



## Seminar Report

# Parenting in Cambodia

Friday 21th of March, Phnom Penh

On March 21 2014, ICS (Investing in Children and their Societies) and the Psychology Department of the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) held the first seminar on parenting (programs) in Cambodia. Forty parenting experts of the government and civil society were participating. The professions ranged from caregivers, social workers, psychologist to officials from the different ministries.

The aim of the seminar was to provide a forum for stakeholders working on parenting to share about their work and identify best practices in order to widen and enrich national understanding of parenting in Cambodia. As this was the first seminar on this topic in the country, another aim was to identify opportunities for more collaboration beyond diverse perspectives on parenting.

This report provides a summary of the seminar, the main outcomes, results of the seminar evaluation and a conclusion with possible follow-up actions.

### 1. Summary of Seminar

The seminar started with a presentation of Elizabeth Högger Klaus to provide a theoretical introduction on parenting “Psychological Background of Parenting - why Parenting Programs are important for the Mental Health Context in Cambodia”. This theoretical introduction was followed by 2 presentations of research that was recently done on parenting in Cambodia. First, Dr. Angela Simcox of Indigo International presented the preliminary findings of a research project on “Beliefs and Practices about Child Rearing in Cambodia”. Second, Chea Samnang presented her Master’s thesis on “Parent Child Discipline associated with Child Depression in Cambodia”.

In the second part of the seminar participants were divided in small groups to discuss the following questions in a world café discussion:

1. What has influenced Cambodian parenting styles? And how do these influence child outcomes?
2. What is the role of fathers in care giving in Cambodia? And how to involve more fathers?
3. How do Cambodian parents use the concept of praise in raising children?
4. Role of parenting programs in alternative care: reintegration & foster parents
5. What is the role of parenting in effectiveness of programs for economic development?

The participants explored each question by discussing it in 20-30 minute sessions. Participants changed tables after each session in order to ‘cross-fertilise’ their discussions with the ideas generated at other tables. Each discussion was managed by a table hosts with specific expertise on the topic of the question. The event was concluded with a plenary session where each table host presented the key ideas and conclusions of the different questions.

## 2. Results of world-café discussions

### **What has influenced Cambodian parenting styles? And how do these influence child outcomes?**

“What the mind doesn’t know, the eye cannot see“: This Khmer proverb is used to point out that education (and connected to this, the socio-economic status) is the factor considered to currently have the biggest influence on parenting styles, along with good parental health and mental health. The better the socio-economic status, the better are possibilities for good education, for both parents and children.

As parents learn from their parents and grandparents as well as from the community, the period of the Civil War is perceived to have had a major impact on parenting styles, leaving widowed parents and a generation without role models. The lack of role models is also mentioned as a result of poverty and the necessity of earning a living, not leaving time for the education of the children. Often, older siblings watch after the younger ones. The loss of family members during the Civil War is mentioned in the same context, with single parents suffering from survivor guilt and mental health problems. Good mental health in turn is seen as important for good self-esteem of the parents and the ability to control emotions, especially anger. The violence experienced by the parent generation during the War has influenced communication styles and behaviour between the generations. Violence is used between couples and in the practice of beating children for the purpose of punishment.

Attachment was mentioned as an important factor for parenting practice, especially the role model of parents who are having faith in relationships and how parents cope with difficult issues.

New influences are cultural influences of foreign cultures in bi-national marriages, as well as through mass-media and TV. Newly established policies against violence and for child protection are mentioned, along with the notion that these policies should be put into practice.

As traditional influences religious practices are mentioned, there is a risk that these are exchanged for a more materialistic (western) worldview.

### **What is the role of fathers in care giving in Cambodia? How to involve more fathers?**

Traditionally the father earns the money, while the mother stays at home. Traditionally, a mother would not ask for help. As mothers used to breastfeed 1 to 2 years, this is seen as the reason of the child being more attached to the mother. The father makes decisions and is the most powerful figure in the family. The father disciplines the children. He can also hit his child to discipline, evoking fear in the child. This is seen as an appropriate measure. The fathers are responsible for the education of the children. So, if a father decides that the child should stop school, normally the mother agrees.

Traditionally fathers are “scared” of small babies. They are not involved in care taking during the first 6-12 months after birth. They start playing with the children - if they are not too tired from work and if they want to - when the baby starts to walk. But the Cambodian society has changed and is changing rapidly because of the influence of western-based media and economic development and growth. Participants say that nowadays the role of the father depends on two major factors: 1) education; 2) urban vs. rural lives.

Education: If both, mother and father are educated and both have jobs, the role of the father seems to change. In such families the father becomes more involved in parenting. Parents share the task of care giving. So, there is a new generation coming up with a more balanced division in parenting between mother and father. Participants mention that from a child's perspective the child



will adhere and be cognitively more attached to the parent who is more educated. Often this is the father.

Urban vs. rural lives: Education is much higher in bigger cities, especially in Phnom Penh. You find more traditional behaviours and traditional perceptions of a father's role in the rural areas. But also the rural areas have begun to change.

The change of society and labour market brings changes in the roles of the fathers. When women and mothers go to work in factories, for example, the fathers will take care of the children, although this is still only a minority. One participant shares their experiences in working with and educating families where fathers is the most important caretaker. Some participants say that some fathers, who cannot earn money for the family, have to face several problems. Some of them feel ashamed or depressed and start or increase drinking. Some are even called "animal" and compared with "*sapprolanka*". There is still an expectation from the society that the father has to earn the money.

Two more aspects:

1. When it comes to reproductive health, you normally find a division between fathers and mother. Mothers teach their daughters and fathers teach their sons regarding reproductive health.
2. Participants agree unequivocally that more education is needed to show that parenting is a job for both mothers and fathers.

### **How do Cambodian parents use the concept of praise in raising children?**

Praise is used when Cambodian parents want their children to do something or do something good. If families can afford it - again there are differences between rich and poor families- , praise will more likely be given through a gift, for example for academic achievements. '*If you do good then you will get a gift*'. Indirect praise e.g. telling the neighbours about the achievements of the child, is more likely to be given than direct and verbal praise. Cambodian parents don't want their children to become too confident or spoilt. Direct praise is seen as to increase confidence, which results in the children being "big headed" and that is not good. Verbal praise is only appropriate when something outstanding has happened. For the same reasons blame is often used. It is seen as to help children grow up well, behaving and respecting their parents. Blame is therefore directed towards the character of a child, not his or her actions. Doing good and bad being different categories than praise and blame. Sometimes, the parents would even do the opposite and ignore their children's achievements. Praise would only be given if something really outstanding happens. They would say: "*You are smart, you are intelligent, you must work hard and harder*". Parents generally do not say thank you to their children.

The participants express their interest for the concept of praise, but they see traditional beliefs, low education and income as challenges to the use of praise. "Using sweet words" is seen as something for the rich and elite. Education and encouragement on positive parenting would be needed.

### **Role of parenting programs in alternative care: reintegration & foster parents**

Topics to teach in parenting programs include minimum standards on health, e.g. food safety, child development, child rights, child protection and security, both physically and emotionally. A special emphasis should be put on ages and stages, informing parents on normal development (as well as abnormal), age appropriate ways of discipline, as well as helping the parents understand the needs of their children at a certain age. Basic knowledge on attachment should be included, and the connection of secure attachment to positive emotional and cognitive development.

Foster parents need to be informed on the concept of trauma and its connection to a child's behaviour. 'Bad behaviour' might be connected to traumatic experiences, whereas foster parents

might just see the 'naughty behaviour' of a child. The child would hear 'you are bad' and would internalize that belief, with the result of behaving 'bad'. A vicious cycle of bad behaviour.

Parenting programmes should teach the importance and values of families - including the idea that re-integration of the children in their families wherever possible, is favourable for the child's development.

Goals of alternative care include the importance of safety, a permanent and secure relationship for a healthy development, along with positive discipline in accordance with the child's age, as well as life skills for the family (e.g. managing money, feelings, information on sexual health).

### **What is the role of parenting in effectiveness of programs for economic development?**

The participants describe a direct impact of inhibiting parenting styles with community and country economic development. If there is no desire to know or learn (e.g. if parents don't want their children to talk too much and ask questions), how does this impact on the child? Children will not learn to ask questions and think critically, they might find decision-making difficult. There will be a lack of innovation in the country if children are not taught the skills to question something or see it another way than traditionally. The ability to resolve problems will be reduced.

A direct impact is seen of lacking encouragement to attend school - resulting in poor education and work skill and therefore diminished chances to get a job. Special attention should be given to gender differences with girls being less encouraged to study and get a good education.

There is an agreement among the participants that there is a shift in the mind-set needed from the focus of only generating money to the need of proper education and training for children and youth.

Education is seen as the agent for change - in both youth and parent generation.

### **3. Results of Questionnaire on Parenting**

A questionnaire on parenting (see appendix 1) was distributed and qualitatively evaluated. 20 participants completed the questionnaire. Among those who didn't respond anonymously stated following positions and professions: executive principle of Krousar Yeoung, secretary of Man network, vice chief of the office of Education of small children (MoEYS), vice chief of the office of Education for small child (MoWA), trainer for TPO Cambodia, residential educator (Liger Learning Center) and a social worker.

#### **Existing studies on parenting in Cambodia**

The following studies were mentioned by the respondents:

1. Chantal Rodier (1997) - Looking after children before 1975 and after 1979. This study is focused on maintaining children's health, i.e hygiene, nutrition, diseases of young children, creating a save environment for children, promoting good relationships, supporting the parents in behaviour management and discussing the roles and responsibilities of the parents. The study analyses parenting styles before 1975 and analyses Khmer poems that are related to parenting.
2. A study conducted in 2006 by a Filipino on believes and positive and negative parenting traditions and their impact on pregnant women and on children.
3. You Sokka from MoWA conducted studies on child rearing in Cambodia from 0 -6 years, focusing on morality and child discipline.
4. Bo Pho from Krousar Yeoung Association conducted a study on parenting styles in Cambodia.



### **Main problems reported by parents**

Respondents indicate that parents are mainly concerned about contextual and socio-economic factors. Parents struggle with poverty: the need to earn enough money for their families, trying to save some money and having debts. Difficulties with taking care of the health of the families is directly linked to the factor of poverty. Parents are having difficulties to consult any health services, such as health posts, as they live far away from such facilities, as well as having difficulties to accepting mistakes and making changes. Child labour and child abuse were specifically mentioned as challenges. Strong beliefs, for example the ideal of parenting not to spoil the children, or the belief that small children cannot be educated, along with adherence to traditional codes of conduct, for example the different roles and responsibilities of father and mother in parenting, the wish to maintain harmony and being loyal, as well as low education of parents are made accounted for these difficulties.

With regard to family relations, parents are having difficulties to manage anger and conflicts, to agree on family rules, and to discipline their children without violence. Parents struggle to make sufficient time for their children and feel stressed. Respondents support parents to deal with these problems through discussion with parents on ways of communication with their children (where they distinguish a soft versus a hard way of talking) and how to show love and affection.

For child factors respondents mentioned that parents are having problems with a quiet or stubborn (not obeying) child, jealousy between siblings, a child's restlessness and irritability, sleeping problems, difficulties with learning or children's low motivation for learning and not going to school. Parents complain that children don't help with the house chores, choose the wrong and potentially 'dangerous' friends, get involved in drug abuse, or are not reachable anymore because parents work far from home.

Along with poverty, domestic violence is indicated as an important topic in parenting.

### **Main problems in working with parents and families**

Answers given for this questions mainly refer to problems experienced by parents. As mentioned above the main challenges faced by parents are related to their economic situation, long working days, the distance to the (scarcely existing) services, and working abroad (migration work). Apart from these external factors, the belief that young children cannot learn as well as the difficulty of parents accepting their mistakes and their ability to change are obstacles for parenting. Parents often lack skills for problem solving and conflict management, having own mental health problems.

Families struggle with problems of alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence against partner or children, severe illnesses, as well as divorce and single parents (almost always mothers) making it difficult to even take care of children's health, not to mention to take care of their emotional development. Here, respondents report that parents have poor relationships with their children, out of the above mentioned reasons, including the punishment of children, taking them out of school and sending them to work, on streets as beggars for example, and abusing them sexually. Ways of communication seem to be poorly developed.

Parents struggle with disciplining their children, not knowing how to do this without punishment. On the other hand some parents tend to let their children to do what they want, not paying attention to them and not listening to them (permissive parenting style).

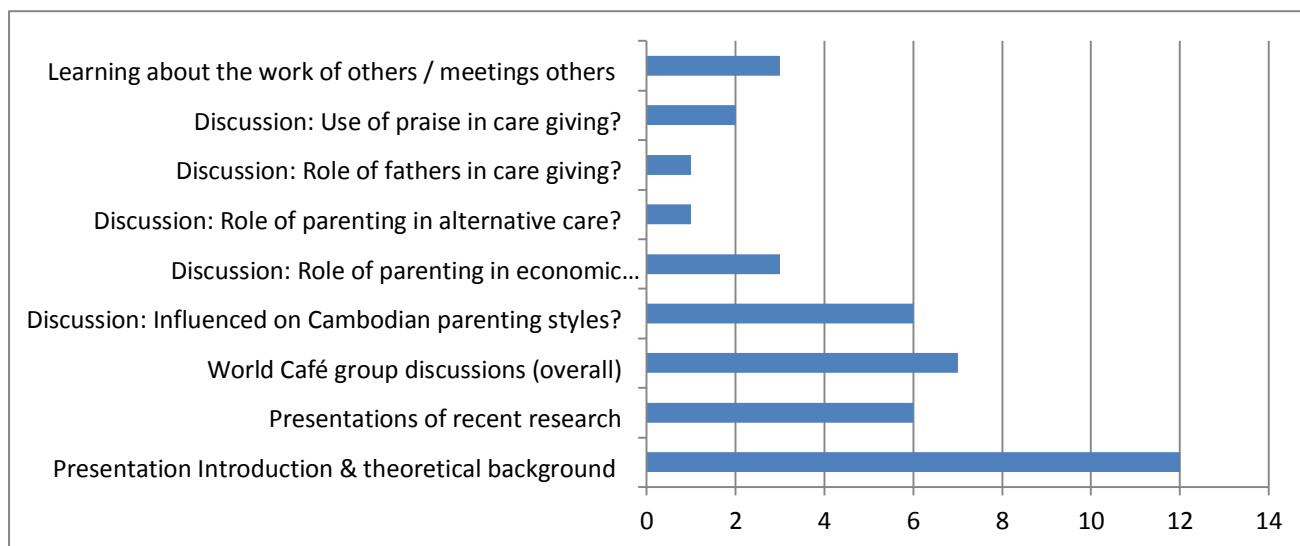
Milder problems are conflicts and jealousy between siblings as well as school problems of children.

Special problems are encountered in communities with a lack of education and in indigenous families.

## Evaluation Seminar Parenting in Cambodia

The evaluation of the seminar was filled in by 29 participants. Overall participants rated the seminar as Good (76%) and Very good (24%). Figure 1 shows how different parts or aspects of the seminar were appreciated by the participants with especially a high score for the first presentation which gave an introduction and theoretical background on the concept of parenting and parenting programs.

Figure 1. Which aspects of the seminar did you find most interesting or useful?



### Did the seminar achieve its objectives?

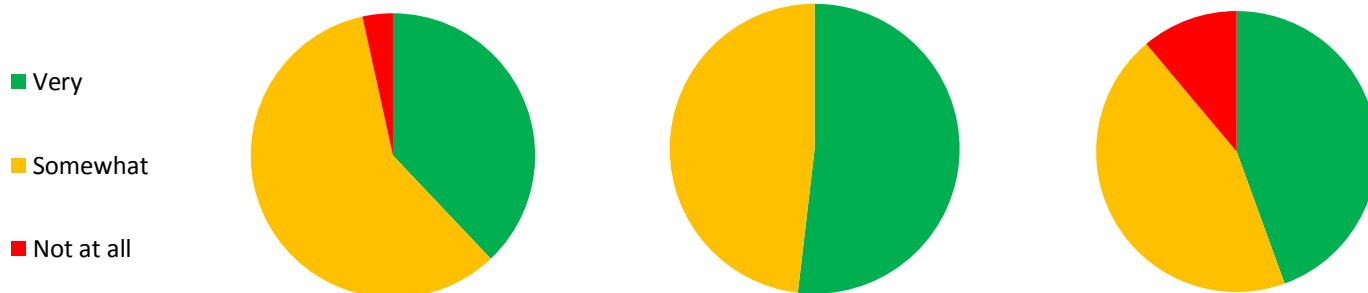
The seminar was organized with 3 objectives. Figure 2 shows to what extent these objectives were achieved according to the participants.

Figure 2. Did the seminar achieve its objectives?

1. Provide a forum for stakeholders working on parenting in Cambodia to share about their work and identify best practice

2. Facilitate discussion to widen and enrich national understanding of parenting in Cambodia

3. Identify opportunities for more collaboration beyond diverse perspectives on parenting



The seminar was especially successful in achieving the second objective: *to facilitate discussion to enrich understanding on parenting in Cambodia*. All participants gained new knowledge and/or information on parenting and can use this knowledge and/or information in their work, see Table 1.



Table 1. Increase in knowledge on parenting

| Did you gain new knowledge and/or information about parenting at this workshop? |    |      | Is this knowledge and/or information useful/applicable in your work? |    |      |
|---|----|------|--|----|------|
| Yes   | 20 | 71%  | Yes  | 25 | 89%  |
| Somehow   | 8  | 29%  | Somehow  | 3  | 11%  |
| No  | 0  | 0%   | No   | 0  | 0%   |
| Total   | 28 | 100% | Total  | 28 | 100% |

However the majority of participants felt that the first and third objective were only somewhat or not at all achieved. Participants felt there were not enough opportunities to share about their work and identify best practices. Consequently the seminar did not sufficiently stimulate more collaboration between organizations working on parenting.

Suggestions for improvement:

- Project implementers should have the opportunity to express their ideas and share their work, possibly through a market place approach.
- Let organizations come together and map what people are already doing.
- Provide the ministries with an opportunity to present what they are doing on parenting.
- Having one organization or at least a few circulate their materials.
- Invite parents to present their case or experience themselves.

**Organization of seminar**

Overall the organization of the seminar was positively evaluated by the participants: 46% good, 50% very good, 4% excellent. Aspects that were appreciated by the participants are good time management, clear explanations, interesting discussion topics, strong and friendly facilitators and a comfortable venue with good food.

Suggestions for improvement:

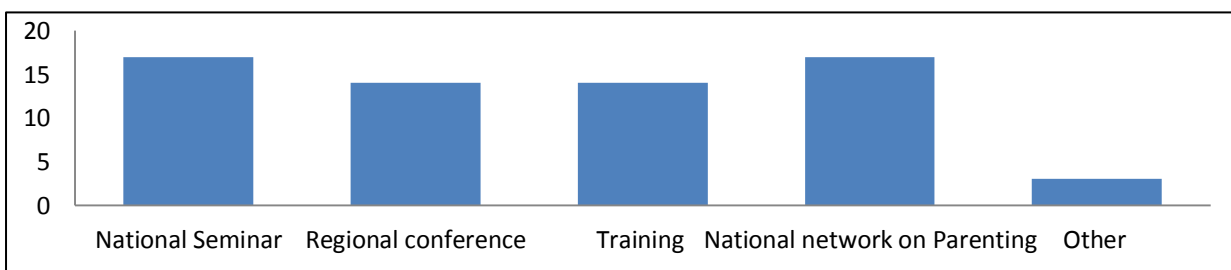
- Give more time for discussion: 20 minutes is too short, so have less rounds with more time.
- Provide a biography (hand-out?) from the first presentation to take away
- Provide all hand-outs in Khmer.

**Follow-up of seminar?**

All participants are interested to participate in more events of initiatives about parenting in Cambodia. Figure 3 shows the variety of events or initiatives that is of interest to them. Other ideas mentioned:

- Exposure visit to model program/project;
- Research supervision or research about parenting on national level.

Figure 3. In what kind of events or initiatives are you interested to participate?



Participants indicate a particular interest in more research on parenting in Cambodia to promote the evidence-base of parenting programs in Cambodia, identify best practices and influence the funding available for parenting in Cambodia. One participant says the following:

*If parent trainers or facilitators had numbers to present to parents on the impact of their behaviour on child development (impact of praise, of drinking, of father involvement...), this would perhaps convince parents more of the necessity to change certain behaviour.*

It is suggested to organize a national research on parenting or to encourage RUPP master students to do their thesis on parenting with support of NGOs for data collection.

Figure 3 confirms the interest of participants to have more opportunities to meet with and share with other stakeholders working on parenting. Some would like to meet with other NGOs working on parenting while others find it useful to have more links between researchers and NGO program planners.

## Conclusion

The seminar was successful in bringing together different stakeholders working on parenting in Cambodia. For the first time there was an opportunity to share the available evidence on parenting in Cambodia and discuss about some specific topics. The seminar raised the need for more research to gain more knowledge on parenting (traditional and changing practices, fatherhood, etc.) and to strengthen the evidence-base of existing parenting programs in Cambodia. The little research that has been done on parenting in Cambodia is unknown for many practitioners. This points to the need for a forum or platform to gather and disseminate relevant information and facilitate interaction between organisations working on parenting in Cambodia (or even Southeast Asia). Possibly inspired by the work of the Parenting Africa Network in Africa: <http://www.parentinginafrica.org/>.

This first seminar was mainly focused on discussion and sharing knowledge on parenting in Cambodia. A follow-up event is needed to move towards more concrete sharing of parenting practices, identification of best practices and more collaboration between different stakeholders. Possibly through a second seminar where different stakeholders can present their approach and materials in working with parents. ICS and RUPP will explore the possibility to organize this second seminar.

ICS and RUPP would like to express their gratitude to all participants of the seminar for their contribution and commitment to the wellbeing of parents, caregivers and children in Cambodia. A special thanks to Dr. Angela Simcox (Indigo International) and Ms. Chea Samnang (RUPP) for their inspiring presentations during the seminar.

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