



“Safety First Initiative” for Early Childhood Care and Education Centres

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Early childhood is a period of significant all-round development. Human babies enter the world with a limited range of skills and abilities. They are helpless and dependent on their parents and care givers for nurturance and protection. Irrespective of their birth conditions, all children have to be protected from harm and have their welfare promoted – whoever they are, and wherever they are. As infants grow in age, they are exposed to the early childhood education scenario. Young children then spend a large part of their day in preschools and transit. Their safety during this time is extremely important. In the recent times, cases of abuse of children at the school premises, or even accidents are increasing and are being reported. Many of these unfortunate incidents are preventable. There is a clear and significant role each preschool and its stakeholders have to play in the prevention, reporting and handling of safety-related accidents during the time children are entrusted to their care.

Hence, the present research has made an effort to sensitize stakeholders of early childhood education centres by using appropriate audio-visual aids through the concept of “Safety First Initiative” which focuses on introducing the concepts of child protection, prevention of child abuse and explores why we need child protection policies and procedures. The study was envisaged with the following objectives:

1. To study the existing safety measures in practice in different early childhood education centres of Bangalore city.
2. To design need-based strategies to transmit messages and information through audio visual materials to target audiences.
3. To sensitize parents, caretakers, early childhood centers and children about safety measures.



Review of Literature

“The rights of women and children and their aspirations are of paramount importance in our march towards and inclusive and equitable society”

Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam

Saini (2013) has reported that India has about 440 million children and that they constitute more than 40 percent of the population. Twenty seven million babies are born each year. Thus, the numbers in need of care and protection are huge and increasing. Extreme poverty, insecurity of daily living, illiteracy and lack of education, result in very little care to the child during the early formative years. The term “protection” should not be restricted to only protection of children from all forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation, but, it must also include protection from disease, poor nutrition, and ignorance.

According to National Crime Records Bureau’s (NCRB) report for 2015, Crimes against children have increased by thirteen per cent, from 2015 to 2016. Fifty two per cent of the cases reported were for kidnapping and abduction. Thirty four percent cases were registered under Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO).

Tater (2016) has opined that preschool is an important life phase when the child gets exposed to a structured setting of learning from teachers. Concern for safety is extremely important at the preschool stage when the child is most vulnerable to various abuses. Considering the possibilities of various forms of abuses that children can fall victim to, it becomes crucial to ensure a safe and secured environment for them at a place, where they cannot be under the watchful eyes of parents. Building a safe and secured learning environment, identifying the pupils who are in distress or at a risk of harm and ensuring a swift and suitable action are vital components to confirm that children remain safe all the times. Children require safety everywhere. Rao (2017) in her blog on “We Need A Holistic Approach to Ensure Children’s Safety In School” stresses that parents, teachers, and managements must collaborate to establish and monitor safety procedures. She opines that at the larger level, there is also a need for the government to enforce safety policies across urban and rural settings. More often than not, it is only after the crime has already been committed that investigation reveals the extent to which rules were violated. It's high time that non-compliance is dealt with seriously. Audits and surveillance should go hand-in-hand with implementation of child protection policies to identify lapses and bring errant schools to justice.



Methodology:

Phase -1 Through extensive review of literature, the safety areas to be addressed concerning young children were identified by the researchers.

Phase 2: Identification of early childhood care and education centres:

For the present project, a survey was conducted to assess the safety mechanisms followed in early childhood educational centres in Bangalore city. A representative sample of thirty early childhood care and education centres was identified based on logistics in Bangalore city. It comprised of anganwadis and private nursery schools.

Phase 3: Development of a comprehensive checklist:

The principal investigator developed a comprehensive checklist to assess the safety mechanisms in early childhood care and education centres based on several existing checklists. The basic data elicited information about the contact details, whether registered, number of students and staff etc. The specific data collected were pertaining to the infrastructure, child supervision, Health and Hygiene practices, sanitation, physical safety and general safety mechanisms. A total of fifty items related to child safety in ECCE centres constituted the checklist. The checklist was used to survey the safety measures in the ECCE centres selected according to logistics.

Phase 4: Assessing the safety mechanisms in practice in the identified ECCE centres:

The checklist developed in phase 3 was used to assess the safety mechanisms in practice in the identified early childhood care and education centres. The researchers interviewed the administrators and also made detailed observations to study the safety situations. The findings were compiled and it was found that majority of the early childhood centres were not prepared for safety breaches. The findings of the survey are presented below:

Table:1 Infrastructure available in ECCE centres

Sl. No.	Particulars	ECCE Centres (N=30)			
		Yes		No	
		No.	%	No.	%
1.	The ECCE centre is structurally stable and suitable for local environmental conditions	21	70	09	30
2.	The ECCE building is maintained in a good condition.	10	33	20	67
3.	The ECCE centre is situated in the ground floor	26	87	04	13
4.	The ECCE building has a secure compound and gate	19	63	11	37
5.	The building can be easily exited during emergencies	22	73	08	27
6.	There are adequate classrooms for various activities	15	50	15	50
7.	The play area is secure and spacious	10	33	20	67
8.	The outdoor equipment are well maintained	10	33	20	67
9.	No hazards, such as uncovered drains/ wells, around the ECCE center.	12	40	18	60
10.	ECCE Centre is located in a safe place (not exposed to harmful chemical products, sound pollution, garbage piles, heavy vehicular traffic).	10	33	20	67

If learning environments are safe, children feel secure and they are more likely to form strong relationships, be confident and achieve their innate potential. The data in Table 1 reveals details of infrastructure available in the ECCE centres surveyed in the present study.

Majority of the ECCE centres had good stable buildings but maintenance was not good in all of them. Thirteen percent of the ECCE centres were situated in first floor with narrow staircases which could be a potential hazard as young children are not adept at climbing steps. Thirty seven percent of the ECCE centres did not have a compound and gate which was a cause for concern. Twenty seven percent of the ECCE centres did not have easy access to exit in case of emergencies. Only fifty percent of the centres had adequate classrooms while the remaining had just one room. Thirty three percent of the centres had a secure and spacious play area with well-maintained outdoor equipment. It was alarming to note that sixty percent of the centres had hazards such as uncovered drains / wells in their vicinity. Sixty seven percent of the centres did not have a completely safe location which was free from exposure to harmful chemical products, sound pollution, garbage piles and heavy vehicular traffic.

Table:2 Child Supervision Related Practices in ECCE Centres

Sl. No.	Particulars	ECCE Centres (N=30)			
		Yes		No	
		No.	%	No.	%
1.	At least 1 adult for every 20 children in 3- 6 years age group and for every 10 children for under 3 years	10	33	20	67
2.	Children are adequately supervised during arrival and departure	10	33	20	67
3.	CCTV surveillance is present	15	50	15	50
4.	Parents/guardians are issued identity cards for escorting children	05	17	25	83
5.	Teachers/ caregivers are sensitive to the children's needs and are able to provide emotional support to children, when needed.	15	50	15	50
6.	All children are treated equally and with respect, affection and care.	15	50	15	50
7.	Caregivers do not use physical punishment or verbal abuse to discipline children.	15	50	15	50
8.	Children approach the teachers/ caregivers freely at any time.	24	80	06	20
9.	Behavioural management and modification program is followed	12	40	18	60
10.	Safety and disciplinary issues are quickly addressed	10	33	20	67

One of the key prerequisites of quality early childhood care is supervision. Supervision in an early childhood centre means using techniques and strategies to provide quality care, which in turn creates a safe and secure learning environment for young children.

The data in Table -2 presents details of child supervision related practices in the surveyed ECCE Centres. A satisfactory teacher pupil ratio and adequate child supervision with quick responses to safety and disciplinary issues were noted in thirty three percent of the ECCE centres. Adequate supervision during arrival and departure of children were observed only in thirty three percent of the ECCE centres. Fifty percent of the centres had CCTV surveillance. Only seventeen percent of the schools had issued identity cards to parents and caretakers to escort children. Sensitivity to children's needs, ability to provide emotional support, equality and absence of corporal punishment was observed in fifty percent of the ECCE centres.

Children in eighty percent of the ECCE centres felt free to approach the teachers/ caregivers freely at any time. Behavioural management and modification programs were followed by the staff of only forty percent of the ECCE centres to discipline the children. Only fifty percent of the surveyed ECCE centres were found not to use any physical punishment or verbal abuse to discipline the children.

Table:3 Health and Hygiene Related Practices in ECCE Centres

Sl. No.	Particulars	ECCE Centres (N=30)			
		Yes		No	
		No.	%	No.	%
1.	Good practices of keeping the environment clean are followed.	10	33	20	67
2.	Regular health checkups are conducted for children and staff	06	20	24	80
3.	Food is stored, prepared and served under hygienic conditions.	12	40	18	60
4.	Availability of adequate, clean and potable water for all children.	02	7	28	93
5.	Drinking water is stored in covered vessels which is regularly cleaned and refilled with hygienic handling.	02	7	28	93
6.	Dining area is clean and hygienic.	20	67	10	33

Following health and hygiene related practices play an important role in preventing infectious diseases among young children who are susceptible to infections. It boosts their personal grooming skills and self-confidence and contributes towards social competence too. A detailed observation of the health and hygiene related practices in early childhood centres surveyed in the present study showed poor compliance with only thirty three percent of the ECCE centres following good practices. Only twenty percent of the ECCE centres conducted regular health check-ups for children and staff members. Although dining areas appeared relatively clean in sixty seven percent of the ECCE centres, food hygiene aspects were not well maintained in sixty percent of the ECCE centres. It was unfortunate to know that only seven percent of the centres provided clean drinking water to the children, while the remaining centres insisted that the children themselves carry sufficient drinking water.

Table:4 Sanitation Practices in ECCE centres

Sl. No.	Particulars	ECCE Centres (N=30)			
		Yes		No	
		No.	%	No.	%
1.	Clean, child friendly toilets available.	10	33	20	67
2.	Separate toilets for girls and boys, which are safe and hygienic.	08	27	22	73
3.	Availability of wash basin/sink at low level, clean hand towels, running water and soap.	13	43	17	57
4.	Garbage bins with lids are available in toilets	18	60	12	40
5.	Toilets are disable friendly.	-	-	30	100
6.	Teacher/ caregivers inculcate habits in children such as washing hands before and after meals, putting materials back in their place after using them etc.	22	73	08	27
7.	Is there adequate lighting, ventilation and circulation of fresh air in the ECCE centre.	20	67	10	33
8.	Periodic pest control procedures are followed	14	47	16	53

The Child Friendly Schools (CFS) Manual highlights that a child friendly school must have accessible, gender-appropriate toilets and hand-washing facilities. They should also have access to clean drinking water and facilities for solid waste management. The school must also teach the children appropriate hygiene practices. (UNICEF 2012). The physical quality of the hand washing facility and toilets in early childhood centres are important determinants of their appropriate usage.

The data presented in Table -4 indicates that although thirty-three percent of the ECCE centers in the present study had toilets that were child friendly, only twenty-seven percent of the ECCE centres had separate toilets for boys and girls. However, it was disheartening to note that none of the centers had disabled friendly toilets. Inculcation of good hand washing habits were observed in seventy-three percent of the ECCE centres. Availability of garbage bins with lids were reported in sixty percent of the surveyed ECCE centres. Sixty-seven percent of the ECCE centres had adequate lighting, ventilation and circulation of fresh air. It was evident that periodic pest control procedures were followed by only forty-seven percent of the ECCE centres.

Table:5 Physical Safety in ECCE centres

Sl. No.	Particulars	ECCE Centres (N=30)			
		Yes		No	
		No.	%	No.	%
1.	Are the corridors and staircases clear of obstructions?	10	33	20	67
2.	Is there any dampness in the wall?	05	17	25	83
3.	Are the electrical fixtures in the classrooms working properly?	23	77	07	23
4.	Whether ceiling tiles or plaster hanging from the wall/roof?	03	10	27	90
5.	Does the school have any ongoing construction?	02	7	28	93
6.	Is the playground free of potential hazards?	19	63	11	37

Physical safety protection of the young children from potential hazards that pose dangers. It is essential to keep the pre-school environment including the classrooms, playgrounds, laboratories, toilets, drinking water facilities, dining area and the other surroundings safe and secure. The buildings should be built specifically for establishing early childhood education centres to ensure safety of children and be more resilient to hazards.

The compiled data of the survey presented in Table -5 indicate that none of the ECCE centres observed had hundred percent physical safety. The corridors and staircases were clear of obstructions in thirty-three percent of the centers only. Dampness in the walls which contribute significantly to indoor pollution were observed in seventeen percent of the centers. Only seventy-seven percent of the ECCE centres reported that the electrical fixtures in the classrooms were functioning properly. Ten percent of the ECCE centres had ceiling tiles or plaster hanging from the wall/roof. Ongoing construction was observed in seven percent of the ECCE centres. Thirty-seven percent of the ECCE centres had playgrounds with some potential hazards.

Table:6 General Safety in ECCE centres

Sl. No.	Particulars	ECCE Centres (N=15)			
		Yes		No	
		No.	%	No.	%
1.	Availability of first aid kit for children, in case of an emergency.	05	17	25	83
2.	Center has preventive measures, in case of fires and other natural disasters (fire extinguishers, sand buckets etc.)	05	17	25	83
3.	Emergency contact information is on file and available to staff for quick reference	15	50	15	50
4.	Caregivers/ teachers are trained to provide first aid to children, in case of an emergency.	01	3	29	97
5.	Caregivers/ teachers are aware of the nearest health care centre/hospital for emergency or referral services	15	50	15	50
6.	Does the school comply with rules and regulations of the local transport authority during transportation of students in school buses?	04	13	26	87
7.	Do teachers accompany the students during the bus journeys?	04	13	26	87
8.	Are children given instructions about traffic safety?	08	27	22	73
9.	Presence of a security guard with a visitor's book at the entrance of the ECCE centre	06	20	24	80
10.	Presence of a School safety committee	0	-	0	-

All ECCE centres must respond to health and safety issues or problems of children as and when they arise. Services can be improved by protecting health and safety of children by anticipating, identifying, and providing protective measures around the issues that are likely to cause problems even before they can actually occur. The responses and observations recorded in Table -5 showcase a grim picture of the general safety measures in the surveyed ECCE centres.

It was disappointing to observe that only seventeen percent of the ECCE centers had first aid kits and fire extinguishers for use during emergencies. Further, it was extremely disappointing to note that only three percent of the teachers were trained in first aid. Fifty percent of them



had Emergency contact information on file for quick reference. Fifty percent of the teachers reported that they were aware of the nearest health care centre/hospital for emergency or referral services. Only thirteen percent of the ECCE centres had transportation facility and they reported that they complied with the rules and regulations of the local transport authority. Twenty seven percent of the children in the surveyed ECCE centres had received some instructions about traffic safety. Twenty percent of the ECCE centres reported that they have a security guard who maintained a visitors' book while it was shocking to learn that none of the surveyed ECCE centres had a school safety committee.

Discussion:

ECCE centres play a significant role in the holistic growth and development of young children. Early educators are expected to protect young children and help them to develop socio-emotional skills and self care skills. ECCE centres need to identify and sustain safe and healthy practices. Safety of the learning environment, together with the health of children, staff, parents, caregivers and the community must be prioritised. Hence the researchers designed audio-visual materials to transmit messages and information on safety measures among various stake holders.

Phase 5: Designing Audio-Visual (AV) materials to transmit messages and information on safety measures:

Audio-visual aids provide opportunities for effective communication in learning situations. Audio visual aids are multisensory materials which motivate and stimulate the recipient. They make dynamic learning experience more concrete, realistic and gives clarity. They provide significant gains in thinking and reasoning. For the present research, the following audio-visual materials were used to transmit messages and information on safety measures for children, parents and caretakers of Early Childhood Education centres. Some of the audio-visual materials were designed by the principal investigator, while others were standard material prepared by organizations which permitted the reproduction and use of their audio-visual materials for educational purposes. The details are as follows:

List of Audio-visual material used for children

Sl. No.	Audio-Visual Material	Topic
1	Flash Cards	Good Touch-Bad Touch
2	Posters	Hand washing, traffic safety, Fire safety
3	Animated video clippings	Children's emotions, Safety concerns of children
4	Worksheets for creative activities	Playground safety and safety around the home

List of Audio-visual material used for parents and ECCE personnel

Sl.No	Audio-Visual Material	Topic
1	Flash Cards	Disaster management
2	Handbook	Child safety
3	Posters	Fire Safety, childline1098, Ban on corporal punishment
4	Charts	First Aid, Disaster management
5	PowerPoint presentations	Safety First initiative
6	Demonstrations	First Aid
7	Street Play	Child safety
8	Short film	Child Sexual Abuse
9	Panel Discussion	Child Safety
10	Activities	Child safety

Phase 6: Sensitization Programs

The audio-visual materials selected and designed in Phase 5 were used to conduct the sensitization programs for children, parents and ECCE personnel in selected ECCE centres out of the main sample. The details of the sensitization programs are presented below:



Sl.No	Sensitization Program and Topic	Date	Venue
1	Sensitization program-1 Safety First Initiative	28 th October 2017	“Jain Heritage MI Kids” RPC layout, Vijayanagar, Bangalore
2	Sensitization program-2 Safety First Initiative	21 st January 2018	International Montessori and Kindergarten Training Academy Mysore
3	Sensitization program-3 Disaster Preparedness and Management	27 th February 2018	Karnataka State Council for Child Welfare, Jayamahal, Bangalore
4	Sensitization program-4 Panel Discussion on “Parenting in Early Years – The Needs and Wants”	17 th March 2018	“Jain Heritage MI Kids” RPC layout, Vijayanagar, Bangalore
5	Sensitization program-5 First Aid Training	27 th March 2018	Department of Early Childhood Education and Administration Smt.VHD Central Institute of Home Science(Autonomous), Sheshadri Road, Bangalore

All the sensitization programs received positive feedback from the parents, teachers and administrative staff of the early childhood centres. Minor changes were made based on the questions raised during the interactive discussions held and the final versions of the educational materials were prepared and distributed to all the thirty ECCE centres which formed the main sample for the survey.

Conclusion:

In the wake of recent incidents of breach of child safety in early childhood education centres in India, it is necessary that we employ Education, Empowerment and Enabling mechanisms; young children should be aware of life skills, child rights and participation. Educators and care takers must be embodiments of responsive care, ambassadors of gender sensitivity and safety marshals –all wrapped into one individual. Parents, extended family members and the community must be educated, informed and enabled so that they can provide care and



protection not only to their own children, but to every child in their neighbourhood. It is of utmost importance that public awareness about child safety has to be raised to ensure happy and safe childhood for each and every child in our country.

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