

Supporting Early Learners and Their Families during COVID-19:

A Reflection on Korea's Response¹

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The COVID-19 pandemic has created an enormous shock to the education sector. In the Republic of Korea, over 600,000 children enrolled in kindergartens were affected by extended school closures from March to May 2020 and were at continued risk of missing out on critical learning experiences that support their social, emotional, and cognitive development. Children's parents and caretakers also encountered unprecedented challenges trying to balance work and childcare. According to the parent survey by the Korea Institute of Child Care and Education (KICCE) in March 2020, Korean parents experienced a decrease in their household income (32.1 percent) as well as a lack of childcare (36.2 percent). The negative impact was more significant in highly infected areas and vulnerable groups.²

Since February 2020, the Korean government introduced a series of support mechanisms for young children and their families. The main support mechanisms include (a) availability of online and offline educational resources to provide tools for parents in support of children's active learning at home, (b) initiatives to support children's and parents' emotional and psychological well-being, and (c) a gradually expanded emergency childcare program to help the parents most in need and ensure safe full school reopening. The initial experience of these programs may help inform how governments and communities can support the needs of young learners and their families during the pandemic in other parts of the world.

Resources for Learning and Playing Activities at Home

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Korean government leveraged digital platforms and new tools to provide support for active learning activities at home.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum portal. The Ministry of Education (MOE) provided virtual play and learning content for parents through the Nuri Curriculum portal, i-Nuri (<https://i-nuri.go.kr>). The Nuri Curriculum is the national ECE curriculum for children ages three to five and the launch of the portal in support of the implementation of revised 2019 Nuri Curriculum (Box 1 illustrates the details of the curriculum) coincided with the school closures and served as a timely resource for families to carry out stimulating activities at home. The portal provides home-based play materials to parents through an initiative called, "What are you doing today?" Each week, it provides a theme for parents based on the curriculum and offers approximately 10 related activities, including arts and crafts, physical activities, children's stories and songs, and science projects.

The demonstration of these activities supported all development domains for children, including motor and socio-emotional skills. For children who stay at home, their daily activities have changed substantially since school closure, with a significant increase in electronic device usage and a decrease in learning and

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² KICCE, *A Study on the COVID-19 Response System and Support for the Lack of Childcare*, July 31, 2020, https://kicce.re.kr/main/board/view.do?menu_idx=26&manage_idx=35&board_idx=40789

outside activities. Due to the lack of physical activities and social interaction, there were concerns about the lack of opportunities to develop children's large motor and socio-emotional skills. The portal provides various physical activities at home to support nurturing these skills, such as playing with the materials at home and outdoor activities. The activities also encourage children to share their thoughts and ideas with parents, who document and send the messages to teachers via mobile phones. As of October 2020, the portal has accumulated 537 activities for parents to adopt. In addition to home-based play and learning materials, the portal provides updates and guidelines on the curriculum, consultation services to parents and kindergarten teachers, and a virtual community space to share experience and knowledge.

Figure 1. Promotional videos of Nuri Curriculum on the i-Nuri portal

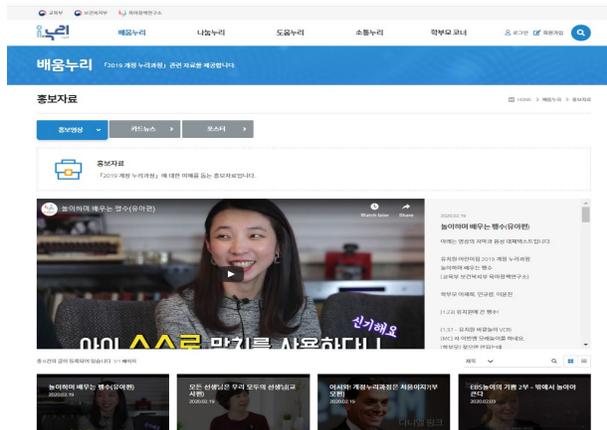


Figure 2. Physical activity at home introduced on the i-Nuri portal

푸르미와 함께하는 **자유로운 놀이 9**

놀이명	사방치기 놀이
놀이 재료	매트, 풀연테이프, 양말, 가위
놀이 방법	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 매트(바닥) 위에 사방치기 선과 숫자를 붙인다. 2. 양말을 동그랗게 말아서 숫자에 던진다. 3. 양말이 있는 숫자는 피해서 선을 밟지 않고 숫자 8까지 간다. 4. 숫자 1까지 오면서 양말을 잡고 돌아온 다음 놀이를 반복한다. <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>① 테이프를 붙이고</p>  <p>③ 숫자에 양말을 던지고</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>② 양말을 동그랗게 말아서</p>  <p>④ 돌아오면서 양말을 주워 도착하면 놀이 끝!</p> </div> </div>

Source: i-Nuri portal.

Box 1. Revised Nuri Curriculum (2019)

In Korea, the national kindergarten curriculum was first established in 1969 and has been reformed 10 times. As part of a major reform, the Nuri Curriculum was implemented in 2012 and was designed to promote children's development in five key areas (physical exercise and health, communication, social relationship, artistic experience, and nature exploration) to promote balanced growth of both mind and body.³ In December 2017, the government announced plans to innovate early education and mandated the implementation of the revised child-centered and play-based Nuri Curriculum (2019) in all ECE centers from March 2020. The key characteristics of the revised Nuri Curriculum are as follows:⁴

1. **Autonomy at the regional and institutional levels.** Although the curriculum is applied to all three- to five-year-old children nationwide, it emphasizes autonomy and flexibility at the regional and institutional levels. For example, it simplified the evaluation guidelines to help teachers implement more field-based assessments.
2. **From teacher-led to child-centered program.** The curriculum was previously based on teacher-led education programs wherein teachers prepare contents which are introduced through play

³ MOE, *Announcement of the 2019 Revised Nuri Curriculum*, July 19, 2019, <https://www.moe.go.kr/boardCnts/view.do?boardID=294&boardSeq=78061&lev=0&m=02>.

⁴ MOE, *Manual of the 2019 Revised Nuri Curriculum*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.moe.go.kr/boardCnts/view.do?boardID=312&boardSeq=79419&lev=0&m=03>.

activities. However, the revised version enables children's voluntary learning through play with teachers' assistance to expand their autonomy and creativity. It emphasizes individual experiences, interests, and curiosity.

3. **Play-based education.** The revised curriculum ensures sufficient time for play, including outdoor activities. It supports children to freely participate in and enjoy play according to their own interests. The play activities are closely connected with five key areas of child development.
4. **Collaborative implementation by children, teachers, parents, and local community.** The government created the i-Nuri portal to promote communication with teachers, parents, and the local community to successfully implement the curriculum. The parent education materials were uploaded on the website to increase their awareness of play activities and promote parent interactions with teachers and kindergartens.
5. **Support the professional development of teachers.** The government provided both online and offline training for teachers, principals, and supervisors of ECE centers to improve the quality of the Nuri Curriculum operation. They continuously disseminated class support materials so that the revised curriculum could be applied to various activities. The portal also offers consultation materials and case studies for teachers.

Educational broadcasting based on the ECE curriculum. The Educational Broadcasting System (EBS) produced a live "My home, the kindergarten" program, which is also based on the Nuri Curriculum. The program was aired from April to May 2020, in line with the kindergarten curriculum that would be delivered during the same period. The program presented various activities, including physical exercise and performances, and encouraged children to participate and interact with teachers via live video calls.⁵ The EBS Kids website (<https://www.ebs.co.kr/kids>) also offers various play and learning video contents and established a YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/c/EBSPin/videos>) with tips on child-rearing during COVID-19. It allowed parents to easily access the content based on their needs.

Delivery of home-based learning kits. According to the guidelines from the MOE, local education offices prepared home-based learning kits to share with parents and kindergartens. For example, the Gyeonggi-do Office of Education mobilized local kindergarten teachers to develop play and learning packages for parents through its website, Play On (<https://edup.goe.go.kr/kids-love>). As a response, the kindergarten attached to Yeongcheon Elementary School in Gyeonggi-do provided the learning packages to parents via drive-through or walk-through. The package included colored clay, toy blocks, and science project supplies with online content guidelines.⁶

⁵ ETNews, *Korea Communications Commission support the production of the EBS ECE program*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.etnews.com/20200410000319>

⁶ Shinah Daily, *The Kindergarten Attached to Yeongcheon Elementary School Provides the Learning Package for Family*, April 13, 2020, <http://www.shinailbo.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=1269280>

Figure 3: Home-based learning kits provided by the kindergarten attached to Yeongcheon Elementary School



Source: The kindergarten attached to Yeongcheon Elementary School.

Support Emotional Well-being for Children and Their Families

During the pandemic, children have exhibited stress and anxiety in many forms. In response, Korean education agencies equipped parents with tools and direct support. These tools helped parents identify when a child was showing signs of psychological distress and assist families in navigating young learners' complex emotions during the school closure. Various organizations in Korea helped step up support for children's emotional well-being through the provision of guidance manuals, online counseling services, and children's observation programs. Notable practices include the following:

Guidance manuals for parents. KICCE provided a series of guidance manuals on its website to help parents better understand children's coping mechanisms and support young learners' smooth transition to kindergarten once schools reopened. The guidance manuals were well received by parents, with over 18,000 downloads as of October 2020.

Using remote technology to monitor and analyze stress levels. The Chungcheongbuk-do Early Childhood Education Promotion Center provides a Children's Emotional and Behavioral Observation Program by analyzing children's pictures and parenting stress tests via mobile application. Parents receive a report that is analyzed by experts. The center plans to offer the program to 5,000 parents from May to December 2020, and the observation program is also connected with follow-up counseling services funded by local education centers.⁷

⁷ Bulgyogong News, *Chungcheongbuk-do Early Childhood Education Promotion Center Provides Counseling and Learning Package to Home*, April 12, 2020, <http://www.bzeronews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=437277>.

Figure 4. Children's Emotional and Behavioral Observation Program in a mobile application (I-Grim P9)



Source: I-Grim P9 website (<https://www.p9net.org/>).

Online counseling center. More than half of the parents experienced anxiety and pressure relating to parenting and work during the school closure. To support their socio-emotional well-being, the Busan Early Childhood Education Center operates an online counseling center to help parents cope with stress. Parents can consult with professional counselors via Zoom on issues such as anxiety from the postponement of school reopening and children’s behavioral problems caused by extended stay at home.⁸

Leverage Emergency Childcare Programs as a Means for Gradual Re-opening

The MOE—together with the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the Ministry of Employment and Labor, and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family—initiated emergency childcare programs for parents in need.⁹ The government gave parents the option to send their children to daycare centers and kindergartens, providing emergency childcare during school closure.¹⁰ The government recruited and compensated emergency personnel and prioritized the kindergartens' financial support to the program. The participating kindergartens need to be opened from 9 am to 7 pm, permitting only 10 students per class with strict safety protocols. Requirements were implemented for sanitation, personal protection, sensitization of public health information, and on-site inspections and monitoring.¹¹

The emergency programs are used as a means for the government to gradually roll out school reopening. The program's participation rate rose from 10 percent in March 2020 to 70 percent in May 2020, before the ensuing full school reopening. According to the KICCE survey, parents' satisfaction with the program

⁸ Newsis, *Relieve the Stress of Parents Caused by COVID-19 via Online Counseling*, April 22, 2020, https://newsis.com/view/?id=NISX20200422_0001002029&clID=10899&pID=10800.

⁹ MOE, *The Government will Provide Support for Safe Emergency Care (COVID-19)*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.moe.go.kr/boardCnts/view.do?boardID=294&boardSeq=79889&lev=0&searchType=S&statusYN=W&page=1&s=moe&m=020402&opType=N>.

¹⁰ The daycare centers managed by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Family Affairs allow children from ages zero to six, requiring teachers to have a nursery teacher's certificate. On the other hand, kindergartens under the MOE permit from age three and require a teacher's certificate. They both apply the Nuri Curriculum for children ages three to five.

¹¹ In addition to the center-based options, the emergency programs provide broader support for households in need:

- (a) The Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family opened the community centers closed during the pandemic to provide extra space for emergency childcare and ensure proper social distance.
- (b) The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family organized home visits for those who could not go to kindergartens.
- (c) The Ministry of Employment and Labor provided temporary financial support to parents who needed to take unpaid family leave. KRW 50,000 (USD 43) per day was provided for a maximum of 10 days leave. As of July 2020, a total of 127,782 people applied for the program, and KRW 40.4 billion (USD 35 million) was paid to 118,606 of them. An average of KRW 341,000 (USD 295) per applicant was received.

was 3.6 points out of 5 points, suggesting parents are generally content with the service, especially with teachers and staff (58.7 percent) and meals (55.6 percent).¹² The main concern at the time of the parent satisfaction survey was the safety of their children. This was however largely mitigated as very few cluster infections were reported in the emergency programs as of the time of this report.

Lessons Learned

With the introduction of the emergency childcare programs, the Korean government was able to reopen the ECE centers with a gradual approach. This effort is supplemented by home-based learning through diverse channels and supporting the children's socio-emotional well-being for the smooth transition from home-based schooling.

Provide parents tools to carry out home-based learning. During the school closures due to COVID-19, the Korean government used various channels to reach out to parents to support home-based learning activities for their young children. It utilized a mix of existing infrastructure and newly launched digital platforms and the activities were all well received by the parents. Notably, the i-Nuri portal and broadcasting of education programs on TV provided parents with tools that were planned and developed before the crisis, demonstrating the important role of digital infrastructure in supporting the resilience of the education sector. Besides virtual materials, various local departments of education also developed learning kits based on local needs and resources.

Supporting the socio-emotional well-being of both children and parents. More than 40 percent of children in Korea reported increased anxiety or stress during school closure due to the pandemic.¹³ For example, children who experienced quarantine because of a family member's death or infection from COVID-19 were reported to have post-traumatic stress disorder and developed symptoms such as lack of concentration or sleep. The availability of parenting guidance manuals helped bring awareness of these potential issues. Digital tools for monitoring and analyzing stress levels helped with initial screening and are followed up with online and offline counseling service options that helped mitigate the negative impact of stress. Psychological support was also provided to parents to help them cope with stress associated with extended stay at home.

Gradual reopening through regular communication, workforce mobilization, and strict safety measures. Emergency childcare usage rose from 10 percent to 70 percent nationwide and was leveraged as an effective mechanism toward full reopening. The following practices helped the program to be successful: (a) the Korean government kept regular communication with local authorities and kindergartens and designated a person in charge of communication at the kindergarten level for swift response, (b) strict reinforcement of safety measures and regular on-site inspections helped ensure safe operations and assurance to parents, and (c) timely financial support to the kindergartens and mobilization of human resources helped sustain the operations during times of crisis.

¹² KICCE, *A Study on the COVID-19 Response System and Support for the Lack of Childcare*, July 31, 2020, https://kicce.re.kr/main/board/view.do?menu_idx=26&manage_idx=35&board_idx=40789

¹³ KICCE, *A Study on the COVID-19 Response System and Support for the Lack of Childcare*, July 31, 2020, https://kicce.re.kr/main/board/view.do?menu_idx=26&manage_idx=35&board_idx=40789