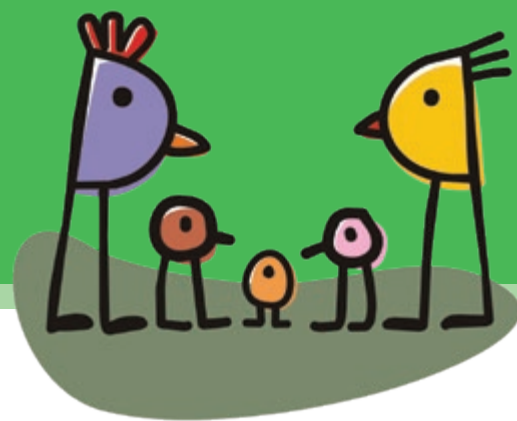


# Empowered Parenting in Serbia



**The “Program for Children and Families Strong from the Start – Dam Len Phaka (Let’s Give them Wings)” in Serbia seeks to improve parental competencies and capacity to support quality care for early childhood development, education and social inclusion of Roma children aged 0 to 7.** Following two 8-month phases of intervention in 15 Roma communities, children that participated in the program demonstrated statistically significantly higher levels of socio-emotional development and school readiness than children in comparison communities. Score gains remained significant when controlling for child age, mother’s education level and other commonly influential variables. Parents reported using more positive parenting practices and fewer harsh disciplinary ones.

## CONTEXT

A child’s earliest years are marked by periods of extraordinary growth and development, supported by the quality of their early experiences and the parenting they receive. However, too many children, including Roma children, remain on margins – living with higher rates of poverty and with poorer access to health, sanitation, infrastructure, and educational opportunities – often as a result of systematic discrimination. These conditions

often impede parents’ ability to give their children the best start in life and adversely affect children’s development, health and well-being, and readiness for school, as seen in the poor outcomes for Roma children across common development indicators, such as birth weight, infant mortality rates, access to early childhood education, and completion of basic education.<sup>1</sup>

## THE STRONG FROM THE START PROGRAM

It is with these challenges in mind that the CIP Center and Romanipen implemented The Program for Children and Families Strong from the Start – Dam Len Phaka, which means “Give Them Wings” in Romanian.<sup>2</sup> The culturally and contextually relevant program, delivered through workshops and home visits, sought to facilitate the development of stimulating and safe family settings for small children from Roma families living in informal settlements by enhancing parents’ skills and abilities, so they can give their children “wings to fly.” Children’s development was encouraged across domains, with emphasis on socio-emotional development.

## Evaluation Overview

<b>Country</b>	Serbia
<b>Sector</b>	Parenting; Early Childhood Development
<b>Lead Program Partners</b>	Center for Interactive Pedagogy (CIP Center); Educational Cultural Union of Roma “Romanipen”
<b>Research Partners</b>	Results for Development (R4D); University of Belgrade; DEEP DIVE
<b>Funding</b>	Open Society Foundations Serbia (OSF Serbia); Open Society Foundations Early Childhood Program (OSF ECP)
<b>Sample</b>	900 families (parent & child); 450 in program and 450 in comparison communities
<b>Research Type</b>	Impact Evaluation
<b>Tool</b>	Save the Children’s IDELA for children aged 3.5 – 6.5 years

This evaluation was lead by:



With support from:

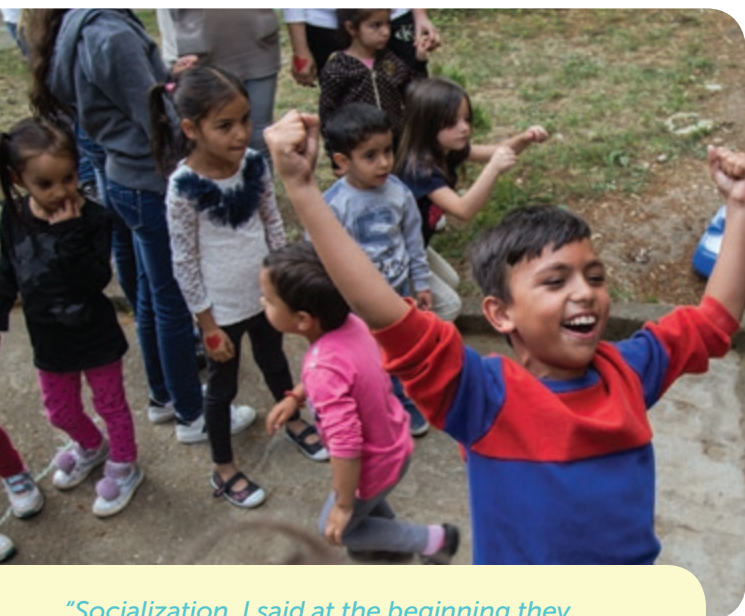


**Throughout 2017 and 2018, Strong from the Start was implemented in 15 Roma communities across Serbia, reaching a total of 450 families with approximately 750 children aged 0 to 7.**

A local Roma NGO implemented the program in each of the 15 communities, with training and oversight provided by the CIP Center and Romanipen. The program was delivered in two phases, commencing in the spring of 2017 and 2018, respectively, with approximately 8 months of active programming per phase.

The Strong from the Start curriculum spanned three thematic areas: *Family and Community Roles and Responsibilities for Raising Children*; *Child and Family Health Protection*; and *Encouraging Child Development*. These topics were covered in a series of community-based workshops for families with children aged zero to seven. Each month, parents and children participated in 2-3 workshops each,<sup>3</sup> as well as 1 joint workshop. Workshops for children were offered for all ages, however, activities were primarily geared towards children aged 3 to 5.5 years, to support entry into the mandatory preschool program. The program offered additional home visits for parents of babies (aged 0-1).

The program was supported by The Open Society Foundation Serbia (OSF Serbia) and the Open Society Foundation Early Childhood Program (OSF ECP).



*"Socialization. I said at the beginning they were very attached to us. Now they feel more relaxed, self-reliant. My child started preschools with no problems".*

– PROGRAM PARENT

## EVALUATION

The Open Society Foundation Early Childhood Program (OSF ECP) engaged Results for Development (R4D), Aleksandar Baucal and Marina Videnovic from the University of Belgrade, and DEEP DIVE, to conduct an impact evaluation of the Strong from the Start program. OSF ECP also commissioned a qualitative evaluation and costing study of the program.<sup>4</sup> The impact evaluation measured parent and child outcomes including changes in parent attitudes, knowledge and behavior around parenting practices, and child school readiness, specifically socio-emotional development.<sup>5</sup> For each family, an adapted version of the IDELA tool<sup>6</sup> was administered to the child (aged 3.5 – 5.9 years)<sup>7</sup> and a survey based of the IDELA and UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey to the parent (most commonly the mother). The evaluation was aligned with the phases of the program, starting with baseline data collection in spring of 2017, midline data collection in fall of 2017, and endline data collection in fall of 2018.

## RESULTS

### Child Outcomes<sup>8</sup>

**Children who participated in the program demonstrated higher levels of socio-emotional development, as well as total school-readiness.**

Children who attended more workshops had higher scores, even when adjusted for variables like age and education level of the mother.

- 1. Children in the program gained an additional 7.4 months of socio-emotional development, the evaluation's key indicator.**<sup>9</sup> These gains held even after children enroll in preschool which suggests they are an important building block to school readiness. Children's gains in socio-emotional development were also positively correlated with their parent's increased use of developmentally supportive activities, suggesting increased parent engagement is an important pathway to improved child socio-emotional development.
- 2. Children in the program gained an additional 4 months of total school-readiness.** While all scores increased over the evaluation (expected as children age), a larger proportion of this growth was attributed to socio-emotional development in the second phase

of the program, compared to gains in early numeracy, early literacy, and persistence after the first phase of the program.

3. **The program does not appear to have a significant impact on children's early numeracy, early literacy, or persistence.** Participation in the program did not yield benefits above what might be normally gained as a result of age or participation the obligatory preschool program provided by the government.

## Parent Outcomes

Parents reported using more positive and fewer harsh practices and while they suggested they had heard most of the information before, they continued to make modest gains on knowledge and attitude indicators.

1. **Parents in the program reported using more positive parenting practices and fewer harsh ones.** Positive and developmentally supportive activities like singing songs to the child, teaching letter awareness, etc. increased, while harsh practices like hitting, spanking, and criticizing decreased.
2. **Parents in the program reported greater confidence in their ability to support their child's development.** Parents' confidence also rose throughout the program as measured by nine statements about their parenting skills and agency in their child's development. They also greatly valued the opportunity to gather and share experiences with one another.

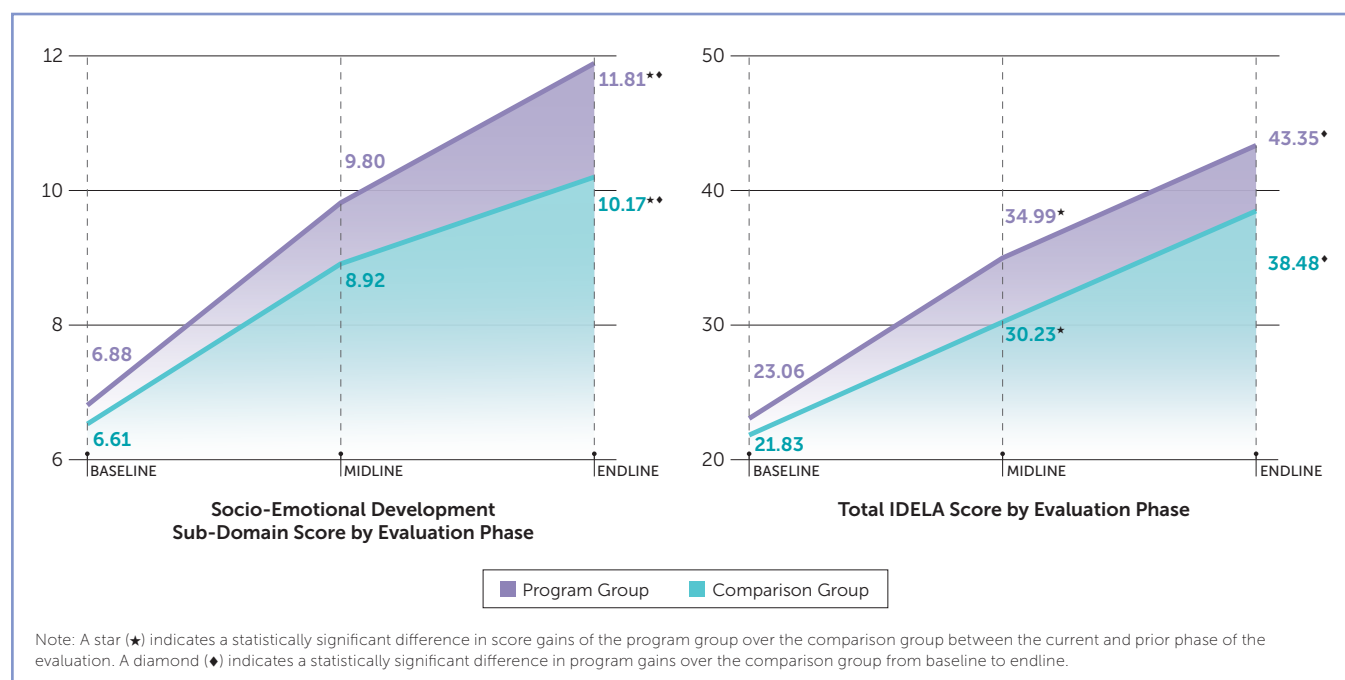
3. **The program did not have a significant effect on parents' aspirations for children, awareness of their child's disabilities, the home environment, or health practices.** Across the program and comparison group, parents were less confident that their child would complete primary school than at baseline, suggesting that this change may be tied to an external factor, such as preschool environment, rather than the program.

*"First time he came here, he saw some tools. And he prefers that. He started to draw and to color. And he has some of his tools at home and now when I work, he says he will go for his tools to help me."*

— PROGRAM PARENT



Figure I. Socio-Emotional Development and Total IDELA Scores



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

The Program for Children and Families “Strong from the Start - Dam Len Phaka” can indeed give children wings. Participation in the program led to gains in children’s socio-emotional development and overall school readiness; gains that were further supported by parents’ increased use of developmentally supportive activities. Together, these results increase the likelihood that Roma children will grow up in enabling environments and are able to reach their potential. The impact evaluation, qualitative evaluation, and costing study provide many lessons for improving, adapting, and scaling the program which should be considered not only in the context of the Roma in Serbia, but in the broader region.

### Key lessons include:

- **Program implementation will only be as strong as the relationships it builds**
  - A strong, stable local partner with knowledge of the community and ability to develop supportive relationships with participants proved invaluable. These characteristics allowed partners to further tailor the curriculum and activities to the needs of the community and served to build trust.
  - Trust between CIP and Romanipen and the local implementation partner was also essential to ensure program fidelity and provide support to the implementation team, including effective mentoring and capacity building. Additional experiential training (pre- and in-service) can complement these aims.
- **The program curriculum and workshop activities must be well defined but readily adaptable to account for the diversity of contexts and community needs.** The program should continue to build out the curriculum with the support of program implementers; this can be particularly valuable for implementers with lesser experience.
- **Regular attendance is necessary to see positive outcomes for families as larger gains were seen for both children and parents who attended more frequently.** Suitability (location and timing) of the workshops, as well as seasonal employment can impact participants’ ability to attend and should be addressed early and often.
- **The curriculum and delivery model could be adapted to reflect the community needs and should be embedded or linked with other services to ensure sustainability.** Given the strength of the curriculum, the program could be adapted to be delivered in multiple formats, such as through preschools or as complementary training for other social service providers, depending on need. One consideration would be to deliver the program in partnership with the

local kindergartens to support children without other early learning experience be ready for school. Linking the program to other community or social services (including community health services) would not only serve to increase the sustainability of the model, but also reduce the stigmatization and discrimination that Roma children and families often face in these settings.

## Cost Considerations

**Early analysis suggests parenting programs are a good value-for-money investment.** This research began the process of exploring cost per family to deliver such a program. Setting aside fixed costs (such as curriculum design, project management), the research team determined that the marginal cost (such as training of facilitators, mentorship, resources allocated to families) for each additional family would be \$750 per family or \$8.30 per family per workshop across the fifteen sites from 2016-2018.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> 2014 Serbian Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)
- <sup>2</sup> The Strong from the Start Curriculum was developed by the CIP Center in consultation with Roma NGOs and this program was implemented by the CIP Center and Romanipen.
- <sup>3</sup> Workshops for parents and children were often held in the same facility, in adjoining rooms.
- <sup>4</sup> The qualitative evaluation was led by DEEP DIVE and the costing study was led by Aleksandar Baucal at the University of Belgrade.
- <sup>5</sup> The research team identified similarly situated participants (15 communities, each with 30 families) to serve as the comparison group. The spring 2017 baseline evaluation confirmed the statistical similarity of the two groups, including on the evaluation’s key measure: socio-emotional development.
- <sup>6</sup> The IDELA tool and the adaptations made for this evaluation are discussed in baseline report.
- <sup>7</sup> The program focused on children 3-5.5 years old (to aid entry into preschool) and the IDELA tool is validated for children 3.5-6.5 years old. If more than one child was within the target age range, the youngest was selected to participate.
- <sup>8</sup> The findings presented below only apply to 374 families (parent-child pairs) who participated in all three stages of the evaluation. Data indicates that program attendance for these families stayed relatively constant across the two program phases.
- <sup>9</sup> This is a mathematical construction to help understand effect sizes based on the average development attained over the 21 months of the evaluation, from baseline to endline. Readers should not extrapolate actual years of development based on these numbers.

In partnership with 14 Roma NGOs, the program was implemented by:

