

Age-Appropriate Reading Materials Are Needed To Foster Reading Skills in Young Children in Cambodia

This year marks the 3rd year of National Reading Day, celebrated across Cambodia to promote the habit of reading. For children aged 0-6 years, early and consistent participation in routine learning activities, such as playing and reading using age-appropriate learning materials (e.g., books and toys), provide children with a critical foundation for early learning, language growth and emergent literacy.¹ While progress has been made in improving access to, and quality of, ECCD (Early Childhood Care and Development) services in Cambodia, the lack of age-appropriate reading and play materials for young children – especially children under the age of six - poses a great challenge in improving learning and emergent literacy for children. More resources and policy guidelines would help to bridge this gap.

The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has shown fresh commitment to improve ECCD services across the country by adopting the National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Development in 2010 with accompanying Action Plan 2014 – 2018. This framework aims to increase enrolment and enhance protection for children aged 0-6 years (especially children from poor families, indigenous minorities and children with disabilities), and prioritize community-based pre-schools and home-based early childhood education programs. It is also intended to improve the quality of services and provide more equitable access to these services. In late 2017, the RGC issued a Sub-Degree on the Management of Community Pre-School for providing support to community-based pre-schools that meet minimum standards. However, much of the energy around ECCD programming has focused on children aged 4-6 years old only.

Improving the early learning of children 0-6 years of age is still an ongoing challenge due to limited availability of age-appropriate reading and play materials. Global research shows that when young children have access to age-appropriate reading materials, it can have positive impact on their language development, vocabulary, eagerness to read, and success in beginning reading in school. A baseline conducted by Save the Children in 2017 with families in the Floating Villages of the Tonle Sap area showed that only 9% of households have access to reading books for children aged 0-6. In addition, only 2% of caregivers read books to children under the age of three, and only 6% had purchased books in the last year, due to both the high cost of children's books and a lack of access to locations that sell age appropriate reading materials.

Reading with young children improves their vocabulary development, word and letter recognition, print awareness, knowledge of books, and talking and listening skills. Developing good quality age-appropriate resources for Cambodia's next generation is of critical importance. Investing in ECCD is

¹ Emergent literacy refers to the development of five foundational key literacy skills (skills associated with reading and writing), these are: knowing about the alphabet, understanding words and sounds, knowing what books are, understanding print, and talking and listening.

one of the smartest investments a country can make to address inequality, break the cycle of poverty, and improve outcomes later in life.

In 2017, World Vision International – Cambodia conducted a market survey of books from 26 publishers. Of the books surveyed, none were appropriate for children under three years old. WVI-C's review has highlighted that there are few books that are age-appropriate for young children aged 4-6 years old, and why the recent efforts of specialized publishers to address this issue, such as Sipar, are so important for Cambodia's future. Furthermore, few publishers have reading levels designated on the books they produce, and most simply define children's books as books with more pictures and less text. When reviewed, despite there being 'less text' it was found that the text was still too complex for young readers, typically using formal language and compound sentences.

On the occasion of the 3rd National Reading Day on 11 March, 2018, we would like to congratulate the Cambodian Government on the significant progress made in increasing access to and quality of ECCD services in Cambodia. We would also like to highlight the need for further efforts to promote the learning and literacy of young children. Therefore, we call for the government to:

1. Increase government resources and investment for development of age-appropriate reading and play material for children 0-6 years of age, and especially to increase access to reading resources for young children in rural, remote, and hard to reach areas.
2. Develop national guidelines on book levelling for publishers, to ensure that all books published for first readers (aged 0-3) and early readers (aged 4 to grade 3) are appropriate in terms of size & layout, narrative structures, illustration, vocabulary & words, phrases & sentences, and content & theme.