** Scientific research indicates that within the span of the early childhood years, there are certain ‘sensitive periods’ or ‘critical periods’ for development of language, socio-emotional, psychomotor and analytical competencies.⁷



Source: MWCD 2013, National ECCE Curriculum Framework, p.8

- b. **The most eager and efficient period of learning:** In the early years (0-8), every cell, every neuron in their body is ready and raring to grow. As humans, we will never again grow at this pace at any other time in our lifetime. The brain’s plasticity is strongest during these years and over 85% of an individual's brain development occurs by age 6.



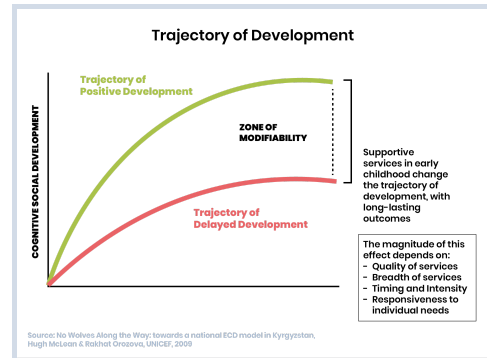
Source: [Brain Architecture](#), Harvard Centre on Developing Child

⁷ [MWCD 2013, National ECCE Curriculum Framework, p.8](#)



c. **The early years have a long lasting effect on development (negative consequences could be irreversible) :**

While a well-rounded early childhood can have an immensely beneficial impact on development, a poorly handled childhood can have negative consequences for a child’s development; wherein the gap in development may be irreversible.⁸

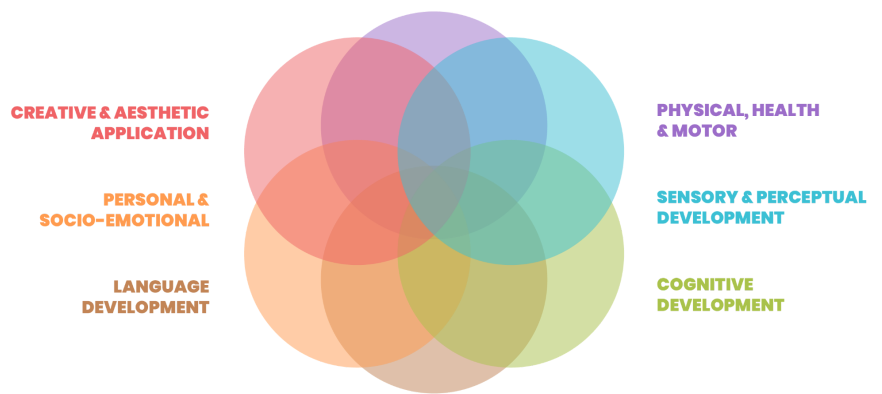


Source: MWCD 2013, National ECCE Curriculum Framework, p.7

2. Holistic development can be a lifelong advantage:

a. **Holistic development is what makes the foundation for the children strong - a springboard for the future.**

Holistic development covers various domains, including physical, socio-emotional, language, cognitive, and creative development⁹ which has been highlighted in the National ECCE Curriculum Framework as in shown in the figure



Source: MWCD, National ECCE Curriculum Framework, 2013, p. 26- 29

b. **Holistic development is an equalizer for inclusive growth.** The lack of holistic development leaves a child with a weaker foundation. This is a long term disadvantage for a large percentage of children (especially marginalized children) keeping them away from opportunity and leaving them more vulnerable overall. This cycle continues driving further disparity. Conversely, fostering all round development can be a great equalizer and important determining factor in inclusive growth.

⁸ [MWCD 2013, National ECCE Curriculum Framework, p.7](#)

⁹ These are the 5 overlapping domains across MWCD’s National ECCE Curriculum Framework, 2013 & NCERT’s NCF-FS, 2022. See for details National Curriculum Framework-Foundational Stage 2022, Annexure 2, Section 1.1 Glossary of Terms (Pages 339-342)



- c. **Holistic development through responsive caregiving:** WHO’s 2020 guidelines on early childhood development go beyond children’s health and nutrition to promote overall childhood development. This new guideline provides recommendations on improving holistic early childhood development through interventions that support responsive caregiving.”¹⁰ Responsive caregiving has been shown to have a positive impact¹¹ on a child’s health and development. Additionally, interventions have been shown to be effective in enhancing maternal responsiveness, resulting in better child health and development, especially for the neediest populations.

About responsive caregiving:

Attentive, appropriate and timely response creates the right environment for holistic development. *“Responsive caregiving is the ability of the caregiver to notice, understand, and respond to the child’s unique needs in a timely and appropriate manner”.*¹¹ This means paying attention to their signals, being available when they need you and providing a safe, secure, and nurturing environment that promotes the child’s physical, emotional, and social development.

“Serve and return” interactions are expected and essential, their absence is a threat to development. One of the most essential experiences in shaping the developing brain is “serve and return”¹² interaction between children and adults in their lives; where children reach out through babbling, gestures and adults respond back with vocalizing and gestures. *“Because responsive relationships are both expected and essential, their absence is a serious threat to a child’s development and well-being”.*¹³


3. Abundance of learning opportunities

- a. **Learning through experience and interactions.** For children in the early years, every living moment is a learning moment. They learn through the simplest everyday experiences - through interactions with different people, by being in new environments, and through stimuli (often undervalued) like language, music, nature, and animals. Caring adults only need to recognise the abundance and diversity of resources available in the form of experience and interactions.¹⁴
- b. **Learning is not a straight line:** While structured learning does help in the later years – it’s important to know that children between 0-8 years, learn best from diverse and unplanned exposures and experiences. This kind of learning (non-linear) helps build learning pathways better than structured learning during this phase.

¹⁰ [WHO. Improving Early Childhood Development](#)

¹¹ [Eshel N. Daelmans B. de Mello MC. Martines J. Responsive parenting: interventions and outcomes. Bull World Health Organ. 2006 Dec;84\(12\):991-8. doi: 10.2471/blt.06.030163. PMID: 17242836; PMCID: PMC2627571.](#)

¹² [Harvard Center on the Developing Child “Serve and Return”](#)

¹³ Harvard Center on the Developing Child  2. Serve & Return Interaction Shapes Brain Circuitry

¹⁴ Harvard Center on the Developing Child  1. Experiences Build Brain Architecture



The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stages, 2022 recognises:
“children under the age of 8 tend not to follow linear, age-based educational trajectories. It is only at about the age of 8 that children begin to converge in their learning trajectories ... [and] begin to adapt to more structured learning”

A natural non-linear approach that is harnessed by a variety of games and activities that are contextually relevant, and also by introducing a variety of informational and physical challenges into play, unlocks the abundant sources of learning in a child’s environment and allows children to gain from them in their own way.¹⁵

- c. Power of instinct.** Research shows that children are naturally instinctive, whether in analyzing speech sounds, explaining actions or comprehending behavior.¹⁶ These instinctive behaviors are important for learning and an understanding of the physical and social worlds around them. Letting children develop these instincts, with freedom, will let them make the most of the abundant learning opportunities around them.¹⁷

- d. Learning happens best with the development of positive dispositions:** Childhood years are when positive dispositions to learning can be nurtured- curiosity, creativity, reflection, wonder, among others. Excess formal and structured instruction can be damaging for the child.

Professor emerita of early childhood education, Lilian Katz in her theory of learning dispositions (1985) states:

“early formal instruction, structured curricular practices, repeated negative outcomes, in the form of criticism from adults or the inability to achieve tasks successfully, can lead to feelings of ‘helplessness’. As a result the disposition to learn, make sense of experiences, being reflective, inquisitive, inventive, resourceful, full of wonder and perhaps puzzlement is damaged at a very early age.”¹⁸

Preserving and nurturing a child’s positive attitude to learning, allows them to embrace the abundance of learning opportunities around them, rather than turning away from them due to negativity and helplessness. Encouraging independence and resilience by building trust with the child,¹⁹ building concentration and perseverance via role modeling, and curiosity and creativity through an inquiry based approach²⁰ helps cultivate these dispositions.

¹⁵ [Chow, J. Y., Davids, K., Renshaw, I., & Rudd, J. Nonlinear Pedagogy. Encyclopedia of Educational Innovation, 1-7. doi:10.1007/978-981-13-2262-4_92-1, 2020](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-2262-4_92-1)

¹⁶ “Childhood Learning and Education: A Focus on Intuitive Learning.” Manuscript under preparation.

¹⁷ [Ojus Patel. 5 Ways To Teach Your Child To Trust Their Instincts. According To Experts](#)

¹⁸ MWCD. The National ECCE Framework, 2013

¹⁹ [Helping young children to develop positive learning dispositions](#)

²⁰ [How we encourage positive dispositions for learning](#)



4. Play is the way

- a. **“Birds fly, fish swim and children play”**. Play is how children naturally learn and grow. Play is the way children learn to be, do and relate to the world and their own selves.

The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stages, 2022 recommends:
“Play at the core of the conceptual, operational, and transactional approaches to curriculum organization, pedagogy, time and content organization, and the overall experience of the child.”

“Play for a child is natural, spontaneous, enjoyable, rewarding and it is self initiated. While children do not engage in play for its learning outcomes, yet it has been shown that play prompts growth and development. In recent times play has been considered as a behavioral disposition that occurs in describable and reproducible contexts and is manifested in a variety of observable behaviors.”²¹

- b. **Play builds the brain and promotes the process of learning:** Yogman et al tell us,
“Play is not frivolous: it enhances brain structure and function and promotes executive function (ie, the process of learning, rather than the content), which allow us to pursue goals and ignore distractions.”²²

Dr Jack Shonkoff, Prof. Child Health and Development, Harvard Centre on Developing Child emphasizes that the most important interaction one can have with their child is play²³. Practitioners in India also emphasize the importance of play-based learning for the foundational stage and highlight that carers, whether parents, teachers, and anganwadi workers can all play a role.²⁴

- c. **Play and child development:** Harvard Centre on Developing Child also captures²⁵ how play is an effective way of supporting three principles that are key to child development:
1. Supporting responsive relationships
 2. Strengthening core life skills
 3. Reducing sources of stress.

- d. **Play benefits children and carers:** When play happens, children don’t just take away learning, they bring in their own unique set of skills, resources and creativity; this enriches everyone, including the carers.

²¹ Fein & Vandenberg, 1983, cited in National ECCE Framework, MWCD, p.30

²² [Yogman M, Garner A, Hutchinson J, Hirsh-Pasek K, Golinkoff RM; COMMITTEE ON PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECTS OF CHILD AND FAMILY HEALTH; COUNCIL ON COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA. The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children. Pediatrics. 2018 Sep;142\(3\):e20182058. doi: 10.1542/peds.2018-2058. Epub 2018 Aug 20. PMID: 30126932.](#)

²³ [YouTube: Learn how to boost your baby's brain from a Harvard Professor | UNICEF](#)

²⁴ [Rinchen Norbu Wangchuk. Kids Under 6? Give Them Fewer Books & More Play, Say Child Experts. The Better India September 2022.](#)

²⁵ Harvard Centre on Developing Child [YouTube: Play in Early Childhood: The Role of Play in Any Setting](#)



- e. **Types of Play:** The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stages, 2022 states that play can be organized in three different ways:
1. Free Play: Child-led, where children decide all aspects of play, the adult only organizes the environment & observes children.
 2. Guided Play: Child-led, where children decide all aspects of play. Here the adult offers support and actively facilitates play.
 3. Structured Play: Adult-led, where children actively participate in carefully planned activities by the adult.
- f. **Methods of Play:** The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stages, 2022 suggests some key methods of play and their impact:
1. Conversations: are very important for children to connect with people and things around them, and to build relationships of trust.
 2. Story-telling: enables learning about social relationships, ethical choices, understanding and experiencing emotions, becoming aware of life skills, and getting acquainted with social and cultural norms. In addition, it expands children's vocabulary, sentence structure and problem-solving skills, as well as their attention span and concentration. Further, children should be enabled to not only listen to but tell stories.
 3. Toy-Based learning: is important as children learn from working with actual objects. This is irrespective of whether the toy is simple or complex.
 4. Songs and Rhymes: promote learning of vocabulary and concepts. When accompanied by physical movement, it develops motor skills. In a group, children learn social interaction and cooperation.
 5. Music and Movement: is a strong stimulation for brain development and formation of synaptic connections.
 6. Art and Craft: is another medium for children to express their ideas, emotions, and feelings. These should be open-ended activities with minimal direction. Notions of 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad' in terms of artistic expression must be avoided. Instead, different viewpoints, experiences, expression, and imagination should be encouraged and celebrated.
 7. Indoor Games: helps exercising the mind.
 8. Outdoor Games: help children develop gross motor skills.
 9. Spending Time in and with Nature: can help develop a connect with nature and the basis for Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE).



Collabaction

This ‘Bachpan Manao, Badhte Jao’ social mission will require communication, education and sustained action to make a real difference. Different stakeholders can contribute to raising awareness and bringing about behaviour change through partnerships and programs.. We call this Collabaction - collaborating for action and impact.

This social mission has two main levers:

Levers of change:

1. Awareness and Education - Assets

- **Film (90 secs):** that reminds viewers of the simple and rich joys of childhood - through which children grow and learn best. It urges the audience to ‘Celebrate Childhood’ and opens their minds and hearts to the larger mission of making the most of the early years.
- **Song (2 min) :** that furthers the appeal of our campaign, bringing alive the key areas of opportunity, perspective, abundance and play and celebration.
- **Website and Social Media:** this where the **Bachpan Manao, Badhte Jao Campaign** comes alive, building a comprehensive and cohesive narrative that explains why the issue is critical, what are the **opportunity areas** that the campaign is focussing on, and how visitors can learn and actively participate. It aims to foster a sense of community and engagement, encouraging organizations and individuals to take this societal mission further. It will also host and share:

Research and Insights as Public Goods for change:

- [Insight Cards](#)
- [Building Blocks](#)
- [Research on Mothers](#)
- [Research on Fathers](#)
- [Research on AWWs](#)
- [Research on Primary School Teachers](#)

2. Involvement and Adoption - Actions

- **Programs and projects** inspired by the mission and informed by the opportunity areas, insights and building blocks shared.
- **New training / pedagogy / curriculums** that can channelize the recommendations in the National ECCE framework (MWCD, 2013) and the NCF-FS framework (NCERT, 2022) into multiple spheres of learning.
- **Content creation** to drive behavior change in keeping with the mission.
- **Events and roundtable discussions** to build **partnerships** for sustainable change and impact, across one or a combination of areas as highlighted in the mission.
- **Innovative partnership initiatives** to create disruption for and drive adoption of the mission. Eg: Art led collaborations, brand partnerships etc.



How you can partner with the ‘Bachpan Manao, Badhte Jao’ mission:

Partners can champion and contribute to this social mission across both levers of impact.

Media partners:

- Come on board as media partners to take on this mission as a cause supported by your organization. Promote the assets created (and future content)
 - Media time - TV, print, radio
 - Digital integration - to share assets, and also create platform specific interactive initiatives.
- Co-create a high impact launch and a sustained (1-3 years) partnership to help create awareness (through the assets) and through initiatives that help promote on-ground adoption of new practices.
- Bring in other partners to multiply the outreach and impact.

Corporate partners:

- Partner with this social mission as part of the CSR outreach.
- Help promote the assets for greater reach and impact
- Co-create a partnership plan to help launch the campaign and sustain it for (1-3 years)
- Using your products/services (marketing & distribution) to help magnify the reach and impact of this mission through innovation and initiative.

Creative & Content partners:

- Help promote the assets created through their social media
- Contribute content based on the:
 - main ‘celebration’ thematic thought
 - and also to bring alive the opportunity areas, insights, building blocks, research points
- Connect and collaborate with other creators for further impact

On-ground & Program partners:

- Promote the film and other assets through your social media presence
- Showcase the film in the communities you impact
- Contribute your learnings and insights to enrich the social mission
- Create projects / programs, for children/carers/educators, to bring alive the opportunity, areas, insights, building blocks and research shared.
- Contribute content (based on your work) towards the mission

Research Partners

- Conduct further research encouraged by the opportunity areas, insights, building blocks,
 - Helps enrich the mission in terms of depth and opportunities
 - and serves as stimulus for more evidence-based action to be initiated



Partners@Work

We are already partnering with a diverse set of stakeholders, to kickstart initiatives that bring urgency, momentum and impact to this societal mission.

- **Science/Evidence Partners**
 - **BioQuest:**
 - **Articles:** will work with the medical experts to publish articles rooted in evidence from scientific studies that shed light on the role of play and non-linear learning, and the power of instinct in a child's development.
 - **IVR:** will service the helpline number with IVR messages that allow the caller to learn about the the campaign, the four areas of opportunity, some key insights and also send them links for further exploration
- **Content Partners**
 - **The Better India (TBI):** has developed a microsite called [#ChildhoodDialogues](#) that shines the light on stories from the ground, including change makers, to highlight what early childhood in India looks like. They are also putting out long reads that shed light on critical issues such as the power of play in learning, inclusive practices in classrooms and the need for more playgrounds!
 - **Sols Arc:** is creating a community that will strive to create inclusive content for all children, keeping in mind those who tend to get excluded, through engaging content creators, educators, influencers and thought leaders.
- **On-ground Partners**
 - **Adhyayan Foundation:** a microsite that makes available story read-aloud starter kits & celebrates librarians of public libraries in Karnataka, who have drastically improved the footfall of children in these spaces by conducting simple yet engaging read-aloud sessions
 - **Pratham:** will showcase the film and other assets across their communities. They have initiated a word project amongst their mothers' groups towards unlocking the treasure of words the child and the mother already knows. Mothers receive a weekly activity card that helps them engage with their children through conversation and games.
 - **Makkala Jagriti and Key Education Foundation:** will showcase the film at organization events to set the stage for conversation around what is needed for the early years, what can improve, and are compiling stories of transformation.
 - **Dost Education:** A microsite called "*Baatein, Sneh aur Khe!*" that will showcase a number of photo stories that will serve to demonstrate what moments of responsive caregiving look like within 6 families in Uttarakhand.
 - **Dharma Life:** Will showcase the film to its communities during its 8th September, International Literacy Day activity called Lighting Up Young Minds.

There is an urgent need to approach the early years differently through communication, education and on-ground action and only a sustainable and scalable approach will make a real difference. We invite you to join this social mission for our children and for the future of our nation.

