SOMETHING TO READ SOMETHING TO LEARN

PRINT MEDIA FOR AND ABOUT YOUNG CHILDREN

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Barbara Kolucki is a Social Communicator whose qualifications, experience and talent lie in children's media, early childhood development, child rights, disability awareness and prejudice reduction, peace education and training. She has more than 20 years of experience working in the areas of child development and media in Asia, Africa and the USA. She has worked with Sesame Workshop, UNICEF, ILO, UNDP, UNESCO, and numerous NGOs and universities. (E-mail: bakoluck@aol.com)

Aida Iskanderova is the Early Childhood Development Project Officer at UNICEF Kyrgyz Republic. (E-mail: aiskanderova@unicef.org)

Deepa Grover is the Regional Adviser, Early Childhood Development, UNICEF Regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States. (E-mail: degrover@unicef.org)

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The **Kyrgyz Republic** was one of the five Central Asian countries that was part of a UNICEF sub-regional workshop on communication for behaviour change in 2003. Participants of the workshop were trained by Barbara Kolucki, an international children’s media expert, in the principles of developing attractive and effective materials for and about children. They were exposed to media products from around the world on topics ranging from health and safety to the development of self-esteem and addressing prejudice towards disabled children. The workshop fired the imagination of the communication and early childhood development teams at the UNICEF Kyrgyz Republic Office, who decided to realize some of the ideas they had learned. And so was born the concept of developing the first ever print materials for and about children in the Kyrgyz language. Soon after, creative local talent was identified and with the help and participation of children, a set of five beautifully illustrated booklets was developed over the course of a year. The booklets, which cover themes such as nutrition and hygiene, serve the dual purpose of being reading and learning materials for children as well as information materials for their parents and families.

This article is in two parts. Part One provides an overview of media for, about and with children and has been excerpted from Barbara Kolucki’s work. Part Two, written by Aida Iskanderova, presents the story of the creation of the materials in the Kyrgyz Republic, their pre-testing, printing and distribution, evaluation and importantly some of the lessons learned. The article has been compiled and substantively edited by Deepa Grover.
The Importance of Communications and Media for, about and with Children

Media for, about and with young children have taken on a new and expanded role around the world. The ultimate goal of all our work with young children is to ensure that their rights and the rights of their caregivers are protected and promoted. Experience has shown that this can best be done through a combination of advocacy, policy, services, social mobilization, behavior change communications and quality media for, about and with children. There are many ways to empower and promote positive attitudes and behaviors.

There is a growing movement within UNICEF and in many countries around the globe to produce media for and about young children. Research indicates that the more language – through songs, stories, books and rhymes that a young child is exposed to in the first years of life – the more prepared the child will be for entry to school. These “child-friendly media” can be models of caregiving for adults as well, especially in environments where children do not have access to quality childcare or have caregivers with little education or time. Developing quality media for and about young children is important for many reasons. These include:

- It is a direct response to the rights of children expressed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- It can help build the self-confidence of children, caregivers – and a nation
- It can promote healthy habits, practices and pro-social behaviors, as well as encourage literacy and cognitive development
- Print media for the youngest child are often readable for people with lower literacy.
- Quality materials can be a safe haven, especially for children in difficult circumstances, those who are sick, traumatized, experiencing grief, etc.
- Sensitive topics (HIV, disability, and death) can be addressed effectively through such media.

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1 Barbara Kolucki wrote the companion articles *Programming Experiences in Early Childhood Development* and *The Face of ECD Communication* for UNICEF, New York Head Quarters (in press). The latter has been excerpted in Part One with due permission.
Some Key Principles

Programmes and media that are often the most effective are those that are unique – or what is often called *sticky* or *contagious*. In a world where people are bombarded with all types of messages and training, it is hard to imagine how overworked, overwhelmed caregivers, especially those in greatest need, can remember everything that is important. There are some principles and guidelines, however, based on research and experience, that can assist in making critical programmes and media for, about and with children as effective as possible.

If one reviews the experience of some of the most effective social movements, programmes as well as media, social communications or international “campaigns”, there is one overarching principle that is evident. All have developed media that are *personal*, *practical*, *positive* and *powerful*.

There are some other basic principles that work, *viz.*,

- **Less is more; simple is best; lower literacy works for ALL.** Of course there are many different audiences with different levels of literacy. But experience has shown that if one creates innovative and powerful programmes and media that can be understood even by non- or neo-literate audiences – then we are truly reaching those in greatest need – and our media can be equally understood and of interest to all audiences. Simplicity and repetition do not have to be boring. It is the role of communicators to make oral, written and visual media *stick*. Award-winning producers of children’s media use this technique all the time. Experiences in integrated approaches to early child development tell us that our programmes, activities and programme communications can be more effective if we use these same techniques and principles.

In *Uganda*, the Community and Home Initiatives for Long-term Development (C.h.i.l.d.), in association with UNICEF, developed a low-literacy booklet entitled “Caring for Children in Uganda”. The booklet is simply but clearly illustrated and covers: Healthy Mothers, Feeding Children, Preventing Illness, Responding to Sickness, Learning with Things and People. Just the most basic information is included and it has been produced in a very “user-friendly” style. And, it is inter-sectoral and holistic.

How can a photograph or illustration model exactly what you would like a caregiver to do with a child? Can caregivers model this action without reading the caption or without outside intervention? This means that it must be much, much more than a beautiful photograph. It should speak to caregivers – it should make them want to say “I can do this with MY child!” And better still – it should present a
In a recent project by Save the Children, USA in Bangladesh, mothers were engaged in literacy classes. As a new element, some mothers were asked to read children’s books to their children at home. Not only did these mothers bond, read to and play with their children more – their literacy level improved more than the group that read the more “typical” books for new, adult literates. The project has been so successful that it has been expanded to included older children reading with younger children in Bangladesh. Similar projects have also been initiated in Vietnam, Myanmar and Nepal.

- **Reflecting examples of good practices from local communities (positive deviance) works.** In every community, there are caregivers, policy makers, front-line workers who are models for others to follow. This is often called positive deviance. It is important that programming, training and media includes examples of positive deviance from target communities – from the poorest parent to a Minister – each is a model for others. Recent examples of positive deviance media include:

  - In a recent workshop in **South Africa**, two prototype television public service announcements were made in support of an integrated approach to early childhood development. One depicted an urban black father who carried his infant on his back. In South Africa and many other countries, it is only women who carry infants and young children on their backs. This father talked about how he knew that people might think it was strange – but it was good for his baby – and for him. The second television spot was of a man who is a Zulu warrior. He shouts out a familiar chant about whom he loves and will care for more than anything. The chant is often used “in pursuit” of a woman – but we see him gently bend down to the ground and lovingly pick up and talk to his infant daughter.

  - A book was written in **Vietnam** called *My Wonderful Grandpa*. It is about a girl with polio whose parents overprotect her. Her grandfather builds her a simple wheelchair out of bamboo and takes her out to explore her world. He finds a way to help her go to a local preschool and knows that even though it may not be “typical”, his granddaughter has a right to and will benefit from all that is available to other children. This book was not merely a book – it became a model for training and programming on inclusion, caregiver training that focused on males, confidence-building and the use of indigenous resources to promote holistic development in young children.
• **Media and materials that simultaneously exemplify best caregiving practices and that caregivers can use with their children today as part of daily routines are effective and economical.** Often, communications focus primarily on **WHAT** messages. For example, we say “It is important to talk to and sing to your baby”. Yet it is the **WHY** and **HOW** messages that, though not often included, tend to increase effectiveness, especially in terms of **behavior change**. Clear, practical explanations and simple, doable actions create a powerful image. So we can add “Children who are told stories or read to, sung to and who hear and learn rhymes often have better language skills, are more confident as well as playful.” This is the **WHY**. But if we also add, for example, a song to sing while washing a child’s hands before eating, a rhyme to say when they are afraid of an immunization injection, an educational game to play while walking to the rice fields – then caregivers can model, adapt and improve upon what they see and hear. This is the **HOW**. This creates a culture of looking at and programming for the whole child – and models holistic activities that are easy to remember and do with and for children during regular routines.

• **Media and materials that are solution-oriented rather than mainly problem-oriented work. Modeling positive and pro-social actions and words is effective.** If one wants to change a given negative behavior – the positive behavior **has to be modeled**. It is always more effective to model the behavior or action that you hope will be practiced. This is also true with words. If we want to discuss the negative impact of family fighting or violence on children, we should try at all costs not to model name calling, hitting, and humiliation. Rather, problem solving, techniques a parent can use to “calm down”, and positive reinforcement should be modeled. At the same time it is important to stress that a young child will emulate every word, action and even look of a loved adult in her/his life.

Historically, social and programme communications have been based on making others aware of problems that need to be solved – gender disparity, abuse, malnourishment, and injury prevention. This is often done through a technique called fear-arousal. What one might see, for example, is a model of an adult hitting a child with the message that hitting is not appropriate. Or, there are examples where a young child is reaching for or even swallowing medicines and the message will be that we need to keep medicines out of the reach of young children. Research and experience have shown that especially for children as well as for non- or neo-literate adult audiences, negative modeling might not be understood to be the *not* or *don’t*. If one is trying to prevent injuries like burns or cuts – rather than showing a child reaching for and getting scalded by a pot of boiling water – one can present the pot in a safe place with the caregiver teaching the child a rhyme about “backing up and staying away” from fire, stoves, knives and medications. It is the caregivers’
responsibility to keep the child safe – but the child can learn cues and safety techniques of what to do, rather than only what not to do.

The field of children's media requires some of the most creative talent that a country has to offer. This combined with the fundamentals of good development communications, graphic design and developmental psychology can result in the production of material that is truly captivating and effective.
PART TWO

Print Media for Young Children in the Context of the Kyrgyz Republic

Upon independence, the Kyrgyz Republic entered a period of social, political and economic transition making life especially difficult for women and children. Despite pro-poor growth and some reduction of poverty during the past few years, over 55 per cent of the population still lives below the poverty line. It is estimated that 25 per cent of people face extreme poverty. The gap between the rich and the poor has deepened and its manifestations have become sharply visible in all kinds of disparities. This situation fuels huge inequity with regard to access to basic services and reinforces the cycle of poverty.

The Kyrgyz Republic is home to more than 80 different ethnicities. In Soviet times, Russian was the language of communication and education and as a consequence literature and other reading materials were produced mainly in Russian. The few Kyrgyz schools in the republic had little in the way of books and educational materials in the Kyrgyz language and those that existed were of indifferent quality. This situation was typical for the preschool sector as well. The only book widely used in areas where the Kyrgyz language was spoken was Alippe – an alphabet book. This was a rather didactic text and was mainly used with preschool groups and first graders. In fact, the demand for Kyrgyz literature was low, as the emphasis was on learning and knowing Russian. In present times, Kyrgyz books and print materials for children are almost non-existent in spite of the fact that the vast majority of the country’s population are native Kyrgyz-language speakers.

A baseline study on child rearing practices conducted by UNICEF in 2004 revealed that most parents and caregivers of young children (birth to 8 years), especially those who are poor and marginalized, do not receive adequate support to develop skills to foster their young children’s cognitive, intellectual, social and emotional development and to provide a safe and secure environment. The extreme lack of preschool services and early learning opportunities, especially in rural areas, compounds the situation as a result of which children are not ready for formal education when they reach the age of school entry. In focus group discussions families confirmed the non-existence of Kyrgyz language literature for young children, especially of the type that would encourage a love of reading and language development. Several parents indicated that if such literature were available for sale they would purchase it. The idea of developing booklets for children was conceived against this background. The intention was to produce colorful booklets that would enable children to learn new concepts and boost their imagination and curiosity.
Based on brainstorming within the office it was originally thought that a book of fairytales constructed around a selection of core messages would serve the purpose. The Soviet legacy constituted a huge variety of fairytales from different ethnicities. Many fairytales are well-known to the generations preceding “post-Soviet” children. The original intention was to introduce some of those stories to the youngest children in the Kyrgyz language. To make the stories more meaningful, it was planned to insert messages at appropriate points in order to model desirable behaviours and habits in young children e.g. hand washing and brushing teeth. Subsequently, there was some discussion of whether instead of folk fairy tales and stories created by Soviet authors, modern Kyrgyz authors should be encouraged to create contemporary tales which incorporated aspects of the daily lives of rural inhabitants. Finally, after much debate a decision was made to create something innovative and imaginative rather than borrowing and adapting something that was already in existence. Besides this, the legal implications of altering and adapting existing material were unclear.

Currently in the Kyrgyz Republic, the only print material for children published in Kyrgyz is the children’s monthly magazine Baichechekei. At one time this magazine used to be a colorful booklet with stories, puzzles and games created by famous Kyrgyz authors and illustrated by talented artists. Nowadays because of the poor economic situation and lack of support, the quality of the magazine has deteriorated and the circulation has decreased. One idea mooted was to support a makeover of the magazine with the intention of making it more “early childhood friendly.” However, negotiations with the management of the magazine’s publishers were unfruitful and a decision was made to develop independent material.

Ideally, primary caregivers should spend some quality time with their young children reading aloud to them, telling them stories and helping them to discover and learn new concepts. It was anticipated that the intended material developed for children would give them the tools to do so. Given the dearth of materials to support parents and families, it was decided that children’s caregivers should also form a part of the intended audience. So it was decided to provide some information for families alongside the stories for their children. The messages for children were to be incorporated into the materials in a simple and attractive way so that even the youngest children would be drawn to them. The messages for parents and families, it was determined should be relevant, knowledge-based and culturally appropriate. The pitfall to be avoided was overloading the material with excessive, “expert driven” information.

The intended audiences were defined as children from 3 to 6 years living in (UNICEF) project priority areas, and their parents or caregivers. The project priority areas were identified as

- Archa-Beshik migrant settlement in the outskirts of the capital Bishkek
- Ak-Orgo migrant settlement in the outskirts of the capital Bishkek
- Kelechek migrant settlement in the outskirts of the capital Bishkek
Boz-Adyr village, Kyzyl-Bel village and Batken town in Batken region located in the south of Kyrgyzstan.

These areas are among the most marginalized. They lack necessary infrastructure, especially with regard to services for youngest children.

What Should Go Into the Booklets?

There much discussion on how many topics should be covered and how many different booklets should be created. Given the short time and limited resources the decision was made to develop 5 booklets, which would include an appealing mix of stories, poems, games, songs and illustrations built around several core messages. The messages for parents and caregivers reflected several of the concerns contained in Facts for Life:

**Love and care in the first three years are of critical importance for the whole life of a child.** Children grow and learn faster when they receive attention, affection and stimulation, in addition to good nutrition and proper health care. The father plays a significant role in a child’s life.

**Children learn from the moment of birth.** Encouraging children to observe and to express themselves, to play and explore, helps them learn and develop socially, physically and intellectually. Children play because it is fun, but play is also a key to their learning and development. Play develops language skills, thinking, planning, organizing and decision making.

**Children learn how to behave by imitating the behavior of those closest to them.** Children learn by copying what others do, not what others tell them to do.

**Vitamin A, iron and iodine are crucial for the child’s intellectual, physical and cognitive development.** Children need vitamin A to resist illness and prevent visual impairments. Children need iron-rich foods to protect their physical and mental abilities. Iodized salt is essential to prevent learning disabilities and delayed development in children.

**Many illnesses can be prevented by good hygiene practices.** More than half of all illnesses among young children are caused by germs that get into their mouths through food, water and dirty hands.

**Protection of children against all forms of violence and exploitation** is crucial to their survival, health and well-being.
What We Hoped to Achieve

While filling the gap of the dearth of attractive, Kyrgyz language materials for children and their families, the development of the booklets was guided by three broad objectives. These were:

a. Parents are encouraged to read to and interact with their young children.
b. Children learn to handle print material, are stimulated to express their observations and learn new behaviours.
c. Parents learn about important child care and rearing practices.

At the same time as articulating these objectives it was recognized that several other contributory and supportive actions would be required for their achievement.

Establishing the Working Group

Based on the intention to use local resources, a quick survey was made in order to identify and assess existing capacities and resources for the development of print material for and about children. Professional expertise and sufficient experience was required to ensure quality in all aspects: content and design, pre-testing and preparation of the material for publication. After a great deal of deliberation a team composed of a children’s writer, a poet and a graphic artist was established. Health and preschool specialists were also engaged to review the developed materials and provide feedback and inputs. Terms of Reference were developed for the Working Group stipulating the process, the values and parameters to be invoked while developing content (sensitivity to culture and gender, age appropriateness, promotion of self-esteem, tolerance and appreciation of diversity) as well as the time line for the development and publication of 5 booklets.

Development of the Content

Special attention was paid to the selection of the artist. The search was for a creative and talented person who had previous experience in illustrating for children. Art City, a resource centre for artistic talent in the Kyrgyz Republic, was approached with the intention of identifying such a person. As it turned out the rates charged by talented artists were very high. After intensive discussions about the importance of appropriate print material for children’s cognitive and intellectual development, three artists agreed to lower their rates and participate in the selection process. Assuming that no one could better select the artist than children themselves, it was decided to organize the selection process with the participation of children. The artists’ recent works were exhibited at Art City and were reviewed by children from a nearby area. Children were asked simple questions about which drawings they liked.
most and why. The majority of them selected the work of Gulnara Akmativa, an artist whose works are attractive for their joyfulness, genuineness and charm. The children’s selection completely coincided with the opinions of adults, who were also fascinated by the artist’s works.

The Working Group met on an average of 15 times to develop one booklet. And although the team was notionally divided into writers and artist – they all worked together on the written and illustrated content. As with any creative work done by a team of professionals there were frequent animated discussions and powerful opinions; sometimes even generational clashes (the poetess was in her seventies, the writer in her forties and the artist in her thirties!). But these were usually reconciled amicably and the proof of this is apparent in the very appealing content, form and look of the booklets.

As mentioned earlier, the content of the booklets was developed for two audiences: children from 3 to 6 and their parents. For children, the Working Group developed poems, puzzles, riddles, songs and sayings built around relevant issues relating to health, nutrition and development. Messages for adults were created in parallel and while appearing on the same page as the associated content for children, a decision was made to separate the adult content by using visual devices such as shaded text boxes and different font sizes (see pp. 17-18). Given below are examples of messages provided for both target audiences. (Please note that the translation is very rough and captures little if any of the poetry, magic or idiom of the original Kyrgyz version.)

**Learning through Play**

*For children*

- My mother gave me a piece of dough. She taught me how to make a bird and a sheep out of it. “It’s a good bread”, said my daddy, when I told him that I had baked it. Everybody was very proud of me.

*For parents*

Encouraging children to play and explore helps them learn and develop socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually. Play is a key to learning and development.

**Hygiene**

*For children*

- Riddle: If you wash you hands with it, you’ll be neat and clean
  Answer: Soap.
- I play with my puppy every day in the yard. My mommy sweeps it every morning to make it clean. Let’s help her sweep it! It’s like a game. You sweep, I sweep and it’s free of garbage.
For parents
Many illnesses, especially diarrhea, can be prevented by good hygiene practices: washing hands with soap and water after using the toilet and before feeding children or touching food is important. Only purified water or water from a safe source should be used.

Micronutrients

For children
• Ala-Too is rich in many fruits and vegetables: apricots, grapes, apples, tomatoes and others. Eat, my baby, eat all these fruits! They are full of vitamins.
• Riddle: It wears lots of green clothes on its round waist. Answer: Cabbage.

For parents
It is important to have enough vitamins and micronutrients in the daily meal. Vitamins and minerals, which are present in food and supplements, are crucial for the physical and intellectual development of your child.

Safe environment and protection

For children
• You’re my moon, my baby. You’re as sweet as honey! You fill my heart with joy and happiness! You’re my hope and my world, you can always be sure of my support.

For parents
Physical punishment or displays of violence can harm a child’s development and affect her sense of self-worth. Clear explanations about what to do, firm rules and praise for good behavior are more effective ways of encouraging children to behave appropriately.

The Illustrations

The artist used live child characters as inspiration for her illustrations. She frequently asked for children’s advice to guide her drawings. Children she felt were frank and creative and were happy to tell her what they did or did not like and why. They also gave her many ideas regarding the overall composition. The artist’s illustrations reflect both realistic and fantasy elements. Some drawings depict scenes fantasy themes such as, cats being friends with mice, chickens playing with worms, etc. These elements it was thought would communicate to children subliminally the values of tolerance and appreciation of diversity.
Artworks (Akylai and Aktan promote the importance of micronutrients)
Pre-testing

The booklets were pre-tested in Archa-Beshik a migrant settlement area. An impressive range of Kyrgyz dialects can be found here. Archa-Beshik was selected because it is home to people who come from many parts of the country, including the most remote and marginalized. Children, aged 3-6, and parents (primarily mothers) participated in the pre-testing. Community leaders were mobilized and they provided full support to the pre-testing which was held in a local youth center.

The first phase of pre-testing was in fact formative research. Respondents were told about the purpose of the research and of why it was important for them to be frank and honest. The poet and story writer participated actively in the process. The community leader who helped organize this session was also engaged, helping to break the ice between the parents and the researchers. Several alternative draft versions were presented to respondents with a view to eliciting their feedback and reactions to the different options. Parents were asked to take their time to study the contents. Subsequently, parents were approached individually to hear their feedback. The individual approach helped particularly with younger women who tended to be hesitant about expressing their opinions freely in front of others especially, older and more experienced.
women. Group discussion was also held in order to encourage parents to exchange their views and share their experiences.

It turned out that the formative research sessions were of critical importance for the booklet development process. It enabled the Working Group to find out what worked and what didn’t, which words were unclear or complicated and which messages were relevant or obvious and unnecessary. In one instance, among the parents were two women who had previously worked in the preschool sector. They made several interesting comments from their professional points of view and as well as clients-to-be. Children who participated in the sessions along with their parents, were read to from the text and asked a variety of simple questions – Did they understand what they had heard? Did they like it? Did they find it interesting? Feedback from the formative research was carefully recorded and incorporated into the final draft version of the booklets.

A second phase of pre-testing was conducted on the final draft version of the booklets. This version contained text that had been thoroughly vetted by subject area specialists - preschool education, health, nutrition, WES, child development - as well as the near final illustrations. The purpose of this second phase pre-testing was to get parents’ and children’s overall opinions about both the illustrations and the content. The focus was moved to assessing whether illustrations reflected the lifestyle of the target audiences as well as cultural distinctiveness, if it was appropriate in terms of gender socialization and if it reflected positive deviance (e.g. a father breaking the masculine gender-stereotype and cuddling or playing with his baby). Other details such as font size and the text color were also checked. Following a recommendation it was decided to increase the font size and to eliminate the use of shadows in the text. Parents also helped to correct details in clothing, nature and settings. For example, they advised the artist to draw a goat and a lamb and add more birds in one of the illustrations so that children could count them and learn more about the surrounding world.

In terms of cultural appropriateness, many valid suggestions were made by parents from the southern regions who paid attention to practices, which were common and acceptable in the city, but which would not be appropriate in the southern rural areas. They considered it ill-mannered and unacceptable when the mother depicted in one illustration was shown sitting on the sherda (a traditional woolen carpet) with her shoes on. They also objected to an illustration that intended to show skin-to-skin contact by depicting a baby without any clothing. They expressed surprise and embarrassment and said that it was inappropriate in Muslim cultures to depict a child completely bare. They requested that the baby be at least partially covered.
It is wonderful to be loved!
We like to wash the apple before we eat it!
Printing and Publication

After pre-testing, the Working Group made a final verification of content and made amendments to the text and illustrations. The next step was the preparation for publication. A publishing company was selected through a bidding process and on the basis of high quality services. However, being a first time effort in the printing of booklets of this nature some unforeseen problems arose. Close attention had to be paid by the UNICEF Communication Unit to details such as color and appropriate design throughout the process. The booklets were printed at monthly intervals. The quantity of booklets was identified based on the lists of families with children from 3 to 6 obtained from the local governments in the different project sites. 4000 copies of each booklet were printed; 3500 for distribution in the project sites and 500 for requests from government and non-government organizations. By end-2004, the 5 booklets were ready for distribution.

Targeted Distribution

Once the booklets were printed and ready for distribution, it became necessary to review the distribution mechanism that had been initially proposed. It was important to reassess the existing situation, local capacities and the feasibility of the approach.

As it turned out, the original distribution plan was rather hazy and hard to accomplish. It had been decided originally that the booklets were to be distributed to target families through preschool workers, medical nurses and community activists. The pick-up locations – preschool centers, medical institutions and local governments’ facilities – had to be identified to facilitate the distribution. It was also necessary to find reliable persons to carry out the distribution. Many different channels of distribution it was agreed would make the monitoring process complex. Given the lack of similar materials in the country, it was feared that there might be the risk of the booklets being sold for profit or distributed among non-target families. And so a decision was made to revise the distribution plan.

First of all, a single channel and single individual was identified as being responsible for distribution in a particular area. These people were the focal points engaged in parenting activities and were well-respected community members with good connections to local administrations, community leaders and other players. Distribution plans were developed for each particular area and context.
The actual distribution of the booklets to the target families was based on lists developed by the local government authorities for referral and outreach to households. The point of distribution was either an existing preschool centre or as in the case of Kelechek and Kyzyl-Bel the premises of the ayil okmotus. The focal points responsible for distribution were trained to provide families with instructions and recommendations on how the booklets were to be used and the importance of the messages contained in them.

Before handing out the booklets a launch was organized in each area. All the launches involved the active participation of local governments, community leaders, preschool workers and families with children. The purpose was to publicize the booklets, promote their use among target audiences and arouse the interest of partners and counterparts. At the respective launches, the authors talked about the purpose of the booklets and provided advice on their use by families. The launch function included activities for the attending children including contests, concerts, and a puppet show.

The first launch was carried out in the Ak-Orgo migrant area. UNICEF’s different partners working in the area of early childhood and families gathered together for the launch. Similar launches in Archa-Beshik and Kelechek areas attracted the participation of the local administration, civil society groups and the community. In Boz-Adyr village in Batken region the launch of the booklets was combined with the official opening of an early childhood center and turned out to be a festive day for the
community. Top officials of the Batken region were invited to this event as well as local civil society groups, community leaders and families with preschool children. This event was organized with the assistance of community leaders and the local government. It was covered by many journalists and broadcast on national television. Two other local launches followed in Kyzyl-Bel village and in Batken town.

**Evaluation**

The evaluation of the booklets was conducted in 2006 in migrant settlement areas of Bishkek city (Archa-Beshik, Ak-Orgo, Kelechek) and 2 villages of Batken rayon (Boz-Adyr, Kyzyl-Bel) by the research unit of Expert, a domestic consulting agency. The evaluators conducted semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with a total of 150 respondents (mainly target parents). Discussions centered on the distribution of the booklets, their content, their use, the value of the advice for parents, as well as the kinds of material families would like to receive in the future.

Findings showed that the majority of respondents had received the booklets in community based ECD centers whereas others had obtained them at the launch. Parents indicated that at the point of distribution they were given some background and instructions on the content and structure of the booklets as well as the recommendation to read aloud to their children. They were also told that the material was free of charge. Respondents said that the booklets were given to the poorest and most marginalized families first, then to families whose children didn’t attend the kindergarten and finally to families whose children did attend. Respondents indicated that the distribution process was fair and transparent.

On the whole respondents said that they liked the booklets very much. In the past they had not bought books for their children due to the lack of simple and comprehensible children’s material in the Kyrgyz language. Parents specifically liked the design and artwork and rural parents said that the advice provided was particularly useful. Respondents reported that young children enjoyed looking at the illustrations and reciting the rhymes in the booklets. For many parents the booklets helped to initiate the activity of reading to children – something rarely practiced earlier. Parents said that they discussed the content and drawings with their children after reading the booklets. Almost all of them found the drawings fascinating and reflective of their cultural values. Parents felt that the booklets had stimulated children’s interest in reading and writing and had helped children to develop their thinking, language skills, memory and imagination through opening up opportunities to analyze drawings, learn rhymes, solve puzzles and invent stories. Children were motivated to draw themselves.

With respect to impact on children’s behaviour, parents reported that children wanted to copy the behaviour of Akylai and Aktan, who served
as role models. Some mothers mentioned that their daughters wanted to look like Akylai (the girl character) - they asked to have their hair braided or to wear a traditional dress like Akylai’s. The booklet on hygiene and sanitation made children more aware of the importance of personal hygiene. One respondent said: “My daughter washes her hands with soap every time after using the toilet, being outdoors, or playing, because she learned from the poem that it was necessary do so.” Another mother told the interviewer: “My husband brought apples home and put them on the table telling my nephews to wipe and eat them. However, the children replied that they should wash the fruit before eating it. I understood that they had picked up this idea from the booklet.” One little girl’s mother related the following anecdote: “I read to my daughter that parents should not punish their children physically or verbally. One day when my husband and I were having words, my daughter brought the booklet and pointed out that it said that it was bad to yell at each other!”

With regard to the advice for parents contained in the text boxes, respondents reported that the information was not new or unknown – however, because it was presented in such a simple way, it made it easier for parents to teach their young children. Respondents said that the recommendations provided in the booklets were clear and realistic. With regard to the advice they remembered most of all, respondents mentioned, the harm of physical punishment, the importance of micronutrients, play as a means of learning for young children, and the significance of expressing affection to young children. However, parents said that they had not necessarily changed their behaviour based on the advice. Some advice e.g. boiling water before drinking, was not considered practical.

Some Lessons Learned

The booklets were the first communication material of their kind developed to support early childhood development activities in the Kyrgyz Republic. Because it was a first effort based sometimes on trial and error, many lessons were learned at each stage from concept to completion and distribution. The most important realization was of course that clearly defined communication and behavioral objectives should have been defined at the very beginning. In retrospect, the project goals, it was thought were too broad and needed to be more sharply focused.

While pre-testing was critical for the successful development of the booklets, it was recognized that representatives of the target audience should have been involved in planning and throughout the whole process. This would have allowed for the target audiences’ preferences, mindsets and way of life to be incorporated into the text and illustrations right from the beginning, minimizing the need for changes and corrections at later stages of development.
The booklets proved successful in initiating parent to child reading, raising awareness about some key issues, and supporting children’s desire for attractive and stimulating print material. However, each booklet has a limited “life span” in terms of interest value for children. Many more than 5 booklets are needed to engage children’s interest on a longer term basis; these should be on a variety of issues and developmentally progressive. Parents’ behaviour is relatively resistant to change. While the booklets model appropriate behaviours and parents acknowledge this, in order to effect behaviour change, the same message needs be transmitted through a multiplicity of channels.

Bringing together people with different creative talents and enabling them to work as a cohesive and harmonious team was challenging and required a great deal of skill and a great deal of time investment on the part of the UNICEF team. This was more than justified because once the team “clicked”, it began to evolve and started to generate ideas and produce material that surpassed anything any single person could have achieved individually. The challenge now is to transform an activity on media for and about children into a movement.

The booklets, the first of their kind in the Kyrgyz language captured the hearts and minds of families and young children. Appreciation also came from many other quarters. UNICEF was approached by government officials, as well as the Ministry of Education with the request to grant copies of these booklets to different preschool institutions. The Asian Development Bank, which is working with the Kyrgyz Government to promote early childhood in the country, also showed an interest in using the booklets. After having them examined by communication and subject experts, the ADB confirmed their intention of doing a large scale replication of the booklets for distribution in priority areas. The Aga Khan Foundation, which provides early childhood services in some areas of the Kyrgyz Republic, also uses the booklets in its programmes.

**Epilogue**

Akylai and Aktan, the two lead characters of the booklets, proved to be so popular that it was decided to develop an animation series. The development of the series, which will combine education and entertainment for young children and their families, is supported by UNICEF; National Kyrgyz Tele/Radio Corporation, the Aga Khan Foundation and the Early Childhood Development Programme under the President’s Administration are principal partners. The national television channel has committed to broadcast 250 animation episodes. “It is the first series of animated stories to be developed in Kyrgyzstan in the last 20 years,” said Vice-President of the National Kyrgyz Tele/Radio Corporation, Mr. Beishinbek Bekeshev, at the launch function in late October 2006.