

Promoting healthy behaviours for mothers, newborns and children: The *Facts for Life* guide

Creating a supportive environment for maternal and newborn health requires altering behaviours that discriminate against women and girls and adopting healthy practices that safeguard them from disease and injury. Healthy practices, such as exclusively breastfeeding an infant for the first six months of its life or washing hands with soap, must be evidence-based and established by medical experts.

Describing these practices to parents and other caregivers in non-technical language is critical to empowering women and girls and supporting maternal and newborn health. Twenty years ago, eight UN agencies – UNICEF, WHO, UNFPA, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Development Programme, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, the World Food Programme and the World Bank – jointly published a guide to make such life-saving knowledge available to everyone. The guide, entitled *Facts for Life*, was addressed to communicators – health workers, the media, government officials, non-governmental organizations, teachers, religious leaders, employers, trade unions, women’s groups, community organizations and others. Its third edition, published in 2002, addressed a broad range of topics:

- Timing of births
- Safe motherhood
- Child development and early learning
- Breastfeeding
- Nutrition and growth
- Immunization
- Diarrhoea
- Coughs, colds and more serious illnesses
- Hygiene
- Malaria
- HIV and AIDS
- Injury prevention
- Disasters and emergencies

Clear, brief and practical key messages explained recommended actions and offered supplementary information.

One underlying principle of the guide is that communication involves more than simply providing information. It also requires presenting the information in an interesting and accessible way and helping people understand its relevance. The guide also discusses ways to take action and overcome bottlenecks and barriers.

Facts for Life has been widely disseminated, with more than 15 million copies in circulation in 215 languages by 2002. A new edition of the guide is being prepared.

