



# Perfecting Parenting

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Pilot Launch Update



**Previous studies have shown that young babies and children living in rural China are not reaching their full developmental potential.**

A 2013 survey of 2,000 rural infants aged 6-12 months in Shaanxi Province, for instance, showed that around 40 percent were significantly delayed in either their cognitive or psychomotor development, based on their scores on the internationally standardized Bayley Scales of Infant Development (BSID).

Why are rural Chinese children performing so poorly, and what can be done to solve this problem? A growing number of economic and psychology studies point to the importance of early childhood intervention for reaching childhood development milestones. The

critical period before age two or three is considered to be a crucial “window”, during which interventions designed to improve cognitive development can have significant and lasting effects, even into adulthood.

*Only 5% of surveyed parents reported reading or singing to their babies.*

Moreover, intervening during this time period is considered to be the most cost-effective from a policy perspective.

However, our survey results show that very few parents interact with their infants. Useful types of interaction include reading stories or singing to babies, activities which less than 5% of the surveyed parents reported doing. The toys typically provided by parents such as toy horses or toy ducks are not usually as successful in stimulating cognition as building blocks, for example. Moreover, some children

are not given much space to explore or move freely, which in turn slows down their motor skills development. These patterns appear to be prevalent due to the lack of awareness about this critical window for development. Many of the surveyed parents were not aware of their children's developmental delays and many confused the cognitive abilities with school learning skills.



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### Project Objective

In light of this convincing body of research, we just launched a 6-month pilot project designed to measure the impact of an in-home parental training program. In doing so, we have two key goals. First, we aim to refine and polish a parenting curriculum that is specifically designed to be upscalable in the unique policy environment and geographic setting of rural China. Second, we aim to measure the impact of this parenting curriculum and intervention strategy on key child development outcomes, including cognitive, psychomotor, and social-emotional development.



## Designing a curriculum

In preparation for our pilot project, our study team spent several months designing and testing a week-by-week parenting curriculum tied to key child development milestones.

In conjunction with child development experts both

inside of China and internationally, we produced a comprehensive parenting curriculum that targets four key areas of child development:

- **Motor**
- **Language**
- **Cognitive**
- **Social-emotional**

**Each week's lesson includes two fun and educational activities for the caregiver to do with the child, each activity carefully designed to target one of our four developmental areas.**

Our study team also purchased and assembled sets of toys and books to accompany each week's activities. Balloons, play doctor kits, building blocks, mini basketball hoops—these are just a small fraction of the massive toy chests that our team put together for use in the project.

**In total, our curriculum includes 144 different activities, and covers children aged 18-42 months. Each child starts at a different point in the curriculum, according to his or her age.**



*By playing and interacting with the caregiver, the child's developmental skills improve.*





Once the curriculum was finalized, we recruited 70 “parenting trainers” to implement the curriculum in our sample areas. All recruits underwent an intensive training program.

All parenting trainers were government workers associated with local bureaus of family planning in our pilot areas. Over the course of one week, they received comprehensive training in everything from child development, to project logistics, to the art of interacting with rural parents who might be suspicious of our team or reluctant to “waste time” playing with their children.

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They heard guest lectures and testimonies from national and provincial government leaders, child development experts, and experienced project staff.



## Learning by Doing

The training course also included an experiential component, during which each parenting trainer had the chance to visit several rural households and put their newfound learning into practice. Under the supervision of the REAP research team, the trainers practiced explaining the

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different curriculum activities to rural caregivers, helped caregivers explore the different games and activities with their children, and got a chance to see the project in action for the first time. Watching the children transform from shy and withdrawn to happy and giggling was one of the highlights of the training!



## And We're Off!



In November 2014, now armed with the necessary skills and experience, the pilot stage of our program officially launched in Shangluo Prefecture in southern Shaanxi Province.

Each parenting trainer who participated in our training program was assigned a list of 1-4 rural households that he or she is responsible for visiting each week. During each visit, the parenting trainer demonstrates the week's new activities with the caregiver, and observes the caregiver as he or she plays with the child, offering tips and encouragement along the way. The visits, which are

*During each visit, the parenting trainer demonstrates the week's new activities with the caregiver.*

now well underway, are designed to last for 1 hour, respecting the caregiver's time commitments while at the same time ensuring sufficient time to carry out the week's new activities with the child.



## A toy library



In addition to helping the caregivers learn how to play and interact with their children, our parent trainers also have another major responsibility: passing out toys. After completing the initial training program, all of our parenting trainers were sent home with two large bins filled with toys, carefully sorted by week in order to match the parenting curriculum. During each household visit, the parenting trainer brings a bag filled with all of the toys needed to play that week's games and activities. At the end of the visit, these toys are left with the family, to be collected next time.



Building on an existing sample of 700 toddlers aged 18-36 months, we randomly selected around 275 households to participate in our parenting project. The remaining 425 households will act as our control group, allowing us to compare the two groups before and after the program.



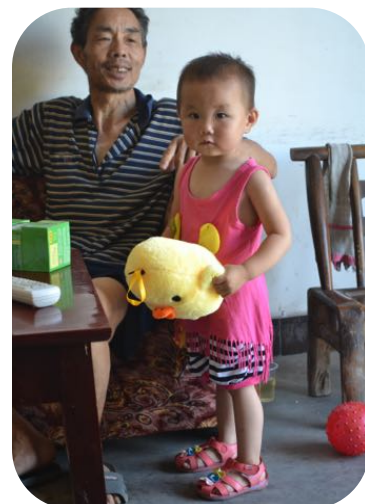
## What's Next?



In April, 2015—six months after the official project launch—our survey teams will revisit all households to collect endline data on parent-child interactions, toy ownership, and, most importantly, the children’s cognitive and social-emotional development. In this way, we hope to isolate and measure the precise impact of our parenting program on child learning

To further verify this impact, we plan on conducting a large-scale randomized controlled trial (RCT), using the refined curriculum and protocols from the pilot stage.

Besides the “home visit” model explained above, the RCT will also include a “parenting center” model. Instead of visiting the caregivers in their homes, the parenting trainers in this model will hold weekly sessions at the village centers and invite all eligible caregivers and their babies. In addition to following the same designed curriculum, this model will involve a group component where both caregivers and babies have much to gain from interacting with one another.





This RCT will provide us with even more accurate figures on the impact of our parenting program on children's development as well as lend insight into which model is more efficient and cost effective. The findings will be crucial as we work to convince policymakers to nationally upscale the program in the third and final stage of the program.

This early, but critical, age range is a window of opportunity to erase the delay that China's children are experiencing in their early development. We hope that our study will inform policymakers to seize this opportunity, investing in these children's well-being as well as their future contributions to China's economy.

Stay tuned for more results in the coming months!



# REAP

Helping China's poor harvest their dreams...

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