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Beyond parents and guardians: Mapping and mobilizing the "significant others" in early childhood care and development in the Philippines

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Beyond Parents and Guardians: Mapping and Mobilizing the 'Significant Others' in Early Childhood Care and Development in the Philippines

Paul Gideon D. Lasco and Jhaki A. Mendoza

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Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II)

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Abstract

ECCD discourse, policy, and research have understandably focused on parents: their roles, knowledge, practices, and lived experiences. However, it truly ‘takes a village’ to raise a child, perhaps particularly so in a very intergenerational, communal society like the Philippines where both of the past (e.g. cultural history) and the future (e.g. demographic shifts) point to the greater involvement of various ‘significant others’ in the *pag-aalaga* (i.e. care or nurturing) of children. This report examines how Filipino parents approach early childhood development, emphasizing the central role of various actors—parents, siblings, grandparents, domestic helpers (*yayas*, *kasambahays*), and community members (e.g., barangay health workers)—in shaping children's early development. Inspired and informed by 17 key informant interviews and a review of the social sciences literature, we map the different participants in ECCD and propose possible ways to leverage them toward better child health and education outcomes.

Keywords: early childhood care and development, childrearing, parenting experiences, caregiving network, qualitative research

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Beyond Parents and Guardians: Mapping and Mobilizing the ‘Significant Others’ in Early Childhood Care and Development in the Philippines

*Paul Gideon D. Lasco and Jhaki A. Mendoza**

INTRODUCTION

The parent-child relationship is at the heart of human development, cultural life, and social reproduction, whether in highly urbanized modern societies or in the most rural indigenous communities. In the course of studying the diversity of human experience across these settings, anthropologists with their commitment to ethnography (i.e. long-term fieldwork) have collectively touched on various aspects of this relationship, including how they vary across cultures and contexts. Similarly, sociologists with their attention to social structures have charted how parenting is practiced in different parts of the world.

Despite the potential of anthropology, sociology, and other social sciences (e.g. history, geography) to contribute to our understanding of Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD), their works have not figured in policy discourses and the more applied scholarship that focuses on ECCD. In the Philippine context, this gap is particularly unfortunate since anthropologists and sociologists alike have worked with indigenous peoples across the archipelago, overseas Filipinos, and other understudied groups, each of which necessarily involving matters relevant to ECCD.

This study seeks to overcome this gap by reviewing the existing social science literature on parenting and child-rearing, including and going beyond the rubrics of ECCD. To offer some contextualization, validation, and inspiration, it will also involve key informant interviews with parents of different demographic backgrounds.

The anthropologist Julie Spray (Spray 2018, p.1) opines that anthropology can challenge (and therefore improve) child health policy, noting that “this research is valuable for its challenges to ethnocentric assumptions often embedded in health policy which privilege adult knowledge and experience.” Following her approach, social science research can help interrogate the following assumptions:

1. Parents are passive recipients of child-rearing and parenting styles
2. Parental knowledge around the country is homogenous and can be generalized based on scientific and public understandings/expectations
3. Parents are simply “misguided” with various “misconceptions” that can be corrected through education

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4. Parenting roles, norms, and expectations can be isolated from broader social relations and structural (i.e. economic, sociocultural) factors
5. Parents are the sole major actors insofar as ECCD in the Philippines is concerned, notwithstanding the often multi-generational, extended, and communal nature of Filipino households

Hence, instead of viewing parental knowledge and practice from the vantage point of ECCD, we propose to approach the literature the other way around, that is, to view ECCD from the vantage point of overall parental knowledge and practice. In this light, the following questions are of interest to this subproject:

1. What are their beliefs/knowledge about education and development in general?
2. How do Filipino parents view early education, and what are their practices related to it?
3. What are parents' own "learning objectives" and "developmental milestones" for their children? Does it change depending on the child's gender?
4. What are Filipino parents' sources of knowledge?
5. What are the decision-making processes and power dynamics between parental dyads? Who are other parties involved (e.g. grandparents, relatives, teachers)?
6. How do socio-economic, geographic, and other demographic variables shape parental knowledge and practice concerning health and education?
7. What are the barriers faced by vulnerable and marginalized groups in terms of ECCD?
8. Beyond educational outcomes, what else is at stake in ECCD?
9. What are parental outcomes in the child-rearing project and how are they reflected in their lived experiences?

As with the broader project of which it is part, this study can be beneficial to policymakers and different implementing agencies by providing evidence that will help them create well-informed decisions related to the demand-side factors influencing engagement in ECCD. It may also unearth overlooked aspects of ECCD (e.g. extra-parental roles, parents' own needs and outcomes, cultural values) that can inform policy.

Reviewing the anthropological and sociological literature on parenting in the Philippines can illuminate barriers and facilitators in early childhood care and development, especially those that involve parental knowledge, perceptions, and practices. Moreover, the grounded, open-ended, and inductive nature of this body of work can *decenter* attention to educational or developmental outcomes and instead call attention firstly to broader parenting cultures and only secondly to childhood education can be situated within parental and familial expectations, norms, values, and aspirations. Given the nature of academic disciplinary divides, the anthropological and sociological literature is also usually omitted in literature reviews on ECCD, thus missing out on their potential contributions - to knowledge, policy, and practice.

OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this project is to identify the parenting styles of Filipino parents and parental caregivers especially as they pertain to early education, health, and nutrition, corresponding to strategic objective 2 (SO2) of the umbrella project. Additionally, it aims:

1. To identify the variations across major socioeconomic and sociodemographic characteristics or groups (e.g., urban and rural poor, Indigenous Peoples (IPs), Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), etc).
2. To identify sociocultural and economic barriers and facilitators of these groups to engage in optimal and recommended parenting behavior and practices (i.e., nutrition, health, and early education such as utilization of ECCD services among 3- to 4-year-olds), drawing on the broader anthropological and sociological body of work.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

(Cross-)cultural perspectives on childhood and parenting

The anthropology of childhood is viewed as a relatively late pursuit in the field of anthropology. “Mainstream anthropology,” Hirschfeld (2002, p.611) noted, “has marginalized children because it has marginalized the two things that children do especially well: children are strikingly adept at acquiring adult culture and, less obviously, adept at creating their own cultures” (see also(Weisner, n.d.) 2015). Parenting, too, has been similarly overlooked but much progress has been accomplished in recent decades to overcome this gap. Researchers now reflect on parenting as a 'cultural accomplishment' and argue that parenting should not be seen merely as a set of reproducible, fixed, and mastered skills but as a dynamic interaction deeply embedded within a broader cultural milieu(Furedi 2002): xiv).

Over time, the perception of child-rearing as a learned skill has gained more attention, shifting away from the view that it is an inherent capacity of mothers and fathers. This paradigm shift has led to an evolving nature of parental relationships with children, increasingly seen as separate from the acquisition of specific parenting techniques.

Such works have also been critical of how developmental interventions based on Western models have been uncritically (and forcibly) applied to non-Western contexts without regard for the cultural context. Morelli et al. (2018) highlight that such programs frequently push caregivers to alter their parenting approaches without fully understanding the broader impact on families and communities. In addition to critiquing these geographic and structural power imbalances, researchers have also pointed out that early childhood development studies tend to prioritize biological fields like developmental and cognitive psychology while overlooking insights from broader social sciences including anthropology, cultural psychology, sociology and other related disciplines, which could offer a more nuanced understanding of child-rearing practices within specific communities and social milieu (Scheidecker et al. 2023).

Meanwhile, other works have also looked at parental educational and economic backgrounds as a necessary context. Reviewing the global literature, Tamis-LeMonda and Rodriguez ((Tamis-LeMonda and Rodriguez 2008) found that limited formal education affects mothers' ability to foster verbal interactions with their children. They found that mothers with lower levels of education engage in reading activities with their children less frequently. Furthermore, there is a close link between socioeconomic income and parental education. Families experiencing persistent poverty often provide less stimulating home environments, putting children at a higher risk of cognitive, academic, and social-emotional challenges.

A notable anthropological body of research has also looked at the everyday realities and emotions of parenting practices to uncover the deeply demanding, morally laden, and emotionally driven requirements to sustain parenting. In their editorial work, Faircloth and colleagues (Faircloth et al. 2013, p. xviii) intended to “highlight parents as active agents emphasizing the often overlooked changes they undergo being embedded in an interconnected system of kinship, culture and ideology.”

As parents themselves, Faircloth and colleagues (2013:1), belabored the paucity of anthropological work on the topic of parenting, leading them to deconstruct the whole idea of parenting both as contemporary cultural and political projects, questioning the “expert-led” knowledge re-formation on parenting, designed to create a universalizing standard on childrearing, as well as expectations on mothering and fathering:

Ideas shaping our understanding of “parenting” challenges conventional notions of childrearing by prompting a reassessment of the objectives, resources, and relationships that define it within an evolving global framework. Rather than being confined strictly to traditional caregiving roles within kinship structures, “parenting” is increasingly regarded as an acquired skill set. It is now often linked to specialized knowledge of child development and care, shaped by contemporary research and guided by expert-driven approaches to raising children.

In conclusion, the exploration of (cross-)cultural perspectives on childhood and parenting reveals the complexities and nuances often overlooked in mainstream anthropology. The marginalization of children and parenting in anthropological research has gradually been addressed, leading to a richer understanding of these domains as deeply embedded within broader cultural contexts. The critique of Western-centric developmental interventions highlights the importance of culturally sensitive approaches that acknowledge the unique practices and values of non-Western communities. Furthermore, the intersection of parental education, economic background, and parenting practices underscores the need for a holistic view that considers the socio-economic challenges faced by families. As Faircloth and colleagues argue, the contemporary reformation of parenting as an expert-led activity calls for a re-examination of the goals and resources that define childrearing in today's globalized world. By embracing diverse cultural perspectives and recognizing the dynamic interactions involved in parenting, researchers and policymakers can foster more inclusive and effective approaches to supporting children and families.

Parental perspectives and practices on education

In the Philippines, many scholarly works have sought to elicit parental perspectives and a general outlook toward parental involvement, or “any action taken by a parent that can theoretically be expected to improve educational performance or behavior”(McNeal et al. 2014, p. 564). Ulep and colleagues (forthcoming) note that a significant number of parents with children aged 3 to 4 years old choose not to enroll them in early education programs, believing their children are too young for structured learning. This perspective is widely shared across socioeconomic groups, with low-income and of affluent households expressing similar views. In a qualitative survey of parents of primary schoolchildren in rural Cebu, researchers found that the parents were generally supportive of sending their children from four years of age and up, but they did not receive information and advance notice regarding school activities, hindering their ability to participate(Alfafara, Canque, and Genobiagon 2021).

Poverty and financial instability create different parental involvement practices in the Philippines wherein active participation of parents in school activities and heavy involvement in the decision-making process concerning academic curriculum and activities are potentially weak. Nonetheless, parental involvement in home-based settings was much more prominent. Drawing on a broader sample in six different provinces, Jabar (2021) highlights distinct parental involvement strategies shaped by the economic challenges faced by some Filipino families. The study found that parents adopt alternative approaches to support their children’s academic success, such as excusing them from household chores, discouraging engagement in vices, and fostering strong family relationships. Similar findings were highlighted by Garcia and De Guzman(Garcia and de Guzman 2020) in their study regarding parental involvement of parents from low-income families in Quezon City. They found that the academic needs of children are deeply valued because education is regarded as an instrumental tool to escape poverty. As a result, low-income parents are highly engaged in home-based learning activities such as closely monitoring their children to finish homework and prioritizing educational activities before play and leisure activities. These parents often emphasize the importance of education as the only intangible inheritance they can provide to their children, even at a young age, which can later create emotional pressure. Alfafara and colleagues ((Alfafara, Canque, and Genobiagon 2021) in their study conducted in Cebu City, found that parents are generally optimistic and supportive of the education system, but they often fail to become involved due to competing social and economic responsibilities. The study also found that parents, especially those who are poor and have lesser educational attainment, may also feel disempowered to make an active stance in advocating for the educational needs of their children.

By recognizing the various ways parents support their children's education, these studies call attention to the structural and most especially economic contexts of parenting toward educational success and urge policymakers to broaden their definitions of what counts as “parental involvement” toward academic success.

Gender roles and expectations in parenting

Research spanning from 1979 to 2007 (Alampay 2014) has consistently shown that Filipino mothers and fathers assume roles based on traditional gender norms. Mothers, much like in many other cultures, take on the primary caregiving responsibilities, overseeing their children's

education, daily routines, and overall well-being. The phrase "ilaw ng tahanan," meaning "light of the home," reflects the conventional view of Filipino mothers as the family's primary nurturers. In contrast, fathers are seen as the "haligi ng tahanan" or "pillar of the home," tasked mainly with providing financial support, with minimal involvement in other aspects of child-rearing (Alampay 2014). This depiction is more commonly observed in single-earner families, where fathers were usually relegated to the task of maintaining a source of income while mothers are expected to maintain domestic work most especially ensuring that children are well-fed and dressed (Mundoc et al. 2024).

Parenting styles among Filipino mothers and fathers were described as both espousing authoritarian beliefs where obedience and respect to authority are highly regarded values commonly taught to their children (Alampay and Jocson 2011). However, with the preponderance of global parenting knowledge and information made available by both mainstream and social media, Filipino mothers are observed to possess more "modern" childrearing attitudes than Filipino fathers, granting more agency and freedom for self-expression towards their children (Alampay 2024).

Such classical works (and understandings) notwithstanding, other studies suggest a more nuanced picture. For instance, while mothers are traditionally regarded as the major caregivers, especially of their sick children, a study by (Sato et al. 2018) found that fathers in Biliran acknowledged and often assumed the same responsibility, even as they emphasized their roles as financial providers.

Collectively, these studies point to the fact that distinct gender lines, with mothers as primary caregivers and fathers as breadwinners have characterized the traditional roles of Filipino mothers and fathers. However, evolving social dynamics and the influx of global parenting knowledge have started to reshape these roles. These findings highlight the importance of acknowledging both traditional and emerging practices in understanding the complexities of parenting in the Philippines, urging a more inclusive perspective that reflects the evolving nature of familial roles and responsibilities.

Parenting practices in health and nutrition

Exclusive breastfeeding rates in the Philippines remain low, with early initiation occurring in just over half of newborns (NNC 2023). Similarly, a significant gap exists in childhood immunization, as the proportion of fully immunized children falls short of the level needed to ensure adequate population protection (Ulep et al., forthcoming). Regarding dietary habits, there has been increasing awareness of food quality and nutrition, especially during the pandemic, as Filipino families adopted healthier eating practices and turned to home-cooked meals (Tariga, Nolasco, and Barayuga 2021). Nonetheless, with the ubiquity of calorie and energy-dense foods like fast food and restaurant food items, many Filipino children under 5 years old were found to be consuming inadequate micronutrients (Denney et al. 2018). In a separate study exploring parental feeding styles, Arde and De Vera ((Arde and De Vera 2022) found that mothers who are employed and earning well tend to use food as a reward and as a tool to regulate children's emotional distress or tantrums. These mothers also have less time in their hands to prepare nutritious food options as compared to self-employed mothers who can offer more nutritious food choices to their children like adding fruits and carefully selecting vegetables to include in their meals. The same study also found that the place of residence is a

significant predictor of parenting feeding styles with parents and children living in urban areas exposed to a wider array of energy-dense and more appealing food options like restaurant food items.

A scoping review on the health outcomes of the left-behind children (LBC) of Filipino overseas workers found enormous poor physical, nutritional, and mental health outcomes from parental separation especially for children left during their early and formative years (Dominguez and Hall 2022). Given the lack of attention on this specific research, the authors call for additional public health research on the health disparities and unmet needs of left behind filipino children.

Some works have also considered parental participation in child health. Documenting the narratives of parents of children with disability in Southern Mindanao, Lasco and colleagues (Lasco et al. 2022, p.30) found that “coming to terms with a disability is a difficult and lengthy process” and that living with disability “is fraught with medical, financial, educational, and social challenges.” Nonetheless, peer support groups provide much-needed assistance. Similarly, Torres and colleagues (Torres et al. 2023) found that contrary to popular belief and parents’ own assertions, the caring and raising of children is a “cooperative endeavor” that involves extended family, friends, neighbors, and even online networks.

Parenting practices in early learning

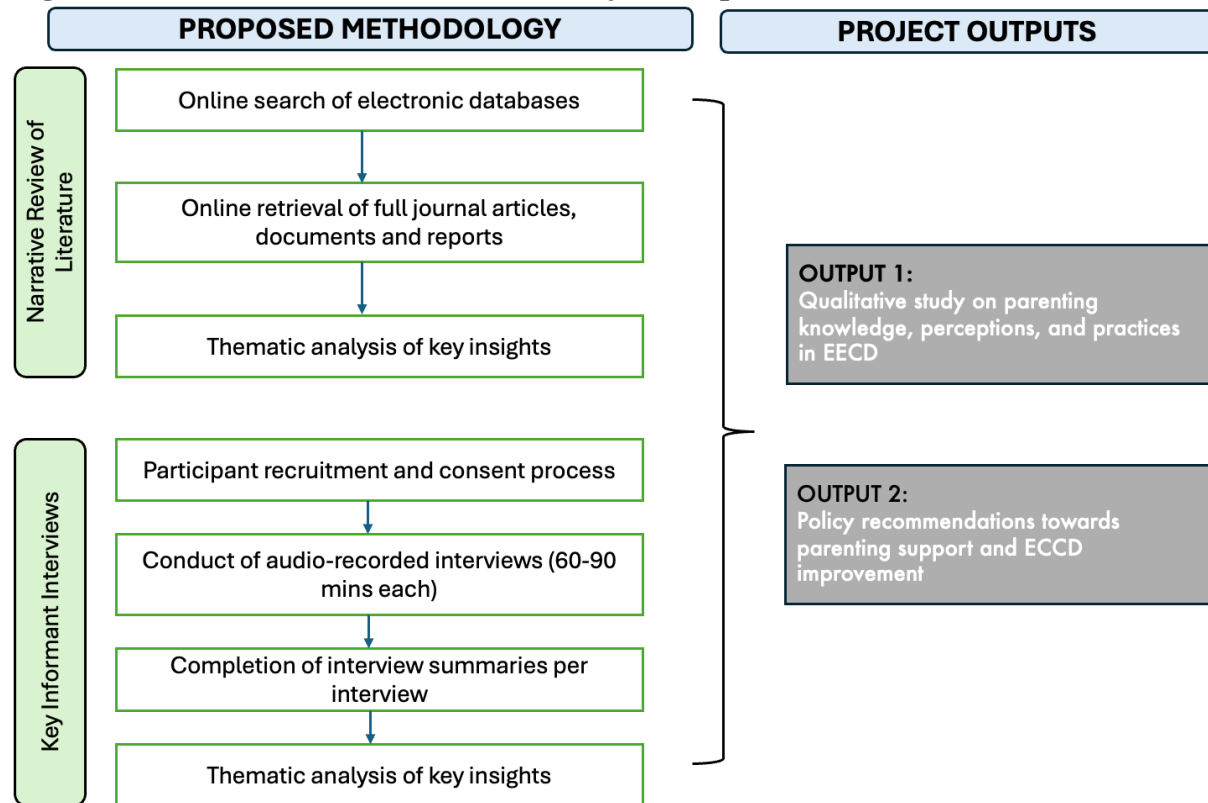
Ulep et al. (forthcoming) highlight key trends in early learning and stimulation, revealing gaps in engagement and enrollment. Many children do not regularly interact with educational media alongside caregivers, with socio-economic disparities influencing access to resources. Early education enrollment (i.e., in daycare or preschool facilities) also remains low, especially among 3- to 4-year-olds, due to cultural beliefs, developmental misconceptions, and limited awareness of its benefits. Moreover, weak government efforts to raise awareness further hinder early education promotion. While financial constraints disproportionately affect low-income families, they are not the primary driver of low participation.

These trends underscore the critical role of parenting knowledge in shaping early learning experiences. Parents’ beliefs and perceptions influence how they engage with their children, and these interactions evolve within the broader social environment. Positive experiences can reinforce supportive learning behaviors, while challenges or new information may prompt shifts in parenting approaches. Understanding how these factors interact is essential for strengthening early education initiatives and promoting more inclusive learning opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

The study collected both secondary and primary qualitative data through a literature review and key informant interviews, respectively. Conceptually, this study is open-ended to allow a range of scholarship to inform the analysis and conclusions. That is, the main strategy was to allow the literature review and the key informant interviews to inform each other, and lead to useful and/or hitherto-overlooked insights in ECCD. Figure 1 summarizes the sequence of data collection activities and the expected project outputs.

Figure 1. Data Collection Activities and Project Outputs



Source: Authors' illustration

Narrative analysis of related literature

The primary objective and scope of this study were to compile and provide a summary review of key indicators, data, and information on developments in the areas of parenting and ECCD in the Philippines. The literature review also assisted the study team in identifying research gaps that informed the rationale for key informant interviews. The literature search focused on the following areas:

1. Narratives and documentation on parenting practices in the Philippines to understand the lived experiences of Filipino parents, the cultural nuances and local values that informed parenting concepts, and potential distinctions between traditional and contemporary parenting practices.
2. Influence of socioeconomic and other sociodemographic attributes (e.g., gender, occupation, educational level, urban vs. rural) on shaping parenting knowledge and practices in the Philippines.
3. Differences in parenting knowledge and practices across socioeconomic statuses and sociodemographic profiles.
4. Impacts of parenting practices and involvement on childhood development, educational goals, and health and nutritional outcomes of children, including any challenges related to effective parenting.
5. Overview of policy and programmatic responses to parenting needs and early childhood care and development.

To identify relevant data and information, key electronic bibliographic databases (e.g., PubMed, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Wiley Online Library, JSTOR, SAGE, MEDLINE, Google Scholar) were searched for potentially relevant journal publications. In the search, broad phrases or words related to areas and topics about "childhood," "early childhood education," "parenting," "parenting styles," "parental involvement," "health outcomes," "nutrition," and "development" were used. Reference lists of identified papers were also searched for other relevant publications. Particular attention was paid to studies employing qualitative and/or ethnographic research methodologies. Anthropological and sociological works were carefully reviewed, and local journals were searched for possible relevant studies. The two authors reviewed and analyzed the literature separately and agreed by consensus on how to thematically organize the papers, while also soliciting feedback from the larger project team. Any available grey literature, such as country reports, thesis projects, and dissertations, as well as studies and reports written in the local language, were also included in the literature review whenever possible.

Key informant interviews

Insights from the literature review were complemented with primary research data gathered through key informant interviews to uncover detailed accounts on topics related to parenting practices and knowledge among Filipinos. The interviews were inductive and open-ended, with no definite sample size. Instead, the concept of 'data saturation' (Guest, Namey, and Chen 2020) — the point at which no new concepts or themes emerged — determined the final number of participants. However, based on previous qualitative studies on the topic (Alfara, Canque, and Genobiagon 2021; Espartinez 2022; Ochoa 2014; Habito, Morgan, and Vaughan 2024; Sato et al. 2018), the estimated sufficient number of participants for this study was around 10-15.

Researchers used a purposive and convenience sampling method, recruiting potential and interested Filipino parents from trusted social networks, including friends, colleagues, relatives, and key experts on parenting and ECCD. Efforts were made to ensure maximum variation based on age, gender, parental roles (maternal and paternal), and location (urban vs. rural). The following sampling characteristics and eligibility criteria guided the recruitment process:

Table 1. Sampling criteria

Sampling characteristics	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Age 2. Gender (male, female, homosexual, transgender, or non-binary) 3. Caregiving roles/actors (maternal and paternal) 4. Geography—urban and rural distinction, provincial representation outside of Metro Manila whenever possible 5. Socioeconomic class - high-income, middle-class, or low-income 6. Occupation—professional or white-collar workers; blue-collar workers or wage earners
Inclusion criteria	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Individuals who are 18 years old and above who have at least 1 offspring under their care 2. Filipino parents currently residing in the Philippines or situated overseas for work in the last 5 years. 3. Able to understand and speak Tagalog or English

	4. Able to understand and provide written informed consent
Exclusion criteria	1. Individuals under 18 years old 2. Individuals with any cognitive and physical impairment that might affect their ability to provide informed consent and participation in the activity

Source: Authors' illustration

The study adhered to research ethical guidelines, addressing ethical considerations related to minimizing risks and security concerns. Information about the project (study objectives, remuneration for participation of around 500PHP, benefits and risks of participation, and data management process) was provided before conducting key informant interviews. It was emphasized that participation in the study was voluntary, and participants could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. Written and/or verbal informed consent was secured before the start of the interview. Both in-person and virtual modes of interviews were offered as options to prospective participants.

Given the anthropological nature of the study, the guide questions centered on the emic perspective of Filipino parents, emphasizing their own definitions, moral standards, and understanding of good, bad, and effective parenting, as well as their expectations for their children. The interview also elicited their everyday experiences related to parenting, including challenges, sources of information, and social support that shaped their parenting styles, knowledge, and practices.

The study referred to the following interview guide questions:

1. General Experience: Tell us about your children. What has your experience been like in raising them?
2. Involvement in Education and Health: Can you describe your involvement in their education and health needs? How do you support their learning and well-being? What challenges do you face in providing for their educational needs and healthcare?
3. Aspirations and Expectations: What are your aspirations and expectations for your children's future?
4. Defining Parenting Standards: How would you describe a good parent? What do you believe are the roles of mothers versus fathers in parenting?
5. Work-Life Balance: How do you balance work and family responsibilities? In what ways does your work or employment situation affect your parenting?
6. Support Systems: Who are the people who support you in your parenting journey? Where do you get your information and advice from?
7. Challenges and Advice: What are the challenges faced by Filipino parents today? How do you cope with the multiple demands (emotional, financial, and physical) of parenting? What advice would you give to young parents, teachers, and the government?

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were audio-recorded, and interview notes or summaries for each interview were completed by the respective researchers.

ANALYSIS

The analysis used a mix of deductive and inductive approaches. The deductive approach, guided by insights from the literature review, formed the pre-identified assumptions as the interview data were examined. The inductive approach allowed researchers to identify emerging insights from the interviews. Data were primarily interpreted through the lens of anthropological and sociological knowledge on parenting and early childhood care. The analysis not only described parenting practices documented in the literature but also explored local notions and definitions of parenting and early childhood care. It focused on the emic (i.e. insider) perspective of Filipino parents, highlighting how they defined and understood early childhood development, including educational and health goals for their children. Researchers conducted the analysis separately and regularly met to reach a consensus on the salient themes related to the study objectives.

RESULTS

Participant demographics

Seventeen parents participated in the interviews for this study. The majority were between the ages of 29 and 45, with one participant in her 60s. Additional demographic details are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Characteristics of participants

Female/Maternal	11
Male/Paternal	6
Metro Manila	7
Luzon	8
Overseas	2
High-income	4
Middle class	7
Low-income	6

Source: Authors' illustration

Lived experiences of parents and significant others in early childcare and development

The interviews reveal the vital role of *significant others* in co-creating practices shaping a child's early development. From siblings and grandparents assuming parental duties to the indispensable contributions of *yayas* and *kasambahays* (domestic helpers), daycare teachers and the wider community, demonstrating that the care towards Filipino children is truly a communal endeavor. Our findings shed light on how each of these actors participates in the

everyday *pag-aalaga* (nurturing) of children and the implications of this involvement on early childhood care and development (ECCD) program in the Philippines.

Theme 1: Home environment and family involvement

Siblings as co-parents

In many Filipino households, especially those with several children, the *panganay* (eldest sibling) often takes on significant caregiving responsibilities, standing in as a secondary parent. This role involves assisting with household chores and providing emotional and educational support to younger siblings. Participant 11, a 63-year-old mother who still works as *kasambahay*, shared: *Yung pangay ko ang tumayo ng nanay sa mga kapatid niya* (She became the mother to her siblings), reflecting the substantial caregiving duties shouldered by her eldest daughter/son. This dynamic is pervasive in lower-income households where parents may be preoccupied with work or other obligations. Although this arrangement helps relieve the burden on parents, it raises questions about the psychological and emotional impact on the *panganay*, who often assumes adult-like responsibilities at a young age. Family therapists (Boszormenyi-Nagy 2014) established the term “parentification” to describe the phenomenon where parents abdicate their parental roles to their child - first born or eldest siblings usually replace the adult parents in this dynamic. Parentification happens when excessive instrumental and emotional caregiving roles are passed on to older siblings, while such experiences can be beneficial for child development by increasing trust and cooperation among siblings (Masiran et al. 2023; Nuttall et al. 2019) it can pose developmental and psychological disruptions serving as adversity to early child growth (McLaughlin 2016).

Global research on the parentification of children has called for more cultural representation of this phenomenon. Experts in the field of Filipino families and psychology have introduced the notion of “*tagasalo*”, providing an important cultural lens to understand Filipino family dynamics especially the parentification of eldest siblings (Urdabe 2001; Arellano-Carandang 1987; Go Tian-Ng and Umandap 2023). “*Tagasalo*” (one who carries burdens) is shaped by deep-rooted values like *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) and *pakikisama*, which may perpetuate the normalization of parentification. By unpacking these cultural concepts, we can better understand how caregiving responsibilities are distributed and why they persist across generations. The challenge lies in balancing these cultural expectations with the child’s own emotional and psychological development. Introducing mental health resources at the community level could be vital in helping both parents and children negotiate these complex familial roles (Teng et al. 2021).

Yayas and kasambahays as invisible caregivers

In middle- to upper-class households, *yayas* and *kasambahays* are central figures in childrearing, often performing much of the day-to-day care while parents focus on work. Parents tend to downplay their role, but as (Goco 2019) asserts, domestic helpers contribute significantly to the child’s socialization and everyday routine. They are involved in feeding, bathing, storytelling, and ensuring children’s physical and emotional well-being.

As Participant 12 noted, *"I didn't think daycare was relevant in our case because I was able to focus on my child's learning since the rest of the household chores are done by the kasambahay."*

Despite their significant role, yayas and kasambahays are often marginalized, with limited formal recognition or training that could enhance their caregiving contributions. Some interviewees noted that while they employ kasambahays in their household, these parents limit the involvement of kasambahays in terms of educational activities, as Participant 13 shared: *We have a kasambahay but when it comes to taking care of our children, we handle it ourselves to be sure. You never know what they might be teaching.*

The involvement of domestic workers in early childhood care highlights a gap in ECCD discourse, which typically focuses on parents, often overlooking the critical role of yayas or kasambahays (de Guzman 2014). These caregivers play a pivotal part in reshaping parent-child relationships within households, especially in situations where they, too, are separated from their own children due to long-distance parenting. De Guzman (2014) noted that domestic helpers often take pride in the close bond they form with their *alaga* (child in their care), sometimes seeing them as surrogate children. This connection helps domestic workers cope with the emotional challenges of being away from their own families. While some parents may downplay the importance of yayas, others actively seek out those who exhibit parent-like qualities and attitudes. For instance, Participant 2 emphasizes the value of a yaya who forms strong emotional attachments with her child: *"I've tried so many yayas. Some are just there to watch over the child, while others become so attached that they start acting like a second mother. Of course, I prefer the ones who act like a second mother because it gives me peace of mind about the care, and I don't have to worry when I'm at work. I feel secure with the yaya."*

The marginalization of yayas and kasambahays within ECCD frameworks reveals broader socio-economic disparities. Although their labor is integral to the family unit, they often lack access to professional development, which could potentially elevate their contributions to child development. This inequality underscores the class-based dynamics of childrearing in the Philippines, where domestic workers perform crucial nurturing roles but remain undervalued in formal ECCD discourses. Addressing this gap requires not only legislative support for domestic worker rights but also public awareness campaigns to highlight their importance in shaping children's early socialization.

Grandparents and intergenerational learning

In Filipino households, lolas (grandmothers) and lolos (grandfathers) play pivotal roles, especially in providing emotional and social support to the family, particularly their apos (grandchildren). They are often viewed as custodians of cultural knowledge and values, imparting wisdom and life lessons to their grandchildren. De Guzman et al. (2018) emphasize the social-emotional development benefits that children derive from relationships with their grandparents, particularly those raised by grandparent educators. Similarly, Oropilla and Ødegaard (2021) argue that intentional intergenerational programs not only sustain cultural continuity but also foster emotional security in children. In the Philippines, the presence of grandparents in the household serves as both a stabilizing and nurturing force, complementing the efforts of parents and other caregivers.

A significant aspect of grandparents' involvement in child-rearing practices revolves around health and nutrition. They often hold considerable authority in influencing health decisions related to early childhood care:

Participant 2 (37 years old, mother of two from Quezon City): For simple stomach aches or fevers, they want to take my daughter to the doctor right away. But since I have a nursing background, I'm more relaxed. Sometimes it's just normal to get a simple cough, cold, or fever. But I guess the anxiety of my mom has been a big help because my daughter used to get sick a lot as a child. She had some kind of autoimmune disease when she was very young. My mom was the one who looked for doctors we could consult.

Participant 13 (29 years old, father of two from Palawan): The worst thing that happened to our eldest was when he had dengue as a baby. My parents were really anxious back then. They did everything they could to make sure the baby got better. They even had us do some things, like prepare herbal remedies for him to drink. We followed along, probably because it worked before and they had gone through it already.

Beyond medical emergencies, grandparents often assert their views on everyday child-rearing practices, particularly concerning nutrition and sickness prevention. Participant 15, a 31-year-old mother from Rizal, recalls: *My in-laws would question us about giving meat to our kid. They said it's not right because the child might not digest it properly. They say, "baka hindi matunawan". And then they also said not to bathe him at night because he might get pneumonia. I asked my pediatrician about it, and she said none of that is true. In fact, meat is healthier for kids because it provides protein, which they need for energy. But you know, when we're in back in the province, we just avoid giving our son meat and follow what the elders say.*

At times, tensions and clashes between parents and grandparents ensue especially when the latter are more lenient and prone to spoiling their grandchildren. During the interview, Participant 12, a 43-year-old mother who is currently working overseas in Australia, explained: *At first, it was really challenging and tense. For example, with the issue of phone time, my parents would often give in easily. They would just hand the phone over to their grandchild right away. So we had to talk, and I made it clear that when it comes to discipline, I want to be strict and have the final say. There shouldn't be any second or third opinions like in the Philippines. Over time, we sorted it out. When I get upset or discuss something with my child, that's final. My parents (the grandparents) don't have a say anymore.*

In Filipino families, grandparents are not just passive caregivers but active participants in health-related decision-making, drawing on their wealth of experience and often favoring local practices and beliefs about health and nutrition. This intergenerational dynamic can sometimes lead to tension as well, as the lenient and more relaxed approach of grandparents—rooted in cultural values and personal experience—can conflict with the modern health protocols and stricter parenting styles preferred by younger parents. The difference in intergenerational communication has important implications for early childhood care and development (ECCD). For instance, the grandparents' more permissive attitude, while nurturing, may inadvertently delay or alter the implementation of health interventions or disciplinary measures. Therefore, child healthcare programs must seek to harmonize these differing approaches, creating spaces for collaborative and culturally sensitive ECCD practices that respect both local beliefs and contemporary parenting standards. This will ensure a more cohesive and supportive environment for children's holistic development.

Other relatives and extended family

Beyond the immediate family, the broader network of extended relatives—such as *titos* (uncles), *titas* (aunts), and cousins—plays a crucial role in caregiving within Filipino households. In many cases, children are entrusted to the care of these extended family members, especially during times of parental absence due to work or migration. This extended family structure not only provides practical support but also serves as an emotional safety net, reinforcing a sense of belonging and stability in a child's life.

The practice of involving extended family members in child-rearing reflects the cultural value placed on *pag-aalaga* as a shared responsibility, emphasizing that child development is a collective effort rather than solely the duty of parents. Participant 5, a mother in her late 20s from rural Philippines, shared her experience, *“Even though my son is my first child, I can’t recall any major challenges in early child care, maybe because I have support in our household. I didn’t have a hard time even when I left for work because I live with my titas, titos, and cousins who also have children, so they became my support”*. Similarly, another mother in her 30s living in Metro Manila described, *“When I leave for community work, the ones left at home are my sibling and my mom. They are the ones who watch over and take care of the kids at home, including my child.”*

The role of extended family members extends beyond immediate supervision; they contribute to children's socialization and development. Participant 12 explained, *“In terms of socialization, he is more exposed to adults than to other kids because we have a lot of extended family at home. So as she grows up, he’s mostly surrounded by adults. We also don’t baby talk to her; she speaks directly.”* This interaction fosters maturity and language skills, as children learn from the diverse perspectives of older family members.

Furthermore, limited parental involvement often highlights the importance of these relatives and even neighbors in the child's education and care. Participant 6 emphasized this, saying, *“Sometimes we teach our eldest here assignments since she’s already in primary school, but often we can’t because we also lack the knowledge. So she often goes to her classmate’s house, who is our neighbor. They do their assignments together and help each other out.”* This illustrates how the support network extends beyond the family, creating a community of shared responsibility that nurtures children's growth and development. Overall, the involvement of extended family members in early childcare is a vital component of Filipino culture, ensuring that children receive comprehensive support as they navigate their formative years.

Theme 2: Educational institution and wider community involvement

Daycare learning experiences and socio-economic differences

In the formalized setting of early education, preschool teachers play a pivotal role in a child's development. As the first adults outside the family to introduce structured learning and socialization, they often become central figures of authority in children's lives. This is

especially important in educational contexts, where children may exhibit more discipline and focus compared to their behavior at home. Participant 14, a father of three from Aurora, observed, "A child can easily manipulate a parent to play instead of doing homework, but they show more respect towards teachers in terms of educational learning." Teachers thus help shape both academic skills and social behaviors, fostering respect for authority and encouraging a more disciplined approach to learning.

However, access to quality daycare and preschool programs varies significantly between urban and rural areas and across income groups. Wealthier families tend to view preschool as a way to enhance their child's socialization skills and limit screen time. On the other hand, middle and lower-income families often see daycare as a means to accelerate academic success. Despite these differing motivations, parents across socio-economic backgrounds share concerns about the long-term effects of early schooling. They fear that early academic pressure could lead to burnout or disengagement, with children growing weary of more formal schooling later in life. Some parents expressed concern about the heavy focus on academic milestones in early learning - such ambivalence has been pointed out in earlier studies and reports. Participant 3, a father of two from Manila, shared his observations: *"Our daughter started daycare when she was 3 years old. It's a facility offered in the university so it's very close to our workplace. I noticed early on that they emphasized memorization, and there were already so many activity papers. I also observed this in other daycares—some kids' bags were already so big, and they were just in daycare. There were so many assignments, mostly focused on memorization. I think when it's like that, it doesn't really enhance their analytical and critical thinking skills."* Melania echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of play in early childhood: *"It shouldn't be like that, not yet. It feels like kids' minds are nabubugbog (getting overwhelmed) with studying. You should let them enjoy their childhood first. Let them play for now. Because nowadays, even at one or two years old, they're already being made to do all sorts of things. As a result, it feels like nothing is really sinking in, and they just end up confused."*

Logistical challenges also come into play when sending children to daycare. The responsibility of *hatid-sundo* (drop-off and pick-up) often falls on parents or guardians, which can be difficult for daily wage earners who cannot easily take time off work. In some cases, grandparents may not be able to help due to their own commitments or poor health. While public daycare services are often free, there are usually miscellaneous fees, with parents contributing to extracurricular events or other preschool needs.

The availability of daycare centers also differs between urban and rural settings. In some provinces in Luzon, daycare centers are organized by *purok* (neighborhood) rather than *barangay* (district), resulting in more localized, community-based facilities with fewer students. These smaller centers typically have a maximum of 15 children, allowing for more individualized attention. In contrast, larger barangay-based centers in Metro Manila may accommodate 20-30 children in a session, which can dilute the quality of care and education. This highlights the importance of community-based approaches, suggesting that smaller, localized facilities may better meet children's developmental needs, especially in underserved areas.

As daycare services become more widely available, both children and parents are increasingly drawn to them. Participant 7, a mother of two who works as a virtual assistant, shared her experience: *"I didn't send my first child to daycare because it wasn't really common back then. When she was five, she still couldn't write, and when I tried to enroll her in kindergarten, they wouldn't accept her yet because she was required to know how to write. Fortunately, the*

preschool teacher offered tutoring. For my second child, I decided to send her to daycare because she seemed bored at home. She also sees her older sister in school and gets jealous. So, I asked around and my friends recommended daycare services. I've noticed that she is more 'advanced' than her older sister at the same age—by three or four years old, she could already read and write."

This rise in daycare's popularity also highlights the agency of children in shaping their own educational experiences. As Participant 1 explained, *"If it were up to me, I wouldn't enroll my daughter in preschool yet because I think it's too early. She can play at home since there are other children here—her cousins, aunts, and uncles. Plus, my work is flexible, so she can be with me. But she sees the neighborhood kids in their uniforms, and she keeps asking about it. She's jealous and wants to go to school already."*

This illustrates how children's preferences and social observations can influence parental decisions about early education. Children, through their interactions with peers, may play a key role in directing when they start formal schooling. This interaction allows parents to recognize the benefits of early education, even if they were initially hesitant.

Ultimately, early learning programs must strike a balance between academic milestones and the need for socialization and play. Policymakers should consider not only facility-based daycare but also community-based early education programs that are affordable, culturally relevant, and accessible, ensuring that all children across all socioeconomic groups and demographics have equal opportunities to thrive in their early years.

Influence of community members

The involvement of barangay health workers (BHWs) and religious communities plays a vital role in the Filipino Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) landscape. BHWs, trained in child nutrition and vaccination, are at the forefront of public health initiatives. Their expertise and social standing within the community make them trusted figures in health-related decision-making. As one parent, Participant 4, emphasized, daycare facilities are instrumental in monitoring children's health and nutrition—tasks that many families may struggle to manage independently: *"Our daycare is great because it's connected to nutritional and health programs for children. Trained BHWs and daycare teachers check the children's weight, teeth, and nutrition status. We can't do that at home on our own. If a child has a dental issue, it might just be overlooked. We don't have a weighing scale at home to check their weight regularly, and it's not something you think about doing every day. That's why the daycare is beneficial; they keep track of the children's nutrition."*

The collaboration between BHWs and daycare centers ensures that children receive regular health assessments and necessary interventions, underscoring the importance of community support in fostering healthy development. Another parent, Participant 5, recalled her experience: *"The BHWs went door-to-door in our area and mentioned that there's a daycare in our barangay. They explained the various activities the daycare offers."* This highlights how BHWs actively engage with families to promote daycare services and inform them about available community resources, helping them access essential services.

Religious institutions also play a role in shaping parenting practices related to early education. Contrary to the emphasis many parents place on socialization and play, Participant 15 shared a different perspective: "Christian communities prefer homeschooling even for early education. My friends at church often ask me when I will start homeschooling my son. He's only 1 year old! Honestly, I would prefer to send him to public schools." Grace's comment reflects a growing trend among some religious communities to favor homeschooling as an alternative to traditional education. This preference often stems from a desire to instill specific values and beliefs in children, highlighting how cultural and community influences shape parenting choices.

By acknowledging these diverse perspectives within the ECCD framework, we gain a deeper understanding of the critical role community members play in shaping children's early experiences and education. Whether through health initiatives led by BHWs or value-driven educational choices influenced by religious communities, these interactions significantly impact a child's developmental journey.

Theme 3: Barriers to early childhood care and education

Given the involvement of 'significant others' such as grandparents, siblings, and domestic helpers in early childcare, many parents interviewed struggled to pinpoint specific challenges in early childhood care. However, overarching issues such as time constraints, divided attention, and financial burdens frequently emerged as barriers. The blurred distinction between traditional paternal and maternal roles was notable, with both parents increasingly participating in the workforce to provide for their families. This shift has intensified concerns about the lack of quality time and attention that working parents can devote to their children, particularly during the crucial early developmental years. Fathers and mothers alike expressed anxiety about balancing their dual roles as providers and caregivers.

A notable concern for many parents is the exposure of young children to mobile technology. With the increasing availability and ownership of smartphones and tablets, screen time has become a common solution for keeping children occupied while parents manage work and household responsibilities for both low and middle-income households. Participant 6 illustrated this in his interview, *"From time to time my wife and I teach them how to read and count, things like that. But since we don't have the time to teach our little kids every day the way we would like to, they end up getting used to watching YouTube on cell phones. That's also our way to not let them get used to being attached to us all the time because we are out and about for work"*

Even though mobile devices offer convenience and access to a multitude of interactive educational materials, parents worry about the negative implications of excessive screen time, particularly its impact on their child's social skills, physical activity, and emotional development. As Participant 9 lamented, "The world wasn't aware of how dangerous it was but now we're more aware. But during that time, It would have been so easy to just leave your kids with the iPad if you needed to be in the office. And they're happy, and they seem like they're fine, you know, with a mobile phone. They seem like they're going to be okay because they're happy, they're learning. It's educational, they learn how to read. But actually, it's really bad for them because their social skills are diminished."

In more affluent households, parents noted that limited communal spaces and increased privacy in neighborhoods have reduced spontaneous outdoor play. Unlike in the past, where children could simply step outside to interact with peers, playtime now requires deliberate scheduling of playdates—a task often falling on the shoulders of parents who are already juggling numerous responsibilities. Participant 9 continued to discuss his parenting dilemma, *"We realized that preschool is very important for socialization. Because here in the city, it's hard to find playmates. Unlike before, especially in the provinces, you could just step outside the house and there would already be kids to play with. Here, you have to schedule and organize everything. It takes a lot of effort just to arrange things and establish friendships for our children!"*

In middle- to low-income communities, parents faced a different set of concerns. They expressed anxiety over the potential exposure of their children to undesirable behaviors or values within their broader neighborhood. These parents often viewed their children's interaction with the local community as a double-edged sword, on one hand, social interaction is important but on the other, exposure to certain environments raised worries about influences they could not control like the use of profanities and vulgar language and vulnerability to certain vices like smoking.

For parents in poorer communities, the focus was more immediate. Their concerns primarily revolved around providing basic necessities like food and shelter. The immediate pressure to meet basic needs leaves little room for parents to reflect on the developmental nuances of early childhood care.

Interestingly, across all socioeconomic groups, parents appeared to exhibit confidence in their parenting abilities during early childhood. It was the adolescent years that posed a greater source of anxiety for many, as children navigate more complex social dynamics and peer influences. Common concerns included how to discipline without resorting to physical methods and managing the challenges of teenage rebellion, evolving traits, and social pressures.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings highlight the need for ECCD policies to expand beyond a parent-centric focus to acknowledge the broader caregiving network that sustains Filipino children. Given how this focus on parents is often based in Western models of ECCDs, there is a need to interrogate these models and their paradigms, including through decolonizing and indigenizing this body of work by incorporating local notions of care, like *pag-aalaga*, and accounting for the gendered nature of caregiving in the country (Estioko et al. 2022).

While this study provides valuable insights, its limitations also highlight opportunities for further research. For instance, our initial focus on parents as primary informants may have overlooked the diverse actors involved in caregiving. Future studies should include a wider range of caregivers. Moreover, the limited sample size means our analysis should be seen as a starting point to inspire, rather than substitute for, more comprehensive research focused on specific demographics.

Nonetheless, the findings of the study provide a substantial basis to support the following policy recommendations:

1. **Incorporating caregiving skills into school curricula.** If parenting roles are in fact distributed across the extended family, then teaching older children caregiving skills to better equip them to support their younger siblings can foster a sense of responsibility and strengthen family ties. This could be part of a broader educational strategy aimed at enhancing life skills across age groups, particularly among senior high school (SHS) students.
2. **Acknowledging and empowering senior citizens' caregiving roles.** Similarly, the significant (and often indispensable) role of grandparents can be proactively leveraged to enhance ECCD. The existing institutional and physical infrastructures for senior citizens can be mobilized to organize training sessions for grandparents, while also recognizing and respecting them as bearers of intergenerational knowledge. Grandparents who are willing and capable can extend their caregiving roles beyond their families by participating in community-based childcare initiatives that offer income opportunities. Such programs, designed to strengthen intergenerational bonds, can create mutual benefits for all involved—parents, grandparents, and children alike.
3. **Training *yayas* and *kasambahays*.** The often-overlooked contributions of *yayas* and *kasambahays* in ECCD present an opportunity to develop programs that recognize their essential role in childrearing. Offering structured training in child development could not only enhance the quality of care they provide but also improve their working conditions. Such initiatives could further draw upon their cultural knowledge and social or educational backgrounds to enrich caregiving practices. By elevating their status within households and equipping them with the necessary skills, these programs would ensure they are better prepared for their roles and fairly compensated for their contributions.
4. **Supporting daycare institutions and preschool teachers.** Given the increasing popularity and acceptance of daycare centers, not only as spaces for early learning but also as vital sites for socialization through play, as reflected in our informants' narratives, our study strongly supports initiatives aimed at enhancing daycare services. These initiatives should include increasing the number of public daycare institutions to accommodate the growing demand and exploring other alternative forms of early childhood socialization and care, such as facilitated or supervised community playgrounds. Such alternatives can provide opportunities for children to engage in guided play and interaction within their communities. Additionally, improving the training of community health and social workers involved in ECCD programs implemented by local government units (LGUs) is crucial. This can ensure that these workers are well-equipped to meet the diverse needs of children and families they serve. Lastly, it is essential to make daycare services more accessible, particularly for low-income families and those living in remote or underserved areas, where access to quality early childhood programs remains a significant challenge.
5. **Addressing gender inequality in ECCD.** Even as our study finds that ECCD involves various actors beyond parents, most of these actors are women, reflecting the gender inequality in the country and the fact that women - elder sisters, grandmothers, *kasambahays* - engage in unpaid care work (Tongson, n.d.). Investments in ECCD must address this inequality by ensuring adequate support and proper compensation for women and pursuing strategies to increase the participation of men in childcare.

Significantly, those belonging to non-traditional families (e.g. single parents, live-in arrangements, same sex couples) must be meaningfully considered in these initiatives.

Overall, our study finds that it truly ‘takes a village’ to raise a child (see(Dahlberg 1999)), particularly so in a very intergenerational, communal society like the Philippines. A fuller recognition and documentation of this fact - including through policy reform and further research - can pave the way for more grounded, effective, gender-affirmative, culturally resonant ways to improve outcomes not just for child development but for community health and well-being.

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