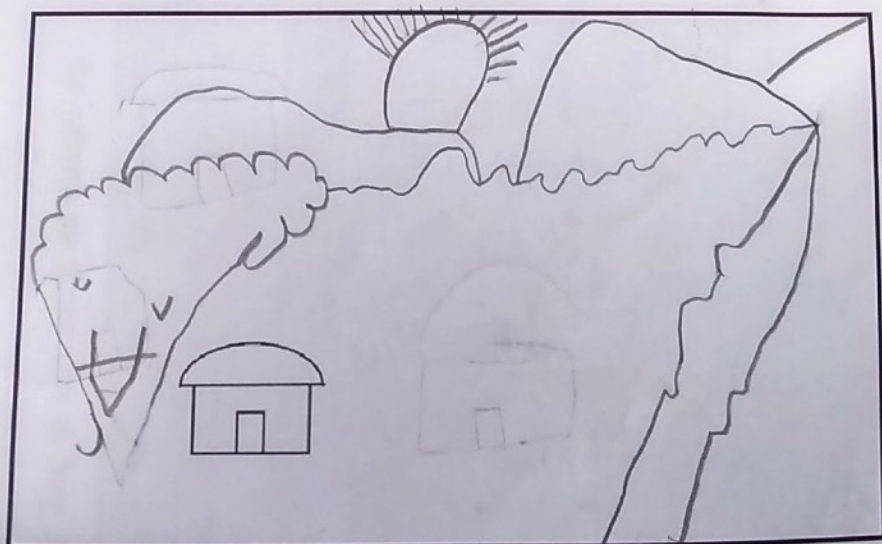




# Science & Practice

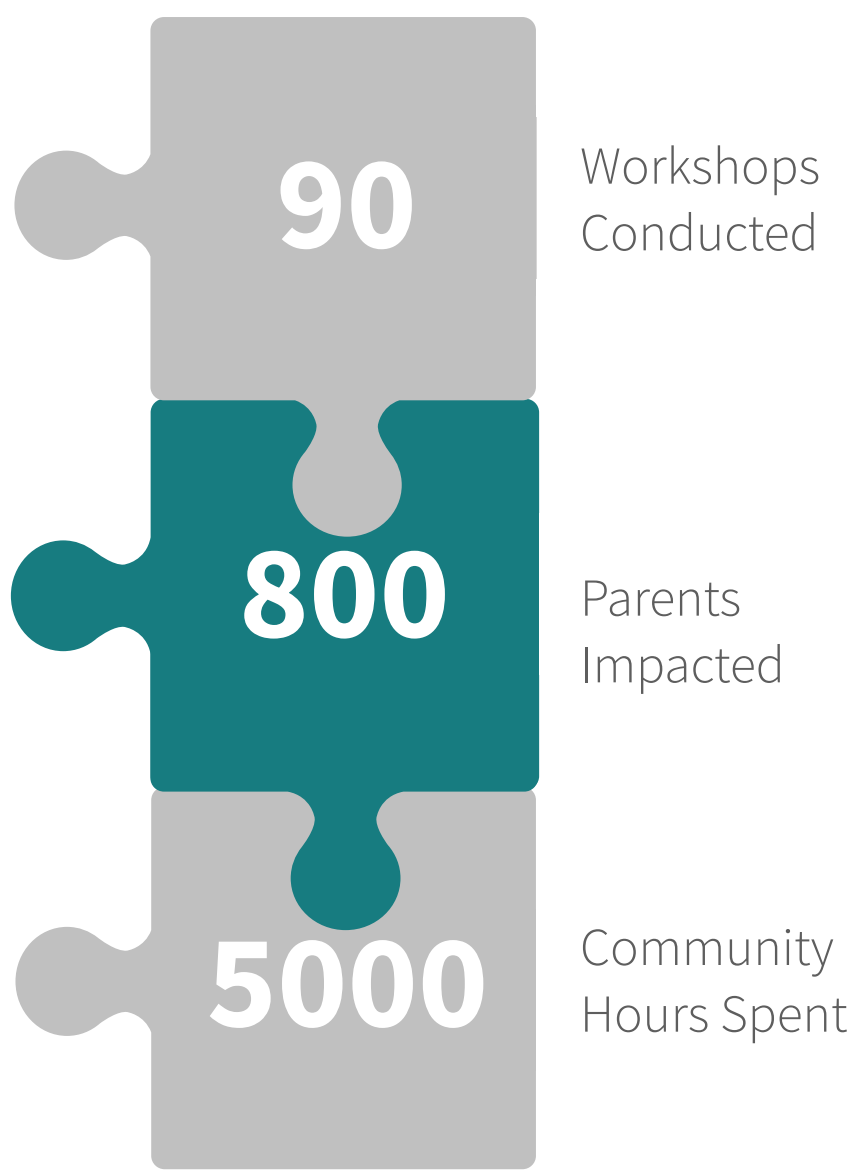
<sup>1</sup>  
*Insights from the Field*





# About Meraki

Meraki is a social impact organisation that emerged from the myriad stories of parents who have not been to schools themselves and are fighting to put their children on a different life path. We strive to enable low-income families to support the development of their children by creating conducive home-environments. During the course of its year-and-a-half-long journey, Meraki has impacted hundreds of parents through its workshops and home-based activities in under-resourced communities of Delhi. Together with its beneficiaries, the parents, Meraki is working toward the day when all children are supported to fulfill their innate potential.



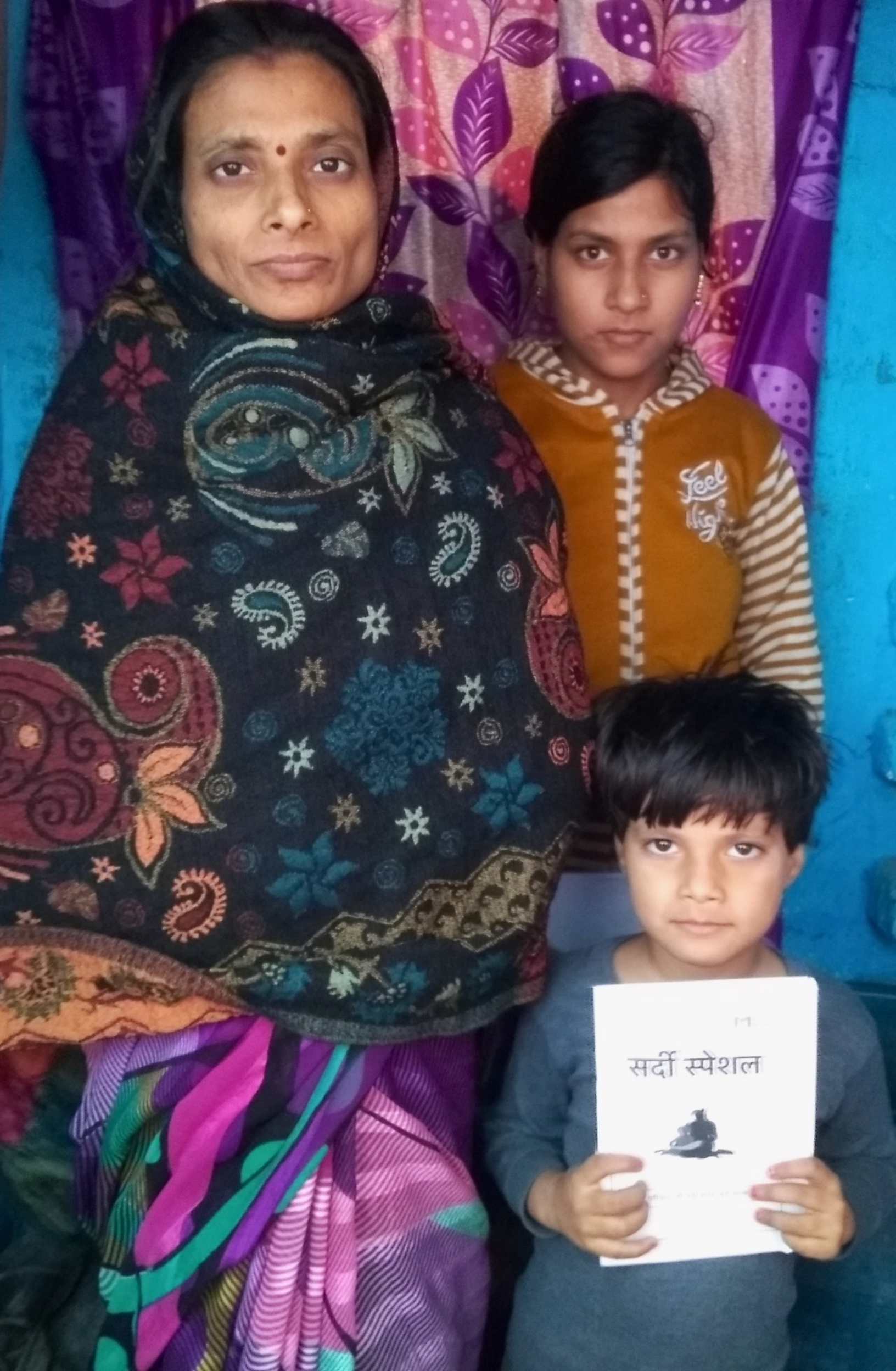
# Why Meraki?

If you had to choose between putting food on your table and spending quality time with your infant, which would you choose? This is the sort of decision many caregivers working with Meraki face every day. The income earned by a single breadwinner is usually insufficient to cover basic household expenses, thereby forcing both primary caregivers to spend crucial time away; time they could otherwise have spent supporting the development of their children. Many parents also express a want of skills to adequately care for their children; they feel incapacitated to fulfill their children's needs. This results in diminished confidence and increased levels of stress, thereby blunting their ability to create a conducive learning environment at home. Paucity of resources further implies the inability to setup proxies for home care and learning support on the part of the parents. This intensifies the vicious cycle of low-confidence, stress and unfavourable home environments, eventually producing poor educational and health outcomes of children.

According to the Center on the Developing Child (CoDC), Harvard University, the nature of the relationship that parents share with their children is a most significant determinant of the latter's early development. Based on a synthesised understanding of the science of child development and the core capabilities of adults, the CoDC recommends keeping in view three design principles while formulating interventions; to be maximally effective in improving child and family outcomes policies and interventions should:

- 1.** Support responsive relationships for children and adults
- 2.** Strengthen core life skills
- 3.** Reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families





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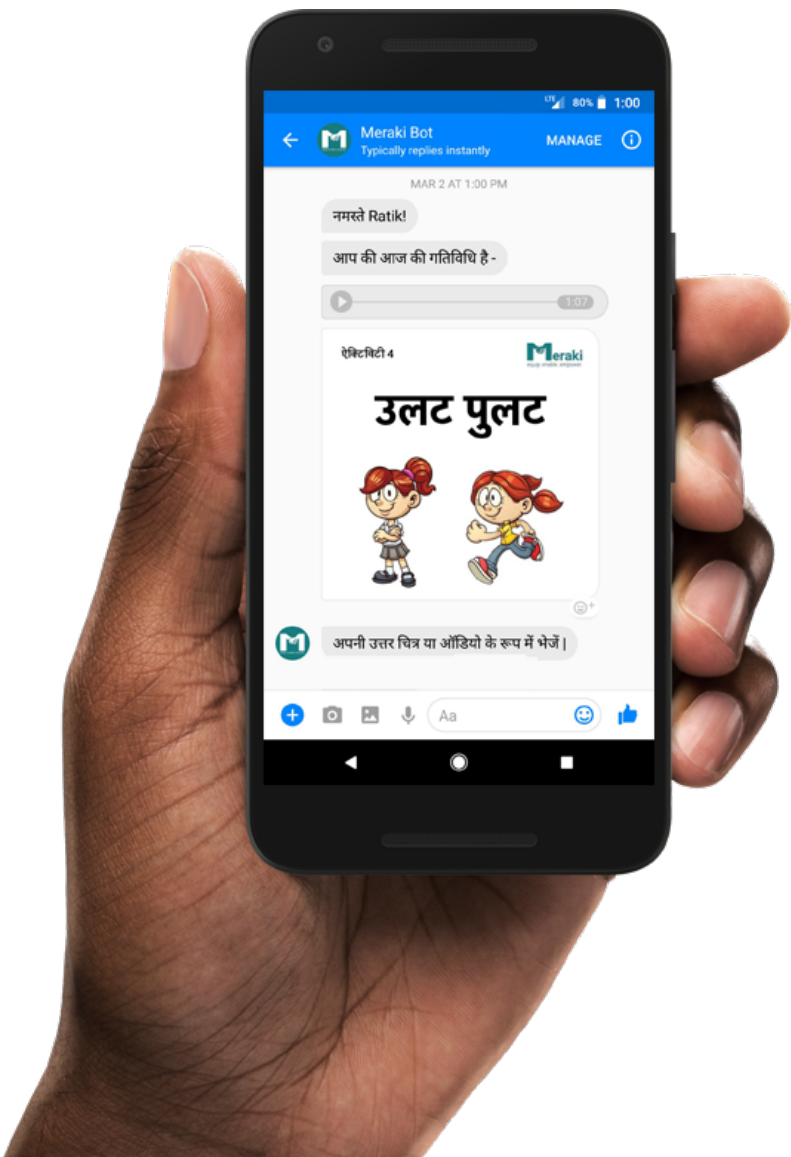
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परिवार जो पढ़े साथ, बढ़े साथ



At the heart of Meraki’s work lie these three principles. Meraki recognises the significance of a stable and supportive home environment in the life and development of a child and endeavours to enable all parents become informed and active caregivers. To fulfill its mission, it uses an innovative blend of **content, training and technology**. The content is designed to catalyse dialogue between the parent and the child. Parents receive this material at workshops as kits containing relatable stories and activities. During the workshops, parents are guided on how to improve conversation with children and effectively implement home-based activities. Technology augments engagement with content via **interactive** voice-guided activities.



The following are three of the many stories that Meraki has had the privilege to collect during the course of its work in some of Delhi’s under-resourced communities. These may also be viewed as instances of the three principles at work.



## Principle 1

Enabling parents to foster responsive relationships with their children.





## Case Study

### *Supporting a responsive relationship between Veena & Arvind*

Veena is the mother of five-year-old Arvind. When we first met her, she struggled to balance her twin-role as breadwinner and homemaker and found little time to engage with Arvind. Both she and her husband were on a gruelling schedule to make ends meet and were unable to provide the quality stimulation Arvind's early childhood demanded. The main casualty of their exacting lifestyles was Arvind's development. Veena reported that Arvind was a silent child who rarely interacted with his peers. His cognitive and literacy skills were under-developed and academic performance was well below average.

***“ The bedrock of the relationship between a parent and child is the serve and return mechanism ”***



## Science

The science of child development and the core capabilities of adults helps us understand Arvind's predicament. According to the Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, the bedrock of the relationship between a parent and child is the serve and return mechanism through which parents respond appropriately to their child's actions, both verbally and non-verbally. These interactions stimulate brain development and serve as the foundation of a child's cognitive, intellectual and emotional development. Stable and responsive relationships build emotional stability in the child, and the assurance of constant and continued support lowers her stress. A lack of serve and return interactions results in unstable parent-child relationships that hamper the child's development, often manifesting in poor social skills and subpar academic performance.

## Intervention

Meraki recognises the centrality of a supportive home environment to the healthy development of children. Its workshops aim to build awareness around the significance of responsive relationships and inculcate the importance of serve and return interactions among parents. A simple game of catch and throw introduces the concept of serve and return to parents. The acts of throwing the ball and catching it thereafter helps them grasp the concept of serve and return respectively. Parents are provided with home-based, Do-It-Yourself (DIY) activities that are specially designed to facilitate five-minute, meaningful conversations with children at regular intervals during the week. They are given booklets containing pictorial stories along with basic comprehension questions, which they may use to conduct structured conversations with their children. They are encouraged to note down their observations and share the same during Meraki's support visits to their homes.

***“ Home-based activities have allowed Veena to meaningfully engage with Arvind ”***

## Impact

Even when she made the time, Veena had no idea how to engage with Arvind prior to Meraki's workshops. Meraki's support and DIY activities have allowed Veena to meaningfully engage with Arvind. She feels she is beginning to understand Arvind's fears and doubts. She reports that Arvind eagerly awaits discussions with her every night. Without these activities, Arvind's spirited interactions with her were seemingly impossible.





## Principle 2

Equipping parents to develop and strengthen their children's core life-skills.



# Case Study

## *Strengthening Fatima’s core life-skills*

Rifat is a housewife and a mother of two daughters who are seven and five years old, respectively. In her view, her children lack self-control, watch a lot of television and rarely pay attention to her instructions. While she wants her children to academically excel, she is unable to sit them down and make them study. In addition, her older daughter, Fatima, struggles to comprehend and follow instructions. Having never attended school, Rifat expresses a lack of confidence in aiding her children’s academic progress.

***“ Children who have opportunities to develop core life-skills experience lifelong benefits ”***



# Science

Appreciating the process of development of core capabilities during early childhood sheds light on Fatima’s predicament. We all need a set of essential skills to manage life, work and relationships successfully. Children who have opportunities to develop these skills are better equipped to take decisions and experience lifelong benefits. These skills depend on three types of brain function: working memory, mental flexibility, and self-control. Working memory refers to the ability to effectively hold, process and utilize information held in short term memory to efficiently execute immediate tasks. Mental flexibility refers to the ability to adjust one’s thinking in order to adapt to new situations. Self-control refers to the ability to control one’s impulses in order to elect a more appropriate behaviour consistent with completing one’s goals.



## Intervention

During Meraki's workshops, parents familiarise themselves with the various ways in which they can foster their children's core life-skills. Meraki uses the words *roko*, *socho*, *badlo* to signify the skills of self-control, working memory and mental flexibility, respectively. An activity, pass the ball, is used to introduce these concepts to parents. Parents are asked to pass a ball to the person next to them, and after a certain point, they are requested to stop (*roko*) and change the direction of the ball. This compels parents to pause for a second (*socho*) and then change the direction (*badlo*). Upon completing the activity, parents reflect on the correspondence between their actions and the words *roko*, *socho*, *badlo*. They then brainstorm other similar activities and games they may conduct at home to strengthen the core life-skills of their children.

***“ Rifat's regularly playing games with her daughters led to their increased attention and better self-control ”***

## Impact

Rifat played games such as *chidiya udd* and *vish-amrit* with her daughters four times a week and closely observed their behaviours. Within a month she saw them pay more attention to her instructions. Due to better self-control, they were able to turn away from the television; enhanced working memory allowed them to maintain focus on their homework for longer durations.



## Principle 3

Empowering parents to create a safe, stress-free home environment





## Case Study

### *Improving Meenakshi's self-efficacy*

Meenakshi married young and has a daughter and a son. Her husband used to run a taxi service but, due to business losses, he now works as a cab-driver with a salary of Rupees fifteen thousand per month. To supplement her husband's income and support her ailing parents, Meenakshi took to tailoring. Her husband gets no weekly-off, leaving Meenakshi to handle the children all by herself. When we first met her, she found herself unable to devote any constructive time to her children. This added to her frustration and stress, which often manifested in adverse reactions on her children.

***“ Stable and responsive relationships  
in the earliest years of life help  
protect children from the potential  
harm of excessive stress ”***



## Science

The biology of stress activation explains how extreme experiences that cause excessive stress can be toxic to the architecture of children's developing brains and can overload adults' capacity to engage productively in work and communities. Stable and responsive relationships in the earliest years of life help protect children from the potential harm that excessive stress can cause, and in adulthood they provide the hope that is necessary for resilience. In the absence of stable, responsive relationships, the mind and body are unable to focus on learning core life-skills and actively handling daily stressors. Children mirror the behaviour of their parents; successful self-regulation of emotions and effective handling of stress on the part of parents equips their children to better cope with stress and adversity. Supportive home environments, therefore, demand that parents come to terms with their own stresses.

## Intervention

Meraki's workshops introduced the parents to the relation between their stress (*tanaav*) and the development of their children through a board game. Parents were asked to reflect on the nature of their responses to stress, the kinds of reactions stress evoked in them and the effect this had on the people around them. Understanding the adverse impact of their stress on children, parents realized that they ought to regulate their negative reactions. Through group discussions, parents collectively devised techniques to reduce their unregulated responses in order move out of stress's vicious cycle. They were provided a "*tanaav* tracker" to track daily instances of stress and their ability to handle stress successfully.

***“ Actively using techniques picked up during workshops, Meenakshi regulates her levels of stress ”***

## Impact

Using the *tanaav* tracker, Meenakshi came to be more aware of her stress and its impact on her children. She noticed her stress increasing during the last week of each month. She connected this to the family's running out of money by the twentieth, which frequently resulted in her erratic behaviour. Her children would also notice and call out the mounting tensions at home. Observing this pattern made her recognise the potential negative fallout on her children. Meenakshi now actively uses the techniques she picked up during workshops to regulate her stress level and self-devises strategies to better manage the stress of her children.



# Conclusion

These case-studies clearly demonstrate the interconnectedness of CoDC's principles. Caregivers under duress struggle to create responsive relationships for children whose core-life-skills-development is impeded as a result.

Through its work, Meraki has recognised the need for creating relatable content, and direct, on-ground implementation for tackling these complex issues. It has striven to establish a relationship of trust with parents through hands-on workshops and support visits. Parents learn about the science that underlies the home-based activities during eight monthly-workshops and are aided on implementing these activities with bi-weekly home-visits. Voice-enabled technology serves as an automated activity-reminder, enabling enhanced reach and long-term engagement.

In Meraki's experience, such a multi-modal approach is imperative to equipping, enabling and empowering low-income parents build a conducive home environment for their children.



To learn more, visit:  
[www.merakifoundation.in](http://www.merakifoundation.in)





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स्वागत है