

# Case Study of The Meséd Project

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## PART ONE: THE BACKGROUND

Experiences during the early years of childhood have an extraordinarily strong influence on lifelong development. A good start in the early years is the ideal way to protect against risk factors and promote positive developmental outcomes for children. Over the last twenty years, scientific evidence has accumulated that demonstrates the positive effects that early intervention programs can have on children's cognitive and other development.<sup>1</sup>

Research like the famous work with children in Romanian orphanages, demonstrated that severe deprivation can lead to long term detrimental effects on development.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the psychological concept of 'resilience' has optimistically shown that children can rapidly 'catch-up' in their development with intervention, even from the most severe deprivation.<sup>3</sup> "Interventions in the early years have the potential to offset negative trends and to provide young children with more opportunities and better outcomes in terms of access to education, quality of learning, physical growth and health, and, eventually, productivity."<sup>4</sup>

Particularly since the UN adoption of the *Convention of the Rights of the Child*,<sup>5</sup> a rights based policy focus has accentuated the need to improve outcomes for the world's children. Interest in the effectiveness of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as a way of improving outcomes for children has continued to grow. In Europe, the European Union has identified and prioritised ECEC in policy (such as the *2020 Strategy for Preventing Social Inclusion*) as a fundamental strategy for achieving lasting results in Roma inclusion.<sup>6</sup>

The European Union is generally seen by early education researchers as a world leader in providing ECEC services and serving as a policy model for ECEC.<sup>7</sup> However, significant gaps and variability in the provision and quality of ECEC services exist among the EU countries, particularly between the "old" and "new" EU members. Rates of attendance<sup>8</sup> at formal ECEC services for children under 3 are lower than 10% in several Central and Eastern European EU members (Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia) as well as in Austria and Malta. While rates improve for older pre-school children, attendance for children 3 to 6 years is still lower than 70% in four Central and Eastern Europe members (Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland).<sup>9</sup>

While disaggregated data for Roma children is patchy, existing data sources provide a disturbing estimate that a maximum of 20% of Roma children across Europe are enrolled in preschool, though this improves to more than 50% in the year before compulsory schooling.<sup>10</sup> Rates of attendance and completion for Roma children in primary school remain staggeringly low with a recent estimate by UNICEF suggesting only one Roma child completes primary school to every four non-Roma children in Central and South Eastern Europe.<sup>11</sup> Secondary school results are even worse, for example in Hungary just 12.9% of Roma children complete secondary school.<sup>12</sup>

From a rights-based perspective that focuses attention on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children – mainstreaming access to early childhood services for this population is critical.

## ‘A Good Start’ Pilot Program

‘A Good Start’ (AGS) was developed to address major disparities in Roma access to ECEC services. The pilot aims to minimise the effects of social determinants such as poverty in its target group – to be a protective factor for participating children and families. The pilot aims to increase access to early childhood education and care services for more than 4000 children between 0 and 6 years of age in 16 locations across Hungary, Macedonia, Romania and Slovakia. Through three international partners and ten local implementing partners, Roma Education Fund (REF) will develop and support sustainable partnerships between government and NGOs. Led by the NGOs these organisations will work together to implement activities that will best increase access to a range of quality ECEC services provided to young children, particularly disadvantaged Roma. Activities are tailored to the specific contexts and needs of the target populations in each country.

The core approach of AGS is to sustainably support partners who are already working with target groups, building upon their existing services and ensure that comprehensive support is available. AGS focuses on enhancing children’s physical, social, emotional and cognitive development through activities related to early education, outreach, parent education and health services. In particular, AGS aims to empower families, particularly female care-givers through activities. The program provides material support; prepares children for transition to compulsory education; trains staff; conducts rigorous monitoring and evaluation; builds relationships with government partners and builds professional networks.

## The Meséd<sup>13</sup> Project

One of the key activities being implemented in the six Hungarian AGS locations is the Meséd project. Meséd activities work towards achieving two project outcomes for Hungary: improving access to quality early education for disadvantaged Roma children and improving parenting practices amongst Roma.

In the Meséd project, Roma mothers meet together with a trained facilitator (8 out of 9 facilitators are Roma women) weekly for two-hour sessions in groups of between 8 and 15. During the first hour of each session, group members receive a new children’s story book. High quality books, particularly those that convey messages to children about their feelings, behaviours, and other life lessons have been sourced. The mothers take turns to read the story aloud, while the facilitator guides the reading and initiates discussion about elements of the story and pictures. This constructivist learning technique encourages readers to explore the text and facilitates improved comprehension.<sup>14</sup> By engaging the women with the story in this way, the facilitator is able to both engage them with the text and model a teaching technique to be replicated with their children.

An integral aspect of the Meséd project is that it focuses not just on children, but mothers as well. The activities are designed to indirectly support and empower women caregivers as well as directly providing the skills and knowledge to improve ECED outcomes for young children. Many Roma women have had negative experiences with formal education because of barriers with language, discrimination or other exclusion. These experiences may have been as children themselves, or in the usual formalised opportunities for adult education. Research has shown that the higher a mother’s own education, the more likely she is to enrol her children in pre-school education,<sup>15</sup> so it is very important to mediate the effects of mothers’ negative experiences by providing an opportunity for a positive experience of learning.

Meséd facilitators are carefully trained to ensure that they cultivate a supportive, caring and non-judgemental atmosphere in groups. The groups become a non-formal learning environment where women are able to re-establish their confidence in reading. The success of this ECED intervention relies heavily on taking a systemic approach which educates and empowers Roma mothers – who are of course mediators in efforts to improve the development outcomes of their children.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond the specifically educational aspects of the groups, facilitators also encourage women to express their feelings and struggles as a parent, to share stories and cultural insights and other concerns amongst themselves. By developing friendships and a collaborative system of support between group members, Meséd aims to promote sustainable outcomes by empowering communities of women and their families to support each other.

## PART TWO: THE FINDINGS

Nyíregyháza is one of five locations across Hungary where Meséd activities are taking place. In Nyíregyháza, four groups have been established, with two running in Keleti and two in Guszev. Groups were established with the support of local authorities and are held within the communities that mothers live. The four groups have been running for between three and six months and although activities are still underway, some positive outcomes are already evident. Some of the findings from recent qualitative research and a household survey conducted with all families engaged with AGS activities, are described below.<sup>17</sup>

### Basic Demographics

As part of AGS activities, a mentor worked to engage women in the Meséd groups, a strategy that was clearly successful given almost all families engaged in AGS activities in Nyíregyháza joined Meséd groups. In Keleti, women from all 39 families are involved in Meséd groups, in Guszev, of the 62 families involved in AGS activities, 52 women are taking part in Meséd groups. Facilitators report that the majority of those enrolled continue to come regularly each week, a surprising and positive outcome given the low engagement with programs for Roma populations that are sometimes reported.

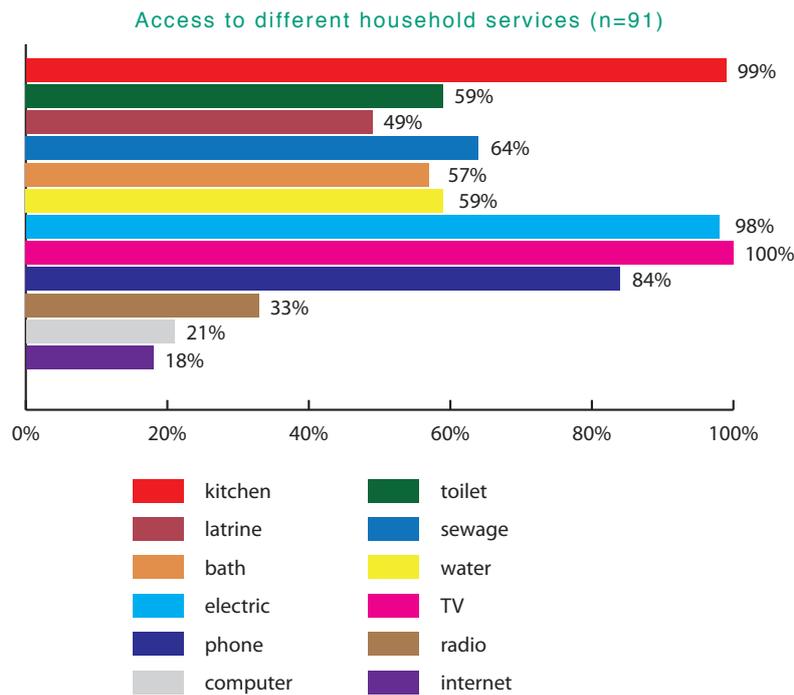
Mothers in Meséd groups are aged between 17 and 45 years with a mean age of 28.47 years. They have between 1 and 4 children (mean of 1.81) who are aged from 0 to 7 years.

All the households in Nyíregyháza speak Hungarian, and just two Meséd families also reported that they speak a Romani language at home. In one of the observed groups, a conversation about Romani language spontaneously began which led to an older member reciting a poem in Romanes. Most of the younger women could not understand this. The facilitator discussed perhaps taking the opportunity in future for the group to learn some Romanes from older women and herself (she was able to speak the language).

All Meséd mothers report that they have ID documents and their children all have birth certificates (in fact only one household in Nyíregyháza – not engaged with Meséd – reported that children did not have birth certificates).

The chart on p.4 summarises access to household services for the Meséd families. There are some differences between Guszev and Keleti. All the households in Guszev are located in a settlement outside of town. The Keleti households are not in a settlement but they are all located in a Roma neighbourhood.

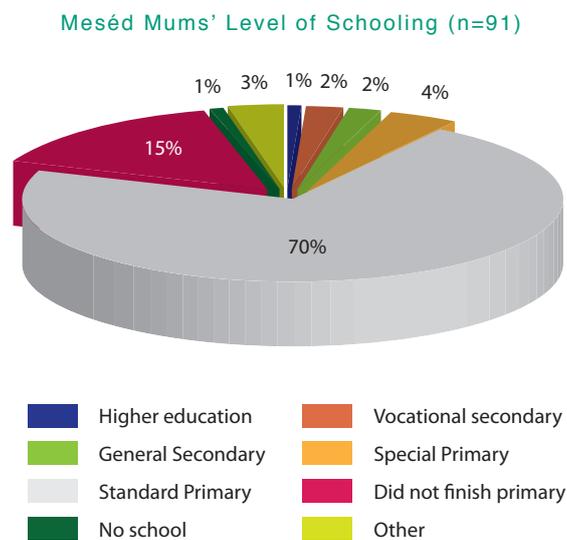
The major difference between Guszev and Keleti was that most households in Keleti did not have access to running water in their homes. Thus latrines were more prevalent here and only a small number of families had bathrooms or sewage systems.



### Mothers' Education Levels

Schooling was clearly a difficult chapter in the lives of the women. The household survey data shows that the vast majority of mothers taking part in Meséd groups had only attended primary school. 15.38% of mothers didn't complete primary school while 70.33% completed no more than primary school (with an additional 4.40% finishing special primary school). While some did go on to undertake secondary school, only 5 women completed secondary education and just one woman completed any higher education.

*"I have two years of primary school, I am learning now from my grandchildren [through reading Meséd books with them]. I had to take care of younger children so I left school when I was nine years old."*



Of the women who finished primary school, some did start secondary school but very few completed. Some left because they failed their studies; *"I started secondary school but left because I failed."* Others were un-

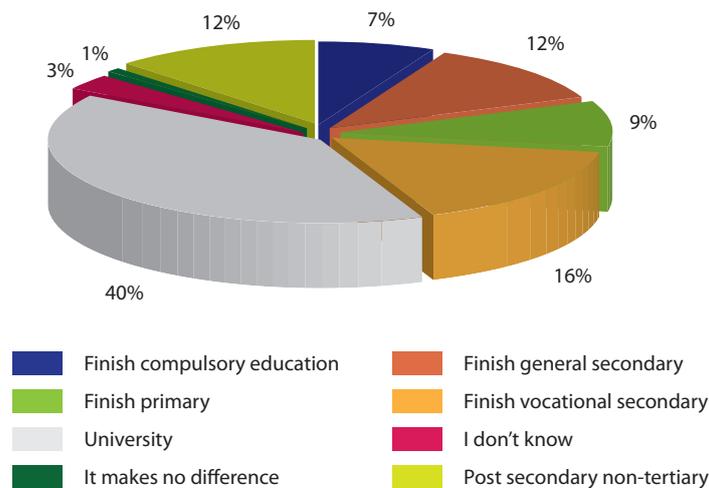
able to continue studying for family reasons; “I started secondary school but left because I fell pregnant. Now that my children are older I want to finish school.” The impact of financial barriers was also a common theme; “It took me until I was 17 to finish primary school so I was too old then to continue with high school, I would have had to pay to study as an adult and we could not afford that.”

### Attitudes about the Value of Education

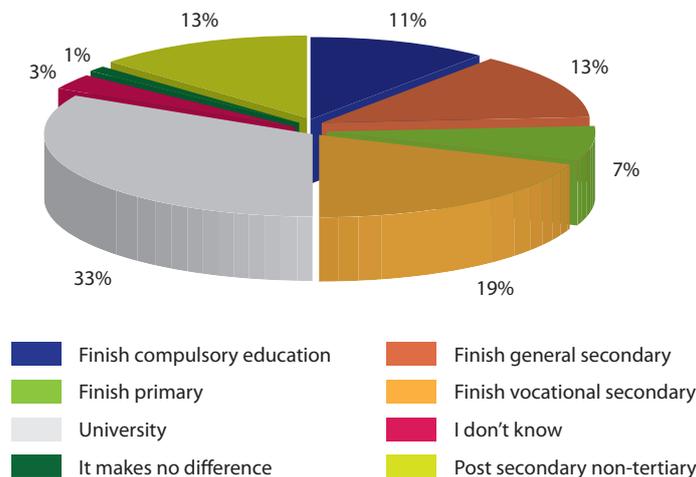
An aim of Meséd is to foster and support a culture of reading and emphasise the value of education amongst target families. The household survey data indicates that Meséd households place a high value on pre-school education with 84.44% of Meséd families reporting that they believe children do better at school if they attended kindergarten or other educational programmes before they start primary school. Very few (4.44%) said there was no difference for children from such programs. 77.53% of Meséd families said it was ‘very important’ for children under 6 to attend pre-school education in order to have a good future.

Most households (73.33%) placed equal importance on girls and boys success in school. However, 18.89% said it was more important for boys to succeed in school and 6.67% said it was more important for girls to succeed. Hopes for the levels of education that parents had for their sons and daughters are illustrated in the charts below.

Hopes for Daughters’ Educational Attainment (n=68)



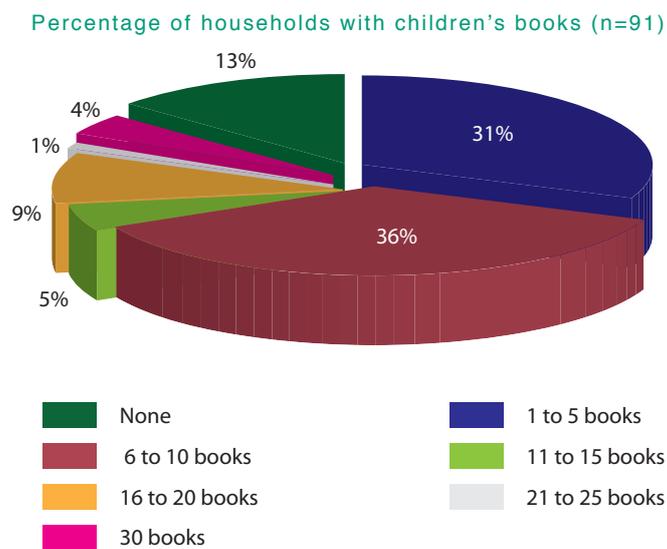
Hopes for Sons’ Educational Attainment (n=70)



One mother acknowledged the importance of education when describing her older son who wanted to be a policeman *“My older son is still at school. It is important that he finishes school because it is his only chance to have his own life, to find a job and things like this.”*

## Parenting Resources and Practices

From an early childhood development perspective, particular information and parenting skills can help children with their language and social development. Meséd supports and empowers mothers by developing their parenting skills and knowledge to help them improve ECED outcomes for their young children.



In a practical sense, the learning resource of children’s books is something that families just do not have the opportunity or means to purchase; *“We have no chance to buy books like this.”*

The results from the household survey (captured in the chart above) show the impact that simply providing quality books can have. Most families (86.81%) now report having at least some children’s books in the home. 90.19% of Meséd families also reported that children had a separate area for learning/playing in the house.

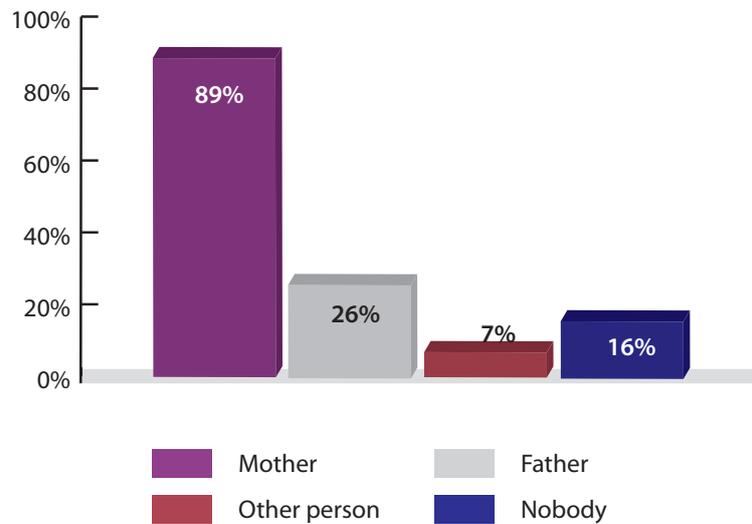
Mothers reported that they used the techniques modelled by the facilitators *“I read the story slowly and ask questions like we do in the group.”* Children also spontaneously engaged with the books in various ways; *“My kids make up stories to the pictures.”*

A number of mothers talked about how the books have become a source of pride for their children. In a common story (according to facilitators) one mother described that her son regularly takes each new book to kindergarten the next day. *“It was his idea to take the book, and his teacher always reads the book that he brings to the whole class after lunch when they have a sleep.”*

## Positive and Supportive Relationships for Mothers

Meséd aims to support and increase positive attitudes about the value of education in target communities by giving women a positive learning experience. Facilitators cultivate supportive, caring and non-judgemental environments where women, who may have had negative school experiences characterised by exclusion

Read books with children in the last three days (n=91)



and failure, can build confidence in their ability to learn. A positive experience can then lead to improved attitudes towards learning in target household which benefits young children.

The groups also develop supportive relationships between the women who share struggles and successes as parents: *“We can hear about the experiences of other mothers and how they raise kids. We can suggest to others some ideas.”* While the groups don’t seem to be creating new connections (most mothers already know each other), the levels of friendships are deepening through Meséd: *“We knew each other, but not this way. We used to say hello on the street, but now we are friends.”*

The regularity of groups in convenient locations also has practical benefits *“There is no place to meet. Now we have a place.”* One mother pointed out that meetings were her “only opportunity to rest, relax and talk to people. There is nothing here.”

One final effect is self confidence. One mother described herself as *“more self confident”* as a result of talking about each other’s experiences and sharing about herself. *“Now I know myself better.”*

### PART THREE: SOME CONCLUSIONS

Primarily, the Meséd project activities are engaging women, who had mostly not progressed beyond primary education, in a positive experience of learning. Women are also describing other positive impacts like the opportunity that the groups provide to develop supportive relationships between the members.

Attitudes about the value of education for children are relatively positive in the communities described here and empowering women with the skills to actively support their children will continue to strengthen them. The data reported here shows that women are using the skills learned in groups to facilitate their own children’s learning with new parenting practices and the resources provided by the project.

The evidence is indicating that Meséd groups are an effective strategy for engaging and supporting Roma mothers to in turn support the education of their young children. Meséd groups are a simple step in providing a good start that will impact children for the rest of their lives.

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## Endnotes

1. K. Gorey, "Early Childhood Education: A Meta-Analytic Affirmation of the Short- and Long-Term Benefits of Educational Opportunity," *School Psychology Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (2001).
2. Michael Rutter and English and Romanian Adoptees (ERA) Study Team, "Developmental Catch-up, and Deficit, Following Adoption after Severe Global Early Privation," *Rutter, M. (1998), Developmental Catch-up, and Deficit, Following Adoption after Severe Global Early Privation. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. 39, no. 465-476 (1998).
3. Michael Rutter, "Resilience: Some Conceptual Considerations," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 14 (1993).
4. Sophie Naudeau et al., "Investing in Young Children: An Early Childhood Development Guide for Policy Dialogue and Project Preparation," (The World Bank, 2011).
5. United Nations General Assembly, "Convention on the Rights of the Child," (adopted and opened for signature 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990, 1989).
6. UNICEF and European Social Observatory, "Preventing Social Exclusion through the Europe 2020 Strategy: Early Childhood Development and the Inclusion of Roma Families," (State Secretary for Social Integration and Combating Poverty (Belgian Presidency of EU), 2011).
7. NESSE Network of experts, "Early Childhood Education and Care: Key Lessons from Research for Policy Makers," (European Commission, 2009).
8. A number of complications should be considered when dealing with rates of attendance as a measure of ECEC success. For discussion see page 43 of John Bennett, "Early Childhood Care and Education Regional Report: Europe and North America," (UNESCO, 2010 (draft)).
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. UNICEF CEE/CIS Regional Office (2010, forthcoming) "Situation Analysis: An Overview of Inclusive Education in Central Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States" cited in UNICEF and European Social Observatory, "Preventing Social Exclusion through the Europe 2020 Strategy: Early Childhood Development and the Inclusion of Roma Families."
12. Ibid.
13. The word 'Meséd' in Hungarian translates roughly to 'Your Tale'.
14. 'Constructivist' learning theories hold that learning is an active process that every individual embarks upon to organize and construct meaning from the world. To do this, children must be immersed amongst opportunities to make their own personal discoveries of language and to develop reasoning. See S. K. Green and M. E. Gredler, "A Review and Analysis of Constructivism for School-Based Practice.," *School Psychology Review* 31, no. 1 (2002).
15. UNICEF and European Social Observatory, "Preventing Social Exclusion through the Europe 2020 Strategy: Early Childhood Development and the Inclusion of Roma Families."
16. Ibid.
17. The researcher observed Meséd sessions for two groups, one in Guszav (running six months) and one in Keleti (running three months). He participated in group discussions as part of these sessions and individually interviewed two mothers. Qualitative findings are based in observations, individual and group discussions. Quantitative findings are based on preliminary analysis of data from the Household Survey conducted in early 2011 with all families engaged in AGS activities. Comprehensive analysis of this data will be conducted as part of AGS M&E activities in the coming months.