

Mothering mothers



Women in a small district of Maharashtra have found a refuge in the anganwadi centres where they discuss the health and problems of children, says *Darshna Dawda*

Every week, on an appointed day, a steady stream of women with children in tow can be seen making their way from Yavatmal's Babhulgaon block towards the anganwadi centre in Kopara, Maharashtra. As the women of this quiet rural hamlet gather around in the *baithak* (living room), the little ones get busy playing games.

These mothers' meets are an opportunity for young mothers and mothers-to-be to lean on each other for friendship and support.

Together, they seek some sound advice on childcare and indulge in creative problem-solving for the well-being of their offsprings.

Prabha Sudhkar Navade, anganwadi worker, conducts the meeting and invites participants to speak one by one. Gradually, it turns into a full-blown discussion on different aspects of motherhood. "The meetings take place every week so that the women can exchange notes on the health problems that their children face and collectively offer some practical solutions to each other," says she.

The unique feature of these gatherings is that the groups have been formed on the basis of children's age. For example, expectant women gather on the first Saturday of every month, mothers of toddlers come on the third Saturday and so on. "This approach enables them to easily share their experiences since their children are going through similar milestones and difficulties. Very often they find solutions amongst themselves by tapping into collective wisdom," reveals Navade.

This, indeed, is a sustainable and participatory initiative that not only helps in building the confidence of the women but also enables them to safeguard the health of their little ones. For expert opinion and assistance, mothers can always reach out to the anganwadi worker or the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA).

During the *Poshan Pakhwada* celebrations, held in March to mark the first anniversary of the *Poshan Abhiyan*, Navade had called a mothers' meet to discuss nutrition, immunisation and other key elements of childcare. The participating mothers discussed the varied and unpredictable food habits of their children.

Aparna, mother of Aditi Ganesh Mehekar, confessed that earlier she was unaware that she should give vegetables and fruits to her children everyday. She says, "Also, I had no idea how frequently growing children had to be fed". Aradhya Santosh Patil's mother, Seema candidly told everyone, "Earlier, my daughter ate very little at home but now she has learnt to eat everything in the company of other children as they share food. Now she also asks me to cook a variety of vegetables."

Navade is really proud that the mothers associated with anganwadi have understood the value of holistic, healthy living and achieving all-round growth for young ones.

An hour-and-a-half's drive away, in the neighbouring block of Digras, there is a village called Harsul. The anganwadi worker and her assistant there have found a unique way to ensure that the children are excited to come to the centre. The health workers have transformed the off-white cloth bag, which was used to provide families with fortified Take Home Ration (THR), into a craft bag for the children. Each bag displays their I-card and this creates a sense of ownership among children. It also enables friendly competition among them. When they come for classes, they take out time to draw, colour or make something from rough paper and crayons that they have brought from home. When it's time for them to go back, they neatly put their creations back into their bags.

When the children come along with their mothers for weekly meetings at the centre or for some special programmes, the anganwadi-tai asks them to show off their art work. Such display of talent encourages them to learn and grow. Not surprisingly, the mothers can't stop gushing.

—Charkha Features