**PILOTING SMART WITH MULTICULTURAL HIPPY**

The SMART is a pilot program which was adapted from an Early Childhood Education (ECE) program from Germany named Opstapje. Like HIPPY, the SMART program aims to build mother’s confidence and strengthen the mother child bond through collective engagement in structured play based learning activities. It is a 12-week programme and is targeted at children aged 18 months to 3 years. The SMART program was delivered through 11 colorful engaging books, 6 attractive and portable toys, a HV manual and easy to read instructions cards for parents in English, French, Farsi and Arabic.

ISS of BC implemented SMART with 38 families and MMC supported the partner and staff in capacity building and technical backstopping along with documenting the learning, challenges and best practices.

 **FEEDBACK FROM MOTHERS AND HOME VISITORS**

‘It gives parents a sense of empowerment as they cannot afford toys and books of this quality for their children. They feel more responsible as parents being a part of this program. A mother shared that seeing her children with the beautiful toys and books made her realize she made the right choice seeking refuge in Canada despite all the challenges brought on by displacement’

SMART HV

‘The children love the toys and books so much that they sometimes don’t let us open the toy for the role play’

SMART HV

‘It is the best thing that has happened for my children in a long while’

SMART Mother

‘HIPPY children would not share their HIPPY weekly packages with their younger siblings. With SMART, the children have learnt to share and play together – elder siblings show younger siblings their activity sheets and core HIPPY activities and younger siblings let elder siblings play alongside them with SMART toys and books’

SMART HV

“My child had a speech delay. When I started SMART, he drastically improved. He even started saying names of shapes and colors. He was so excited about the books. I really like the books as they have improved my vocabulary of English too. I use them to learn English for myself as well.”

SMART Mother

“The books are a hit. Kids love them. It makes younger kids feel included as in most families the older sibling is a HIPPY child”

SMART HV

Limiting screen time for my children has been a challenge for me. SMART has greatly helped me in doing that. It helps my kids learn and it makes me happy that the kid’s time is being utilized in something more useful than the screen.

SMART Mother

SMART motivated kids but it motivated mothers even more. The mothers felt equipped with tool and resources to engage with their younger children – something which they cannot usually do due to lack of time, resources and skills.

SMART HV

**Challenges in Implementing SMART**

1. Logistical management of toys and books delivery to family proved to be challenging for HVs. The toys and books are heavy and taking them out to homes was difficult.
2. HVs did not have a separate set of toys and books for delivering SMART (as different families were on different weeks and it is logistically challenging to carry all the SMART materials with, some times it was difficult for the mothers to retrieve or find certain toys which required to be used again in subsequent SMART activities.
3. Sometimes getting the child to agree to ‘open’ their toy and role play with it required serious negotiation, skills and a lot of patience.
4. Sometimes SMART activities use up as much as 3 toys for one activity which can be challenging and time consuming for the mum to gather again from the kids and make them available for role play. It may be better for activities to focus on one toy.

 **Lessons Learnt from SMART:**

1. The SMART program really hit home with families. It was developed in response to the families’ needs of having resources and structure to engage their kids under 3 years of age. The response to SMART was overwhelming by at partner, staff and family level.
2. The quality of books really matters. SMART used high quality books which could endure rough handling by children between 18months and 3 years. They were hard board books and they proved to be very useful for children, siblings and mothers alike. Quality of books should not be compromised on for this age group for future programming.
3. SMART helped kids and mothers find new friends. Many SMART families found new friends in the park, neighborhood or within the SMART family circle. The kids had toys from SMART and they could play together while the mothers got a chance to chat. Usually, it is difficult for mothers and children to engage in the absence of quality materials (toys, books) to keep children engaged.
4. The activity with pretend play dough was flagged by some families as inappropriate as it required children/mothers to make cookies from play dough and pretend to eat it. Some families thought their children were too young to understand pretend play and this encouraged them to eat play dough. Other families however loved the activity and shared that it sparked creativity for the children. The discussion with HVs showed that maybe this activity would be better undertaken with children 2 or 2.5 years and older.
5. The age limit is quite diverse for the 12-week program. For 18 months, some activities were just too hard and sometimes frustrated the child and the mother however for a 3-year old some activities were all too easy and they got done within minutes and then felt bored by the activity. In a revision of SMART perhaps activities can be arranged from simpler to more challenging and the programme should be of a greater duration so children can move through the program at their pace and learn to take on more complex challenges as they move along.
6. Home visitors shared how mothers benefitted greatly by the vocabulary building activities and the books to learn English themselves. For some mothers SMART was the first learning experience for their children as the children lived in camps for a long time and were not exposed to schools or learning environments. There is a mother who has no English or Arabic literacy – she looks at pictures in SMART books and is teaching herself English. A modified version of SMART can maybe have some add on activities for mothers using SMART reading materials.
7. SMART worked well with RHH and with HIPPY core however it was tried with families who had just arrived in Canada and the experience was very successful. The toys and books made the family feel welcomes in their new life and the group activities linked them to others in similar circumstances as them for an early intervention for peer support.
8. The methodology of delivering SMART can be adapted i.e. HV to mother at individual level or HV to group of mothers as long as the mother and child spend one on one time with each other doing the SMART activities.

**Way Forward**

MMC is presently taking stock of SMART’s roll out and consolidating learning. Based on this learning and feedback from partner, staff and families – MMC will refine SMART and pilot the modified version to test it and fine tune the program in consultation with ECE experts, staff implementing Opstapje in Germany and partners and families involved in rolling out modified SMART.

MMC plans to scale SMART in a year’s time so that more families can benefit from the program.