



UNICEF in Belarus

Parenting for Early Childhood Development

HIGHLIGHTS

Over 300,000 young children live in Belarus, but many of them do not achieve their potential for cognitive and social-emotional development due to the combined risks of poor health, poor nutrition, and absence of supportive learning and nurturing environments. The evidence that early interventions can stem this loss in developmental potential is now strong.

Results indicate a good level of knowledge among parents about the harmful effects of second-hand smoke on children’s health, although there was some misunderstanding that smoke cannot harm a child if they are in another room. One in three homes had at least one regular smoker who smokes inside the everyday.

The most common activities that parents engaged in with their child during the past week were: playing outside or going to the playground and playing with toys or indoor games. In contrast, the least common activities were reading or looking at picture books, and musical activities such as playing music, singing or dancing. Mothers were more engaged than fathers with activities to support children’s early learning at home.

One in five parents disagreed that they had the skills to stay calm when their child misbehaved, and one in three parents showed a lack of awareness of the negative effects of physical punishment on a child’s psychological and emotional well-being.



54%

parents considered it ‘important’ for children to be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life.

Yet, in terms of practice, **less than one in three** parents reported that their child was exclusively breastfed up to age 5 months. The average duration of (non-exclusive) breastfeeding was 8 months.



45% vs. 14%

Mothers were more engaged than fathers with activities to support children’s early learning at home.



■ Mother ■ Father



3 in 4

parents reported using some kind of violent discipline

There is relatively little evidence on core parenting knowledge, attitudes and practices related to parenting and child development in Belarus. To address the need for more evidence, UNICEF Belarus commissioned a study on knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) in relation to parenting and child development. UNICEF Belarus will assist the two main partner ministries Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health to create effective parenting support and assistance programmes and interventions. The recent UNICEF Belarus KAP showed the areas that significantly challenge positive parenting practices.

### Nutrition and Health

This evidence highlights the need for improved health-related services focused on parenting support to strengthen breastfeeding practices, attitudes and knowledge. Parents should be informed and educated about breastfeeding in the lead up to birth, as part of universal maternal and child health services.

Misconceptions that influence breastfeeding practice, such as the inadequacy of mother's milk and giving infants water, should be addressed through communication strategies. Quality lactation counseling and support after delivery are crucial to addressing misconceptions and supporting parents to overcome common breastfeeding challenges. For this to happen, doctors, nurses and midwives need to be trained to provide breastfeeding support. Exposure to second-hand smoke is a serious health hazard for children and smoke-free environments are the most effective way to reduce exposure. Related to health services is the need to develop communications and advocacy materials to give families the information they need to make their home and car smoke-free.

### Responsive Caregiving and Early Learning at Home

The two most common activities that parents engage in with their child

are: playing outside or going to the playground; and playing with toys or indoor games. In total, 74% of parents play outdoor games or go to the playground with their child on a daily basis; and 71% play indoor games or toys with their child on a daily basis.

The two least common activities that parents engage in with their children are: reading or looking at picture books; and playing music, singing, dancing or other musical activities. In total, 36% of parents read or looked at picture books with their child on a daily basis; and 22% sang, danced or engaged in other musical activities on a daily basis. 1 in 10 parents did not read or look at picture books with their child; and 1 in 5 parents did not engage in singing, dancing or musical activities.

Mothers are typically more engaged than fathers with activities to support children's early learning at home. For example, 45% of mothers compared to 14% of fathers reported reading or looking at books with their child on a daily basis. The two activities that fathers were most likely to engage in with their child on a daily basis were: playing outside or going to the playground and playing with toys or indoor games, as reported by 50% and 49% of fathers, respectively.

### Disciplinary Practices

3 out of 4 parents used violent disciplinary practices towards their child during the past year. In total, 68% of parents indicated that they shouted, yelled or screamed at their child, considered a form of psychological aggression – and the most common type of violent discipline. 51% of parents used physical (or corporal) punishment, such as spanking, hitting or slapping the child on the bottom. To a lesser degree, parents practice shaming their child in front of others (24%) and shaking their child (13%). One in five parents disagreed that they had the skills to stay calm when their child misbehaved, and one in three parents showed a lack of awareness of the negative effects of physical punishment on a child's psychological and emotional well-

being. An important finding is the extent of violence witnessed by children in the home: half of the parents surveyed reported that their child had been exposed to a parent or other adult in the home shouting and displaying anger towards another adult.

### Recommendations

The following strategic actions across multiple sectors are recommended:

- Develop parenting support for pregnant women and new mothers (and fathers) to provide information, education and skills to promote breastfeeding and support to overcome breastfeeding challenges.
- Health-care system support to ensure health-care workers are skilled to provide guidance and support to increase the duration and exclusivity of breastfeeding.
- Develop communications and advocacy materials to give families the information they need to make their home and car smoke-free.
- Develop parenting support to increase the involvement of fathers and to promote the concept of shared parenting and gender equality.
- Government support and leadership to pass and enforce national laws and policies protect and support breastfeeding, such as enacting legislation to restrict the marketing of breastmilk substitutes and monitoring its compliance.
- Develop culturally appropriate and gender sensitive parenting support to promote positive, non-violent disciplinary practices. Parents can learn skills such as positive reinforcement, effective limit setting and conflict resolution in the family.
- Promote awareness raising and public educational campaigns in order to raise awareness of children's rights, understanding of what is appropriate child discipline and to help shift social norms and reduce the invisibility surrounding violence against children.
- Support legal prohibition of all forms of violence against children in all settings, including within the home, and provide support for effective enforcement measures.