

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

TAJIKISTAN

THEY CALLED THEMSELVES AS 9-1-1 FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN EMERGENCIES

Using their motto 'Protecting the Young: Our First Commitment', a group of 9 facilitators and 35 volunteers are confident that their training has placed them in an advantageous position to carry out early stimulation activities during emergencies in culturally appropriate safe spaces anywhere in Tajikistan.

With support from the Government of Estonia, UNICEF in cooperation with the Ministries of Education, Health, Labour and Social Protection organized a group of specialists, non-governmental organizations, community volunteers, parents and young people to prepare and support parents, families and communities in responding to the needs of young children in emergency situations.

Tajikistan experienced extreme weather conditions with unusually heavy snowfalls early 2008. Temperatures dropped as low as minus 25°C. The situation was further compounded by an acute energy (electricity and gas) shortage that seriously disrupted service facilities, such as health centres, schools, special-care institutions and water supply systems.

The recent report of the Humanitarian Futures Programme noted that Tajikistan is one of the few other countries where the "changing nature and growing complexity of humanitarian crises are more evident; and where a confluence of longer-term drivers together with recurrent short-term shocks is exposing human vulnerability in ways not commonly seen by humanitarian and development communities."

During the early childhood development (ECD) in emergencies training, one parent admitted that initially she was apprehensive and felt insecure among specialists from education, health and social services as she thought she was unable to make inputs. "For me, the session on preparing low-cost stimulation materials from discarded materials in the home was amazing. It was a teaching/learning exercise. Knowing that I could help my child even when I am doing my housework – washing, hanging out clothes – is so cool," she said.

Tapping the Ministry of Health's Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (IMCI) Centre, the 9-1-1 team has put together whatever resources they have to make sure that, in the event of an emergency, their group will be able to work with families in taking care of young children. "The most significant thing for me is that UNICEF has managed to pull together education and health officials as a coordinated team and has shown it is possible for early childhood development to be an integrated programme. Our best show of appreciation would be for us to continue working as an integrated team, particularly in emergencies," narrated the director of the IMCI Centre.

The participants believed that the training filled a big gap in emergency preparedness and response in Tajikistan and provided a foundation for the introduction of community-based ECD programmes. The programme techniques used for safe ECD spaces in emergencies, and experienced through simulation activities for each of the natural disasters in Tajikistan, are also seen as pillars upon which disaster preparedness in families and communities may be institutionalized. With the three-year support ECD recently received from the Government of the Netherlands, UNICEF Tajikistan plans to build upon the efforts started and scale up ECD in emergencies in the country.

"It is so important to keep children calm and occupied during emergencies," a young participant said. "I never thought that they too can have so much stress and trauma. I enjoyed our role plays. The visits to the families and to early learning spaces in Dushanbe, Tajikistan's capital city, were useful for me. I now have an idea of how children behave in normal situations and about the appropriate activities during emergencies."

The 9-1-1 for ECD in emergencies may be new in Tajikistan but what is encouraging too is that parents, families and young people are one in saying, "We can do ECD anywhere, and even under a tree once the space is safe."