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## Family literacy

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Background paper prepared for the  
Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006  
*Literacy for Life*

## Family literacy

Harald Nordtveit  
2005

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### **Acronyms**

ECD	Early Child Development
EFA	Education For All
IGA	Income Generating Activities
ITP	Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty
LAMP	Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme
MOCEP	Mother-Child Education Program (in Turkey)
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ( <a href="http://www.unesco.org">www.unesco.org</a> )

## **1. Introduction: Family literacy defined**

The teaching and learning of literacy have often been classified as a primary education activity. Statistics on the literacy rate of a country frequently reflect this definition, by classifying people who have attended primary school as literate (Wagner, 1999). The narrow understanding of literacy as an ability to read and write has slowly evolved towards an understanding of literacy as a social practice. An international experts' meeting in UNESCO in 2003 defined literacy in the following terms: "Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning enabling an individual to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potentials, and to participate fully in the community and wider society" (LAMP, 2004, p. 2). In this broader understanding of literacy, new studies have investigated the correlation between literacy and social settings, from early infancy to adulthood. In particular, the role of the family as educators has been examined.

In the 1950s, conventional wisdom in most Western countries considered that literacy education was the role of primary school, and parents' intervention in literacy provision at preschool level was found undesirable: "Educators believed that it was harmful for children to be taught before they were physically mature and ready to learn. Such beliefs affected decisions about when children should enter school; they were kept at home until they were considered physically ready to learn to read" (Wasik, 2004, p.6). In the 1960s and 1970s, however, the importance of the family as a starting place for what was called "emergent literacy" gradually became more accepted. The term family literacy was used to define ways of educative interaction between parents and children. It was recognized that such interaction was highly beneficial for later success in schooling. In view of the positive correlation between preschool interventions and school results, several family reading programs began focusing on the interaction between parents and preschool-age children. The International Reading Association's Family Literacy Commission suggests these components to characterize family literacy:

1. "Family literacy encompasses the ways parents, children, and extended family members use literacy at home and in their community.
2. Family literacy occurs naturally during the routines of daily living and helps adults and children 'get things done.'
3. Examples of family literacy might include using drawings or writings to share ideas; composing notes or letters to communicate messages; keeping records; making lists; reading and following directions; or sharing stories and ideas through conversation, reading and writing.
4. Family literacy may be initiated purposefully by a parent, or may occur spontaneously as parents and children go about the business of their daily lives.
5. Family literacy activities may also reflect the ethnic, racial, or cultural heritage of the families involved.
6. Family literacy activities may be initiated by outside institutions or agencies. These activities are often intended to support the acquisition and development of school-like literacy behaviors of parents, children, and families.
7. Family literacy activities initiated by outside agencies may include family storybook reading, completing homework assignments, or writing essays or reports" (Family Literacy: New Perspectives New Opportunities, cited by National Adult Literacy Database, see <http://www.nald.ca/flag.htm>).

In the above-mentioned definitions, two main types of family literacy can be distinguished; one is an informal and spontaneous relation between parents and children, and the other is characterized as an outside intervention to stimulate such interaction. Outside interventions (i.e., family literacy programs) can again be divided into two types, one characterized by focusing on parent-child relations at pre-school and primary school age, and one providing lessons to pre-school children in day-care and preschool learning centers.

Family literacy programs initiatives often have as a further goal to prevent intergenerational transmission of poverty (ITP) by breaking a cycle of low literacy skills (literacy skills are in such context understood as a functional skill, as in the

aforementioned UNESCO definition). Such poverty programs can be defined as "intergenerational interventions that aim to improve family functioning and family prospects by enhancing child and adult literacy. Interventions include teaching of literacy-related skills to parents and to children independently, as well as efforts to enhance children's literacy through involving parents as partners in their children's literacy development" (Lonigan, 2004, p. 57). Family literacy programs flourished in the 1980s, principally in the developed world, and especially in Great Britain and in the U.S. (for example Barbara Bush's Foundation for Family Literacy was created in 1989. See [www.bararabushfoundation.com](http://www.bararabushfoundation.com)). Family Literacy programs vary according to family needs. These latter are dependent on geographical, cultural and socio-economic contexts.

At least three main reasons for undertaking family literacy can be identified, such as:

1. Family literacy is an important factor in combating intergenerational transmission of poverty (ITP). Research has demonstrated that illiteracy and poverty are often intergenerational (Morán, 2003).
2. Research has shown that parents have a strong influence on children's attitude towards learning, particularly from birth to school age.
3. After the children enter formal schooling, the parents' attitude and help to stimulate children's learning are important.

Most family literacy programs build on these reasons, and aim to help both parents and children to learn better. For example, Barbara Bush's Foundation for Family Literacy has as its goal "to establish literacy as a value in every family in America, by helping families in the nation to understand that the home is the child's first school, that the parent is the child's first teacher, and that reading is the child's first subject; and to break the intergenerational cycle of illiteracy, by supporting the development of family literacy programs where parents and children can learn and read together" (Bush, 2003, p. 392).

The following sections further investigate family literacy's impact in emergent literacy, on school performance, and on poverty. In developing countries, most family literacy programs aim to increase parents' skills and thus to enable them to better care

for their children. Such programs often have a special focus on mothers and children. They aim at making parents and children positive towards lifelong learning, and help to strengthen the bond between them. In such programs, the distinction between family literacy programs and early child programs (ECD) may be difficult to discern. Many literacy programs have ECD components that seek to help the family function in a poverty context. These components may include such services as distribution of nutritional supplements and provision of medical follow-up for mothers and children.

## **2. Family literacy: impact on emergent literacy and on school performance**

Emergent literacy has been defined as a set of "skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are presumed developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing" (Lonigan, 2004, p.59). The concept blurs the separation between children's pre-reading and reading stages, and underlines the importance of parents' interaction with children before and during the first school years. It has been recognized that a poor upbringing in difficult circumstances may disable cognitive mechanisms, whereas a favorable environment may stimulate them. Research shows that almost all children, under the right circumstances, easily gain access to knowledge. The "right" circumstances include "internal attributes (metacognitive, learning, thinking and motivational skills) and external attributes (nutrition, freedom from infection, quality of stimulation; cognitive and behavioral scaffolding)" (Bekman, 1998, p.7) It is suggested that family literacy programs for children at risk should target these external and internal attributes.

The internal attributes (metacognitive, learning, thinking and motivational skills), have often been separated in two different groups, such as (i) knowledge to translate signs into sound, i.e., phonological access, sensitivity and memory; and (ii) the understanding the meaning of text, i.e., interest in print, vocabulary, as well as syntactic and narrative understanding of text (Lonigan, 2004). The term "school readiness" is often used to describe the level of match between school expectations of the child and his or her ability to fulfill them. A child's school readiness is heavily correlated with the external attributes mentioned above and with the family's socio-economic status (Bekman, 1998).



Evaluations of family literacy programs have found varied evidence about preschool initiatives on the children's later success at school. Different controlled studies of the U.S. federal Even Start family literacy programs (which are in many cases using Head Start as their early childhood component) failed to find effectiveness of the program in terms of literacy achievements. The Even Start program was heavily focused on external and environmental factors, and its apparently low results may be partly explained by lacking focus on the development of cognitive skills (Lonigan, 2004). Also, the evaluation may have failed to take into account the full range of effects of early childhood intervention.

Other studies have found important results of preschool attendance; not only in literacy, but also on later educational performance and work skills. Among the most well-known evaluations is the High/Scope Educational Research foundation's Perry Preschool study, which followed two groups of African American students from similar backgrounds over four decades. One of the groups received high-quality preschool instruction, the other did not. The study published several reports on the students' achievements later in life, when they were 25 and 40 years old. The studies showed that young adults and adults who participated in a preschool program in their early years had important advantages as compared to those who did not, both on cognitive and educational achievements, economic achievements, and on the reduction of crime rates.

Some of the study's main findings on educational/cognitive issues are as follows:

"More of the group who received high-quality early education graduated from high school than the non-program group (65% vs. 45%), particularly females (84% vs. 32%);

Fewer females who received high-quality early education than non-program females required treatment for mental impairment (8% vs. 36%) or had to repeat a grade (21% vs. 41%); and

The group who received high-quality early education on average outperformed the non-program group on various intellectual and language tests during their early childhood years, on school achievement tests between ages 9 and 14, and on literacy tests at ages 19 and 27" ([www.highscope.org](http://www.highscope.org)).

As for the economic outcome of the study, it was estimated that

"more of the group who received high-quality early education than the non-program group were employed at age 40 (76% vs. 62%);

The group who received high-quality early education had median annual earnings more than \$5,000 higher than the non-program group (\$20,800 vs. \$15,300);

More of the group who received high-quality early education owned their own homes; and

More of the group who received high-quality early education had a savings account than the non-program group (76% vs. 50%)" ([www.highscope.org](http://www.highscope.org))

Also, the preschool activities had an effect on crime prevention:

"The group who received high-quality early education had significantly fewer arrests than the non-program group (36% vs. 55% arrested five times or more); and

Significantly fewer members of the group who received high-quality early care than the non-program group were ever arrested for violent crimes (32% vs. 48%), property crimes (36% vs. 58%), or drug crimes (14% vs. 34%)" ([www.highscope.org](http://www.highscope.org)).

The cost-benefit of the ECD project was highly positive: "overall, it was documented a return to society of more than a \$17 for every dollar invested in the early care and education program" (High/Scope press release, 2002). The results of evaluations of similar initiatives in developing countries have shown many of the same benefits: In Latin America, for example, it was noted that "compared to children from broadly the same geographical area and similar socioeconomic background, those that participated in early childhood care and development programs during the preschool years are more likely to enroll in primary school at the appropriate age; attain higher scores in standardized tests of mental and cognitive development around the time of primary school enrollment; progress normally across grades in primary and remain in school longer; and be evaluated in psychological tests as having better social skills, and by teachers as getting along better at school" (Morán, 2003, p. 70). Two cost

benefit studies that were undertaken, while not finding as high cost-benefit rates as in the High/Scope study, nevertheless found that returns to ECD programs were likely to yield two to three times of the invested amount (Morán, 2003).

An evaluation of a Mother-Child Education Program (MOCEP) which has been widely implemented in Turkey, showed significant effects on the children's future wellbeing. The MOCEP is based on a four year longitudinal research project implemented between 1982 and 1986. The project compared outcomes from custodial and educational preschool day care centers, and at the same time studied the outcomes of a home intervention program with two components: (i) a program to foster the overall development of the child and (ii) a program to foster its cognitive development. The sessions aimed at training the mothers to better respond to the emotional and social needs of the child, while at the same time addressing its cognitive growth. Short-term effects of the program were assessed in 1986, and a new evaluation addressed long-term effects in 1992-93.

The short-term assessment showed that educational day-care centers were superior to custodial centers and to home care for "all indicators of cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as school achievements" (Bekman, 1998, p.24). The effect on mothers was significant: "the main difference was observed in the area of mother-child interaction. Trained mothers were observed to be more responsive, to use higher levels of verbalization, and to have higher aspirations and expectations for their children. Direct effects on the mothers indicated higher intra-family status within the family and greater optimism for future life" (Bekman, 1998, p.24). After these positive outcomes were documented and publicized, the program gained a high political visibility in Turkey, and gradually became a public program instead of a series of scattered small-scale projects. In 1983 the Mother-Child Education Foundation was established in Turkey with the help of a private bank, and operates as an NGO. It is institutionally connected to the Directorate for Apprenticeship and Non-Formal Education within the Ministry of Education in Turkey. The program aims to: "to promote school readiness by providing cognitive enrichment to children and by creating an environment that will provide optimal psychosocial health and nutritional development. This necessitates fostering the role of the parents in the cognitive, social and emotional development of the child. Child management methods and

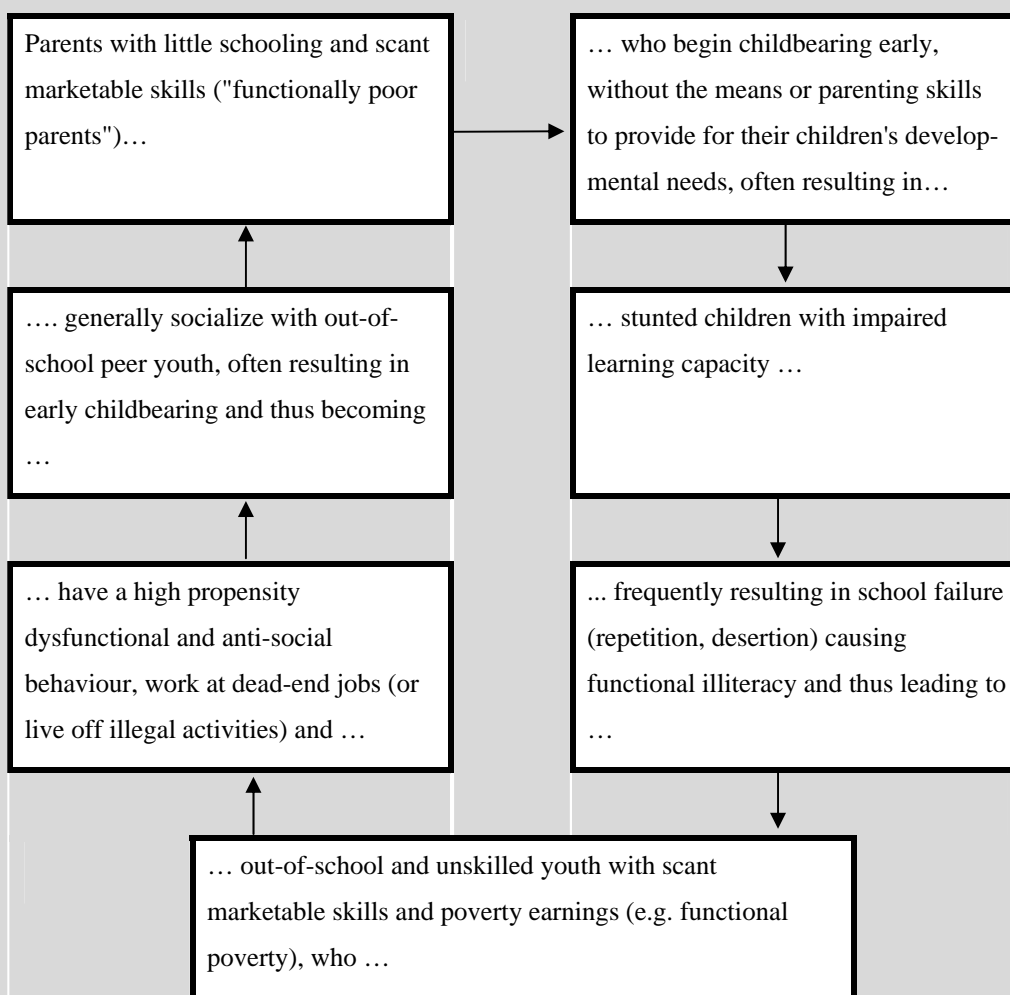
communication with the child, emotional security and self esteem of the mother, family planning and reproductive health are also targeted in the program. Thus, it is an example of both an adult education and a child development program" (Bekman, 1998, p.27). It is implemented through adult education centers immediately before the children start formal schooling, and facilitated by adult education instructors who have been especially trained by MOCEP. The instructors also visit the homes regularly (in average five times during the 25-week training program). The effects are consistently positive (better family relations, improved child results in primary schooling, etc.). Similar findings, although not so well documented, are found in many developing countries (see for example Morán, 2003).

### **3. Family literacy as a tool to fight intergenerational transmission of poverty (ITP)**

International evidence and research support the notion that poverty, just as assets, are passed on from parents to children. The negative loop of parent-child poverty is frequently labelled intergenerational transmission of poverty (ITP). A simplified view of this model depicts poor parents who begin childbearing early, and who do not have the means to provide for their children's upbringing. The children do not have access to schooling and thereby lack marketable skills. They will generally mingle with other youth in the same social milieu, socializing which is often resulting in early childbearing (see table 1 below).

**Table 1: A simplified view of the Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty**

In the midst of typically harsh social, economic and cultural settings with inadequate social services, oversupplied labor markets for the unskilled, and meager cultural opportunities and successful role models, a host of formidable impediments characterizing the environment of families in poverty include...



Taken from Morán, 2003, p. 9.

The model shown in table 1 may lead to policymakers' blaming the poor for poverty transmission. Poor people seemingly make wrong decisions during their whole lifetime. Indeed, a frequently encountered moralistic attitude would state that the poor could "just say no" and avoid early childbearing, dropping out of schools, and socializing with the "wrong elements." However, it often appears that

intergenerational transmission of poverty is a policy issue that is characterized by a government's deliberate decision not to support the poor. Hence, ITP is characterized, not by the parents' erroneous decisions, but by the state's failure to address the needs of the poor. The failure can be seen at the following levels:

1. Failure to provide adult training for young parents and thus failure of addressing the functional poverty of the parents;
2. Failure to provide information about family planning to avoid early pregnancy;
3. Failure to provide support (training, nutrition, medical follow-up) when early pregnancy occurs;
4. Failure to provide early childhood programmes to help the young child's psychological and physical development;
5. Failure to compensate direct and opportunity costs for children's education and thus failure of ensuring basic schooling for all children;
6. Failure to provide non-formal training for the unschooled youth (back to step 1 again).

The political decisions not to address these issues in many cases do not make sense economically. Experience and research show that there are high societal returns for training initiatives. Literate parents are supporting their children's schooling, improving social capital through active participation in civil society and through participation in the democracy (through voting). Also, negative societal effects of illiteracy will be reduced. These latter include the continuation of a poorly skilled workforce, which is socially not very productive, the parents of which have children early, and whose children are caught in the same poverty trap as their parents. By extension, there is evidence of higher drug abuse, higher crime rates and other negative externalities of illiteracy and poverty: "education and training for youths is not only an economic imperative. In many countries young people's dissatisfaction and disillusionment with their prospects for education and work threaten social cohesion and stability. Reaching this age group through formal and non-formal education is also vital to the targeted intervention in such areas as HIV/AIDS and

reproductive health education and programs to raise awareness of civic rights and responsibilities” (World Bank, 2001, p. 14).

However, adult literacy alone is in most cases insufficient to deal with intergenerational transmission of poverty. As shown in table 1, investments are needed all along the cycle of ITP. The needs may include the following interventions:

1. Training for young parents;
2. Awareness-raising on family planning to avoid early pregnancy;
3. Training, nutrition allowances, medical follow-up when early pregnancy occurs;
4. Early childhood programmes to help the young child's psychological and physical development;
5. Compensation of direct and opportunity costs for training (including children's primary and secondary education);

These actions can be clustered into three main groups, which can all be parts of a family literacy intervention: (i) Adult and adolescent training; (ii) Early Childhood Development activities; and (iii) Health and nutrition programmes addressing the needs of pregnant women and infants, as well as compensating for some of the opportunity costs of attending training through distribution of food.

#### **4. Adult education as a part of family literacy programs**

The difference between traditional adult literacy education and the adult education component of a family literacy programs is the latter's focus on parenting education. The adult education component in a family literacy program aims to strengthen the parents' relationship and influence on children's emerging literacy skills and early school experience (Wasik, 2004). It can be implemented in various ways. In many cases, family literacy has been modeled on children's education and follows a highly theoretical approach. Adult and family literacy, however, differ from children's formal education in many different ways (see table 2 below). The needs, lives and

experiences of adults are very different from those of children, and are making it more difficult to involve adults in training programs.

**Table 2: Differences between children's and adult education**

<b>Children's (formal) education</b>	<b>Adult education</b>
Children's primary schooling is mandatory and has a predefined timetable	Adults are free to participate in, and leave, the program at their wish
Schooling and learning occupies the main part in the lives of schoolchildren	The lives of adults are organized around their work, family and community
Children scoring the same at a standardized test, usually have similar skills, knowledge and abilities	Adults scoring the same at a test have dissimilar experience and needs
Children follow a pre-determined curriculum	Adults make use of selective training, and thus adapt it to their own needs

(Adapted from Comings, 2004)

Since adults' participation in education programs is based on willingness to participate, the learning must be adapted to fit the learners' needs. It is especially important that the learners identify these needs for themselves, so as to avoid early drop-out or irregular attendance.

Adult education instruction is often provided through lectures which may prevent internalization of the learning, thus precluding behavioral change. Research has shown that such lecturing approach has very little effect. On the contrary, use of participatory approaches, group work, and peer tuition may prevent problems of low attendance and lack of accomplishment in adult education (Abadzi, 2003; Nordtveit, 2005). It is important that the program, by using participative methods and instruction that is adapted to the participants' needs, encourage the learners' persistent attendance to the course and their internalization of the subject matter. Of particular importance is the learners' use of creativity in diagnosing problems and in proposing solutions (Uauay & Miranda, 1983). Adult education needs to be adapted to individual needs of the learners, and the program's content needs to be functional. A functional approach includes "(a) increasing motivation by making explicit the relationship between the content and its specific application in the adult student's life after the educational program; (b) learning by ensuring that instruction builds on the adult student's prior knowledge; and (c) increasing the likelihood that the abilities developed in the



educational program will be put into practice by deriving instructional content, as much as possible, from the future context in which the adult will apply the abilities being acquired" (Comings, 2004, p. 241).

Practically, this could be done through implementing a series of participatory actions, as follows:<sup>1</sup> (i) Participants in adult literacy courses identify the characteristics of the family or community; (ii) they identify problems in the family/community and recognise causal relationships (what behaviour is causing which problem); (iii) they examine short and long term effects of the problems (the facilitator is providing theoretical knowledge about the case); (iv) the learners, guided by the facilitator, plan and carry out individual and community actions to solve the problems; (v) during implementation, the learners continue dialogue about the actions (and their results) with each other and with the facilitator, and identify and correct any implementation problems; (vi) results are evaluated regularly during the whole implementation phase.

Such approach is particularly important for addressing problems related to family nutrition and children rearing, questions on which family literacy programs are focusing.

When addressing family literacy issues, it is also necessary to improve the family verbal environment. Research has demonstrated that attention (in the form of joint parent-child attention) and warmth from the parents can create the baseline for children's intellectual growth. This attention needs to be completed by enhanced verbal communication skills, vocabulary use, and reading. The socioeconomic differences in children's experience with words and literacy are extreme: "Estimates indicate that the average child in a family on welfare heard 616 words per hour, the average child a working-class family heard 1,251 words per hour, and the average child in a professional family heard 2,153 words per hour. Extrapolations of these data to a 5,200-hour year are as follows: 11 million words in a professional family, 6 million words in a working-class family, 3 million words in a family on welfare" (Powell, 2004, p. 159). Research shows that family interaction and communication with the child in the first years are essential for later school accomplishments. Comparative studies of early childhood in educated, advantaged families and children

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<sup>1</sup> This is adapted from Uauay & Miranda's (1983) model for adult training in nutrition.

from families of low socioeconomic status, firmly establish strong predictors of future achievements in the interactions between parents and their 1- and 2-year-old children. Achievements are highly correlated to the vocabularies of children. There are extensive communication and vocabulary differences between wealthy and disadvantaged families, differences that translates into widely different academic and intellectual performances as the children grow (Hart & Risley, 1995).

## 5. Conclusion

The expected outcome of family literacy programs may be appreciated on several levels. The short-term effects include (i) better child-rearing (better understanding of children's needs, better communication and follow-up during children's informal and formal educational processes); and, by inclusion of adult education and ECD components, (ii) improved family health (better awareness of nutritional and hygiene issues) and improvement of adult functional skills.

The long term effects are directly derived from the short-term effects. They include children's higher accomplishments in school and work life, and thus disruption of the intergenerational cycle of poverty. The High/Scope Educational Research foundation's Perry Preschool study, for example, showed that a preschool initiative alone has strong effects on children's accomplishments during a lifetime. There is evidence that a multi-pronged approach has even more significant effects.

In most cases, the documented cost-benefit ratio of family education programs has been overwhelmingly positive, and such programs can be considered as a necessary part of breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty. The potential effects of family literacy programs are very clearly prompting policymakers to set up such multi-pronged initiatives. When setting up family literacy programs, the following components merit consideration:

1. An ECD component (in a day-care center or as an in-family exercise) with focus on fostering pre-literacy skills and establishing school readiness;
2. An adult education component addressing child rearing, child nutritional and emotional needs;

3. An adult education component addressing adults and children's cognitive needs (literacy, basic skills);
4. A nutrition and health component following up on the family's (and especially the pregnant mother and the newborn child's) nutritional and health needs.

The implementation of such program poses multiple problems for establishing an implementation strategy, since the four components usually would be dependent on different institutions (e.g., education and health). Experience has shown that it is very difficult to coordinate many actors to deliver one single program. There are two ways of dealing with this issue (i) implementing the program through use of one single institution, and eventually drawing on expertise from other institutions and/or the private sector; or (ii) making use of civil society to implement the project. In the latter case, small NGOs and other types of local civil society organizations can adapt the programs to the community needs, and draw in local expertise as required. In some cases, a mixed approach, using both government intervention and civil society, has proved to be effective (Nordtveit, 2005).

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