

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES – UNICEF’S ROLE

UNICEF programs are guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. We believe that the family remains at the centre of UNICEF’s work to achieve children’s rights and to help children realise their full potential.

Human rights underlie every aspect of UNICEF’s efforts – and our work with communities and families is no different.

Families and communities play a vital role in the survival, growth and development of children. A priority of UNICEF’s efforts worldwide is to help empower them to identify issues of concern, define viable solutions and multiply their capacity to act on their decisions.

UNICEF uses participatory methods to help families and communities identify issues of concern, define viable solutions and develop their capacity to act on their decisions.

EARLY CHILDHOOD AND THE FAMILY

UNICEF is committed to giving young children the best start in life.

Through early childhood development programs, UNICEF works with governments and other partners to ensure young children good health care and proper nutrition, to protect children from violence and exploitation, to promote the participation of children in the lives of their families and communities at the youngest ages.

THE SCHOOL-AGED CHILD IN THE FAMILY

When the child reaches school-age, the role of the family remains critically important. The child can only be enrolled, attend school regularly and participate in after-school activities with the assistance of the family. All of these activities are vital to children’s learning.

Both the family and the school are essential elements of the “protective environment” – the network that ensures that children are shielded from all forms of exploitation and abuse, such as child labour. The family is an essential vehicle for the transmission of knowledge, values, attitudes and practices which are essential for the survival of a culture. UNICEF devotes special efforts to support the welfare of families so they may, in turn, protect and implement children’s rights.

Children who are healthy, well-nourished, and protected from abuse and exploitation are better prepared to learn. The family serves as an important bridge between all of the public institutions that assist in these areas, and can make certain that their children’s needs and rights are respected by all agencies involved.

In times of conflict, UNICEF supports families and makes sure that children continue to have the right to an education realised. UNICEF helps mobilise teachers and parents, registers children, prepares school facilities and organizes curricula, at times rebuilding entire educational systems.

THE ADOLESCENT IN THE FAMILY

Adolescence is one of life's fascinating and perhaps most complex stages. Adolescents have the potential to break cycles of violence, poverty and discrimination that pass one generation to the next. When supported by caring families, adolescents thrive in unimaginable ways, becoming resourceful and contributing members of families and communities.

UNICEF believes that families are central in enabling adolescents to develop to their fullest. UNICEF programming aims to strengthen families as they have the primary responsibility to care for children from early childhood through adolescence, so that they feel safe, connected, valued, informed, free and able to discuss their concerns and needs.

UNICEF looks for innovative ways in working with families and extending partnerships to create opportunities for adolescents to become not only competent, but connected, caring and committed members of society. This can only be achieved if adolescents are protected and empowered through 1) access to information, skills and services; 2) supportive environment in family, school and community; and 3) meaningful participation in defining their priorities within the national development agenda.

THE CHILD WITHOUT FAMILY CARE

Families are children's first line of protection. Yet every day, children are separated from their families either due to the belief that this is the best or only option given the family's poverty, a child's disability, a parent's educational status or the lack of educational opportunities, or due to an emergency, such as the Indian Ocean Tsunami crisis experienced in 2004. Armed conflict and domestic violence also contribute to the separation of children from their families.

Both children who are indeed in need of alternative care, as well as those who could be cared for by their families frequently end up in residential care which rarely provides the environment children need for healthy development. Others may be cared for in foster families, arrangements which work best when properly supported. Children in poorly monitored foster care as well as institutional care may be particularly at risk of physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Returning children to their families or finding other permanent, family based options should be the highest priority for children in public care, but unfortunately these goals are often not pursued.

Every child has the right to know and be cared for by his or her own parents, whenever possible. UNICEF believes that families needing support to care for their children should receive it. For children who cannot be raised by their own families, an appropriate alternative family environment should be sought in preference to institutional care which should be used only as a last resort and as a temporary measure, until the child can return to the family environment.

UNICEF is working with partners to build a protective environment for children that helps keep their families intact and fortifies them against abuse and exploitation, in the way that good nutrition and good health care fortifies them against diseases, and focuses on family reunification whenever families are separated.

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES IN MALAYSIA

UNICEF is working with the Government of Malaysia and NGO partners to enhance and strengthen the protective environment” for all children in the country. A key component of our efforts is to strengthen the family unit by providing education on parenting; empowering women for their important roles as mothers and enabling young people to be committed members of society.

Our efforts in Malaysia are focused on establishing an effective social and legal protection system through (1) advocacy for child protection rights; (2) technical assistance and capacity enhancement; (3) grassroots programs; (4) public information and dissemination; (5) applicable research and analysis.

1. Early childhood development with KEMAS

UNICEF is working with the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development to contribute to the development of pre-school children in rural and remote areas, including Orang Asli children. Through KEMAS preschools, parents are taught about early childhood development, good nutrition, and helping families understand the needs of children to prevent violence at home. Child caregivers and teachers are trained on the importance of Child Development from birth to 6 years old, parental skills and also child psychology. The pilot phase of the program reached out to an estimated 18,000 parents and guardians in rural areas through approximately 300 KEMAS preschool teachers and supervisors. Close to 213,000 children ages 2 – 6 years old from rural and indigenous communities in Malaysia is expected to benefit from the program.

2. Early identification of Autism with MOH

Together with the Ministry of Health’s Family Health Development Division, UNICEF is working to improve the early identification of autism amongst toddlers so that early interventions to benefit the child can be instituted. Through this pilot project, UNICEF has introduced a standardized screening tool to screen autism that will be used nationwide and an increased awareness amongst health staff about autism and how to detect it. Healthcare givers have been trained to provide support to families to help them detect autism in their children as well as to respond to the needs of children through therapy at home.

3. Child Participation program with the Social Welfare Department

Following the World Summit on Children in 1990 and Malaysia’s formulation of the *National Plan of Action for Children* (NPA), the Social Welfare Department and UNICEF work hand-in-hand to promote child participation in civil rights which include rights to information, expression and decision making. Through this partnership, children and adolescents are trained to be facilitators and peer educators to promote the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** and create awareness for the prevention of violence and abuse against children. Young Malaysians are also given opportunities to contribute to the preparation of the NPA for 2001-2010; and to participate in various international and regional meetings.