

Longitudinal study and impact evaluation of EICs in Sarawak for children with developmental delays

November 2025



Purpose and Context

The purpose of year one (baseline) of this longitudinal study and impact evaluation is to generate evidence on the key success factors and outcomes of early intervention centres (EICs), in terms of their implementation and contribution to a child's future and replication. The total number of children aged 6 and below registered with the Sarawak State SWD is 1,561 including 1,254 children with learning disabilities.

Mixed Methods

Approach: The **IDELA (International Development and Early Learning Assessment)** tool¹ was implemented to observe the differences in learning and development between children receiving the EIC support with those not attending any EIC.

This study involved two groups — those enrolled in an EIC and the comparison group—which were further divided into two cohorts (for a total of four).

All caregivers of the selected children were surveyed using the **IDELA-Home and Environment (HE)** tool.

Key informant interviews (KIIs) with a subset of caregivers of children receiving services at the EICs, caregivers of children on the waitlist for an EIC, selected staff of the EICs, and teachers from mainstream KGs and primary schools.

Sample

This study sample includes Early Intervention Centres (EICs) in Sarawak:

1. **One-Stop Early Intervention Centres (OSEIC)** in Kuching and Dalat

2. **Agape Centre in Sibul:**

a. Methodist Care Centre (MCC)

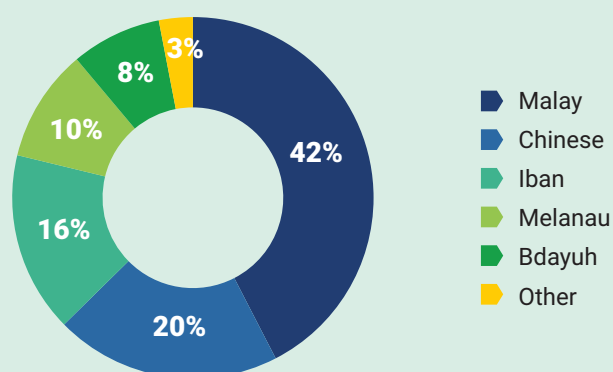
- b. Pertubuhan Pemulihan Dalam Komuniti (PPDK Sibul),
- c. Sibul Autistic Association (SAA).

3. **IDELA: 275 children (201 boys and 74 girls) aged from 3 to 6** with developmental delays (194 EIC children and 81 comparison children).

- Children residing in **rural areas represent 26% to 36%** of the sample.
- **Most children in the study have a diagnosis** of at least one type of developmental delay.
- Most rural children (74%) are from the lowest income level (RM 3000 or less); 42% of urban children are in the lowest income level.

4. **IDELA-HE (Home and Environment): 275 caregivers** (233 female and 42 male) of the same children completed the IDELA-HE survey.

- The largest ethnic groups are Malay (42%), Chinese (20%), and Iban (16%) and the most common languages parents reported speaking at home were English (70%) and Malay (48%), with Mandarin and Iban also common at 21% and 20%.



5. A total of **46 KIIs** with selected caregivers as well as with EIC staff and mainstream teachers (44 female and 2 male).

¹ Save the Children (2019). *International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA)*.



Key Findings



EIC Program Features

	OSEIC Kuching	OSEIC Dalat	Agape: MCC	Agape: PPDK	Agape: SAA
Individual intervention	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Require diagnosis to enroll			✓	✓	✓
Enroll multiple development delays	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Occupational therapy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Physiotherapy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Speech therapy	✓				
Hydrotherapy	✓	✓			
Sensory/calming room	✓	✓			✓
Indoor gross motor playground	✓	✓			✓

Average amount (MYR) paid monthly by parents for EIC

	Average MYR paid per month
OSEIC Sarawak	50
Agape: PPDK	30
Agape: MCC	63
Agape: SAA	400

SAA intervention sessions are daily; other EICs provide 1-2 intervention sessions per week.

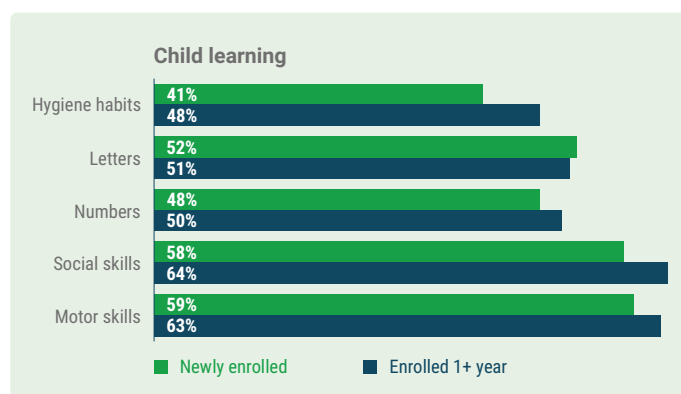


Children

- Parents expressed gratitude for the gains they had observed in their child since attending the EIC, such as **increased motor skills** and **social skills**, **greater ability to communicate**, **better emotional regulation**, and **better hygiene habits (self-care skills)** as well as academic skills such as **letters and numbers**.
- Mainstream primary school teachers described clear differences in those who had attended EIC** and those who had not, noting that children who had received early intervention had a level of confidence and comfort in a classroom setting, and were able to follow instructions, that children who had not received early intervention lacked.



- The majority of children across the sample (65% to 83%) attend **other preschool or kindergarten** with daily group sessions typically in the morning. Many such early learning centres provide children with opportunities to gain similar skills as those taught in the EICs.
 - This data shows the **clear advantage of early learning opportunities** at pre-school/kindergarten on developing skills in the various IDELA domains. The overall IDELA score, combining all domains, was 59% for those who attend preschool/KG and 46% for those who do not.
 - Children attending preschool/KG are found to be more likely to come from relatively higher income families.

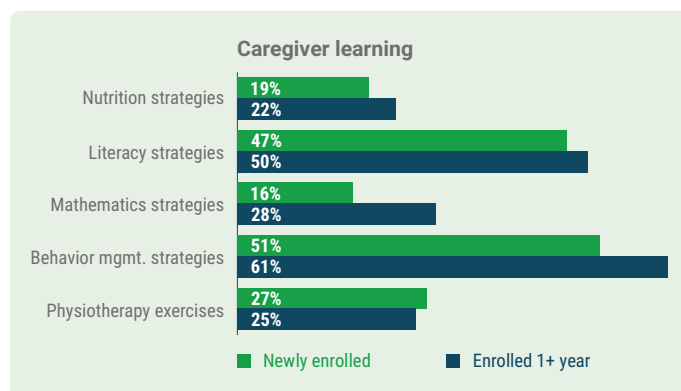


- Study data showed very little difference between girls and boys across most indicators.** When asked about gender, EIC staff noted no major differences, reporting that boys tend to be quicker but less precise, while girls are more diligent but engage at a slower pace. Performance on the IDELA shows boys demonstrating skills with slightly greater accuracy than girls across most measures, but most differences are not statistically significant.
- Age impacts scores with an increase in scores from the younger to the older children in every domain (motor, literacy, numeracy, expressive vocabulary, and socio-emotional).



Caregivers

- Caregivers report learning behavior management and literacy strategies from the EICs. Not surprisingly, caregivers whose child had been enrolled longer (a year or more) noted more learning in most domains.
- EIC families pay more for **assistive device maintenance, medication** and **housing** and less for **caregiving services** than the comparison group.





Key Recommendations

1 Evidence: No broader mention of students with disabilities (aside from autism), inclusive education, or early detection and intervention was found in the Thirteenth Malaysia Plan (2026-2030).

- Explicit provision and planning for inclusive education in policy documents can help to ensure the integration of inclusive education into all programs.

2 Evidence: Parents expressed difficulty learning what EIC services exist and said that there are few affordable options and long waitlists (the OSEIC Kuching waitlist is over 300 children. EIC staff described working long hours and risk of burnout).

- Make information about options and services provided by EICs easily available and accessible to parents in a variety of locations and formats (online, at pediatrician clinics and hospitals, in community groups, etc.) so that they can make informed and timely decisions.
- Expand number of EICs in Sarawak.

3 Evidence: Within the study sample, 29% of children are from rural areas and of these, 74% are from the lowest income level (RM 3000 or less). Rural children tend to travel long distances for their sessions at the EIC, which can lead to inconsistent attendance. Publicly funded EICs have long waitlists, including the OSEICs in the study.

- Increase the number of EICs, especially in larger districts and rural areas, to ensure equitable access for all children with developmental delays.
- Subsidize the travel, housing and assistive device costs and/or increase financial aid for rural parents of children with developmental delays.
- Expand early screening and diagnosis services to rural areas.

4 Evidence: The overall IDELA score, combining all domains, was 59% for those who attend preschool/KG and 46% for those who do not. The largest gaps are in the motor skills domain (19 percentage-point difference) and early literacy (18 points).

- Expand the communication between EICs and preschools/KGs so that parents can be informed about the benefits of attending preschools/KGs in addition to EIC and encouraged them to enroll children in these early centers.

5 Evidence: EIC staff caution that children may regress in less individualized, larger settings, and that mainstream schools may be unprepared or reluctant to accept children with developmental delays. Parents often fear lack of support, bullying, or progress decline. MCC and SAA offer an annual session for parents to help them understand how to navigate enrolling their child in primary school. As reported by one of the teachers in a mainstream school in Sibul, they have established a standard practice that upon a child's transition to the school, the EICs provides the school with a report on the child.

- Conduct a mapping exercise, particularly in Kuching, to identify inclusive preschools/KGs and primary schools and facilitate meetings between staff as well as with families.



- Create a stronger tie between EICs and primary school staff/teachers for smooth and effective transition pathways of children to primary education. This can be achieved through (1) joint training sessions, (2) joint annual meetings for EIC staff and primary school teachers at the center, and (3) EIC orientation events for primary school teachers and staff.
- Provide a bridge between EICs and preschools/KGs and primary schools by sharing child profiles with schools.

6 Evidence: There is limited communication or coordination between ministries overseeing early intervention and later schooling (eg., KPWK and MOE). This can hinder smooth transition of support as children receiving EIC services age out and move into primary school settings.

- Establish and strengthen formal collaboration between ministries for publicly funded services to increase efficiency and coherence and contribute to ensuring that the work of the EICs is maintained across educational settings for children with developmental delays.

7 Evidence: Most special needs education in mainstream schools takes place through Program Pendidikan Khas Integrasi (PPKI), which is a segregated setting. Program Pendidikan Inklusif (PPI)—the inclusive program—is not widespread.

- Expand inclusive learning opportunities (including teacher training) in mainstream primary schools so that children can learn alongside their peers without developmental delays.
- Apply the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to all teacher training (preservice and in-service) so that teachers are equipped to provide accessible instruction to all students.

8 Evidence: Mothers described bearing the largest share of caregiving responsibilities, and many felt that their child's additional needs were not well-understood by others, including by the child's father. Parents expressed wishing for more direct support to parents from EICs.

- Provide more opportunities for parents to come together in communal settings to learn strategies from the EIC. EICs launch programs for fathers' participation in caregiving so that they get opportunities to learn behavior management, and literacy, numeracy strategies and socio-emotional skills.
- Facilitate community-building among fathers through group sessions for training as well as socializing.