

UNICEF EDUCATION

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Case Study

BHUTAN

Early environments of care: Strengthening the foundation of children's development, mental health and wellbeing

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Parenting and family environments play a critical role in children's survival, development potential and ability to thrive. The mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of young children are directly tied to the physical, psychological and social capacity of their caregivers and families. Moreover, [evidence has shown](#) that emotional wellbeing and mental health are the key facets that enable caregivers to provide nurturing, stimulating and protective environments. Therefore, supporting parents' and caregivers' mental health and wellbeing is critical to ensure children have access to attentive care and protection during pregnancy and throughout childhood to develop to their full potential.

In Bhutan, UNICEF is supporting the Government to develop and implement an early childhood strategy to improve child wellbeing and development. Activities include the [National Parenting Education Programmeme](#) that serves children aged 2– 5 years in conjunction with the implementation of UNICEF's [Caring for the Caregiver](#) (CFC) package.

Developed in 2019, the [National Parenting Education Programmeme](#) helps parents with low education levels or no education build the skills needed to effectively support their child's development. The programme guides parents on using everyday settings for learning experiences, skills to express feelings to the child and explain the world around them, skills to notice how well a child is developing and knowing where to find support. It harnesses best parenting practices that are already present and helps parents develop effective new methods to improve children's wellbeing.

Parenting sessions take a comprehensive approach, covering all aspects of child development rather than single-focus programmes that may focus exclusively on health or child rights. These sessions help caregivers recognize the importance of the early childhood years and their power to shape their children's future.

Considering the pressing need to provide support to caregivers in remote, resource-constrained areas of Bhutan, UNICEF is supporting the Ministry of Education to contextualize and pilot the [CFC training package](#), providing technical support and training to Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) facilitators. Developed with support from the LEGO Foundation, the CFC curriculum's goal is to equip facilitators with counselling approaches that build caregivers' confidence and help them develop stress management, self-care and conflict resolution skills. The CFC also engages families and communities in the support of caregivers' emotional wellbeing. The CFC programme, originally developed for pregnant women and caregivers of children from 0–2 years, was adapted specifically to Bhutan's context to focus on caregivers of children 2 to 5 years of age. It is delivered via two home visits per month as an extension of the National Parenting Education Programme.

RESULTS

- The Parenting Education Programme, delivered across 432 community based ECCD centres, has reached 8,915 children (4,396 girls and 4,519 boys)
- Approximately 260 children and 260 caregivers were reached during the CFC pilot.
- An evaluation of the pilot found that the CFC led to decreased feelings of depression and anxiety and improved self-esteem in caregivers who participated.

Cost effectiveness: Over the past year, a strategic investment by UNICEF of US \$45,885 allowed to pilot and contextualize the caring for caregivers package, supporting the training of 67 ECCD facilitators and reaching out to 260 caregivers and their children. Behind the pilot, the Ministry of Education plans to mainstream the Caring for Caregiver as part of the National Parenting Education package.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Leveraging existing infrastructure to maximize sustainability and efficacy of the CFC implementation.** Enlisting ECCD facilitators already involved in the National Parenting Education Programme allowed staff to draw on their existing rapport with caregivers and families. Deploying data collectors already trained in ECCD and the CFC from within the districts themselves allowed them to respond to caregivers' needs and provide follow-up when in the field.
- **Develop packages that can be easily adapted across contexts.** The CFC package was adapted without having to modify the approach of the CFC, highlighting its applicability and relevance to caregivers of children across all age ranges.
- **Ensuring representation in the pilot can inform implementation.** The selection of three districts from different regions provided insights into caregiver challenges that are common across regions (i.e., marital challenges, domestic violence, financial stress, single parents, etc.) and some that are specific to the district alone, which will inform refresher training and future guidance for facilitators and mental health and psychosocial support programming.

NEXT STEPS

In 2022, the Ministry of Education and UNICEF plan to further improve the CFC programme based on the findings gathered from the pilot evaluation in preparation for a nationwide roll-out. UNICEF is also exploring introducing home-based ECCD interventions in target districts, incorporating lessons learned from the CFC, parenting education programmes, and remote learning initiatives implemented during COVID-19.