

## Rapid Feedback MERL in action – Read to Kids pilot in India

### Background

The following example outlines a two-year project in New Delhi, India, where we are applying the Rapid Feedback (RF) MERL approach. The pilot is seeking to promote pre-literacy skills and empower parents to read with their young children by training them in active reading techniques and providing access to free high quality, locally-relevant books via a mobile phone app. A summary of the RF MERL process is provided below.

### The Rapid Feedback MERL Approach

#### PHASE I: SCREENING...determining the scope of the engagement (~1 month)

The RF MERL team and the implementing partner jointly identified the following research questions for the engagement:

- Are the assumptions implicit in the activity's design valid (about parents' literacy, use of mobile phones and data, and beliefs/behaviors about reading with children)?
- Who will be the best target for outreach activities (mothers, fathers, older siblings, influencers like community leaders and ECD teachers)?
- What channels are most likely to drive *sustained* reading with children (home visits, health centers, ECD centers, community meetings, networks of community activists, primary schools)?



#### PHASE II: DEVELOPMENT...designing and refining (~4 months)

##### *Define and understand the problem the activity aims to address*



• The RF MERL team conducted formative research to validate the assumptions implicit in the pilot's theory of change and identify intervention options for testing. Within the context of this activity, the team was interested in validating assumptions around attitudes, skills, beliefs, and behaviors related to literacy among the target population, as well as mobile phone use. Methods for this phase included approximately 150 key informant interviews, ten focus group discussions, and usability testing that included 25 structured observations of various types of potential users interacting with the mobile phone app.

##### • **Key learnings:**

1. The key barrier to reading with children was not lack of access to books, but rather lack of time and understanding of the importance of reading.
2. Young adults, health care workers, teachers, and community group leaders are strategic channels for encouraging behavior change among parents.
3. The app needed more appealing content and a more intuitive mobile interface.
4. Caregivers found the most appealing content to be bilingual, visually rich, and books including moral lessons.

Data from this formative research revealed to the RF MERL team and the implementing partner that the mobile phone app needed to be accompanied by an intervention supporting behavior change among parents to prioritize reading to their children.

##### *Develop implementation and evaluation plan for "Feedback Experiments"*

- The implementing partner selected three local NGO partners that had existing networks of and activities with key influencer groups who could promote reading to young children: healthcare workers, teachers, youth group leaders, and mothers' groups leaders. The local NGO partners designed and carried out trainings for each influencer group, demonstrating how to promote the mobile app and demonstrate positive reading practices to caregivers.
- To compare the effectiveness of the different outreach strategies (reaching caregivers through health care workers, teachers, youth group leaders, and mothers' groups leaders), the RF MERL team recommended assessing the following short-term outcomes:
  - Parents understand how reading relates to children's success later in life
  - Parents read to children more often, for longer, and with better parent-child interactions

### PHASE III: IMPLEMENTATION...experimentation and learning (~12-18 months with cycles of iteration & adaptation every three months)

#### *Test three different outreach activities*

- Local NGO partners managed influencers as they introduced caregivers to the mobile app and educated them about the importance of reading with young children. The RF MERL team developed easy-to-use data collection tools to monitor the activities being carried out.
- Local NGO partners managed their influencers to collect data on the activities they carried out, and on the caregivers who they helped register on the mobile app. By matching this user information to the back-end app data, individual user data on app usage (a proxy for reading behavior) can be tracked. Thus, the effectiveness of each local NGO partner's strategies can be assessed, both in terms of the initial registration of users and, more importantly, their longer-term usage of the app's reading content.
- In addition to the back-end data on user activity, baseline and follow-up surveys were conducted with a sample of caregivers to gather information on reading frequency, attitudes about reading with young children, and other short-term indicators.
- Qualitative data collection supplemented this quantitative data: The RF MERL team, the implementing partner, and local NGO partners together assessed how and why outputs and short-term outcomes were or were not being achieved by systematically capturing lessons learned from local NGO partners and the key influencers they managed. Qualitative methods included:
  - Interviews and focus group discussions with various types of users, as well as influencers
  - Ongoing feedback from influencers and local NGO partners captured in a "learning tracker"



#### *Iterate and adapt*

- Every three months, the RF MERL team and all partners meet for a "Learning Check." The RF MERL team presents the data collected so far, and what the implications are for activity design. All partners then adapt activities accordingly; this includes how intervention options should be modified or dropped, or if intervention options may need to be added.
- For example, registering users on the app is not a major challenge for the local NGO partners, but generating sustained use of the app is. By analyzing back-end data and data on outreach activities, the RF MERL team found that four "touches" (caregiver interactions with an influencer) appears to encourage sustained use; one to three touches likely will not. As a result of this learning, local NGO partners will focus on improving sustained use of the app by following up more frequently with a smaller target group, rather than continuing to try to register more users.
- To date, two cycles of iteration and adaptation have taken place. The RF MERL team and all partners will continue the experimentation phase for an additional six months to ensure that the activity design is solidified before selecting the final set of intervention options for scale-up.

#### **Key learnings from the experimentation phase that have informed implementation:**

1. Local NGO partners have refined their screening process to better target user groups that have shown to register and use the app most often.
2. Activities that have proven to result in the greatest uptake are being held more frequently: group awareness sessions rather than individual outreach activities, home visits for caregivers unable to attend training sessions, and outreach activities on Sundays to ensure fathers can attend.
3. Caregivers with lower earning levels seem to demonstrate more interest in the app as an opportunity to improve social outcomes for the children. This has resulted in a greater focus on this group for targeting.
4. The on-the-ground activities are now supplemented by a general awareness-raising campaign about the importance of reading to young children. The campaign is promoted via radio, Facebook, YouTube, local cable, and mobile phones.