

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A MOBILE CRECHES CHILD

The Mobile Creches centre is situated on the construction site, next to the jhuggis where the workers live. No gardens or playgrounds for the children are here, only gaping foundation pits, piles of bricks, and a dry, cement dust in the air.

The centre is a temporary structure, about fifty square feet in size – walls of bare brick and a roof of tin sheets. The room is divided into three parts: the creche for children under 2 years, the balwadi for the 3-5 year olds, and non-formal-education for 6 years and above. Bright collages and drawings give the room an air of festivity. Modest though it is, the centre is a triumph for Mobile Creches!

Between 9.00 and 9:30 a.m., there is a long progression of mothers leaving their babies for the day...

The Creche: The centre-in-charge manages the centre with the help of four other childcare workers. The morning is spent feeding the creche children a mixture of cereal and milk. Although the creche has an average attendance of 85, today there are barely 35. Many children are lying sick at home, victims of a measles epidemic on the site.

The Balwadi: The 22 children in this section are busy in small groups, organized around low wooden tables in the room. The playthings are simple: pebbles, bottle caps, pieces of string, cut up cardboard, wooden blocks, etc. Free play continues till just after 10:30, when the children gather in a large circle for story time!

The NFE: The teacher calls out to the older children – on the swings outside – announcing the beginning of their day. As they walk in through the creche section, many stop to take a peek at their younger siblings, happy to be free of their premature mothering responsibilities for some time! It is now time for song and dance. With some luck, if they stay longer, some of them will start going to the local municipal school.

The Working Mother: Since childcare in India is largely the mother's domain, the programme cannot be conceived without the mother. Creche workers seize every opportunity to interact with the mothers and build trust. The centre staff has negotiated a time with the contractor when mothers can come and breast feed their babies.

The Mobile Creche Staff: During the brief respite at lunch, when the children go home, the staff makes a note of things to follow up on: meet the contractor about the power supply, remind the mothers about the doctor's visit and to educate them on reproductive choices, health care and hygiene. The children are back by 2:00, and the centre is bustling with activities again.

Between 4:30 and 5.00 p.m., mothers start arriving, weary from the work site, to pick up the children.

The children are given a simple snack of channa just before they leave. The lights and fans are turned off and the doors and windows locked. All is quiet, till 8:30 the next morning...