



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF ARMENIA
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH
CENTER FOR HEALTH SERVICES RESEARCH

**CARETAKERS' RESPONSES TO UNICEF
EDUCATIONAL BOOKLETS**

**“If Your Child Has Caught Cold” and
“If Your Child Has Diarrhea”**

A FOCUS GROUP REPORT

*UNICEF/Armenia and the
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Introduction

UNICEF/Armenia has prepared two four-page booklets that are titled “If Your Child Has Caught Cold” and “If Your Child Has Diarrhea”. These booklets are intended for the caretakers of children aged 0-5, and contain information that instructs caretakers when to seek care from health providers, as well as how to manage their child’s illness at home.

UNICEF funded the Center for Health Services Research (CHSR) at the American University of Armenia (AUA) to conduct a series of focus groups with mothers of children aged 0-5 in order to assess their reactions to these booklets. The main goal of this project was to gain information that could be used by UNICEF to make the booklets more understandable and useful to mothers.

Description of the Focus Groups

A topic guide was developed for use in facilitating the focus groups (see appendix). A total of four focus groups were conducted between February 10 and 18, 1998. Two focus groups were conducted in pediatric polyclinics in Yerevan (# 1 and # 9), and two focus groups were conducted in regions outside of Yerevan¹.

The total number of participants in the focus groups was 24, including 23 mothers and one father. The mean age of participants was 26.5 years (range from 17 to 35). Nine women (38 %) had university level education, one (4 %) had studied at the college level, and the others (58 %) had completed secondary school. The majority of women (67 %) had two children, while 12 % had one child and 21 % had three or more children. All participants had children aged 0-5 years.

Focus Group Results

The focus groups were intended to determine mothers’ overall impressions of the booklets, how they understood the main messages of the booklets, and if there were any words or expressions that were difficult for them to understand. Mothers were also asked whether they agreed with the treatments that were described in the booklets, which treatments were new for them, and what other types of new information would they like to obtain.

Results that are specific to each of the booklets are reported below. Reactions to the booklets from the participants were mixed. Most participants, especially the more educated Yerevan mothers, felt that the booklets contained little useful information for the experienced caretaker, but that the booklets would be helpful to inexperienced mothers. It is important to note that most participants did not feel that the booklets contained incorrect information, but rather that they found the information to be very basic, consisting of “things that we already know”. The booklet on diarrhea was felt to be more helpful than the booklet on acute respiratory infections (ARI).

In general, participants suggested that the booklets contain more specific information that could be used to manage their children’s illness at home. The booklet’s instructions to see a health provider when a child becomes ill, when coupled with recommendations for how to manage diarrheal illness at home, was felt to be contradictory by one caretaker. She asked “if we are supposed to immediately apply to the doctor, why is so much written here about how to stop diarrhea?”

The Booklet “If Your Child Has Caught Cold”

The majority of participants of all four focus groups found that this booklet contains necessary information for mothers, especially for first-time mothers. Participants who stated that the booklet

¹ Focus groups were conducted in the village of Azatan in Shirak marz, and the village of Zangakatun in Ararat marz.

didn't contain new information agreed that they usually practice the treatment methods offered by the booklet. Thus, in general the booklet contains information that is practiced in Armenia.

Participants understood and agreed with the main messages of the booklet. In Polyclinic # 1 in Yerevan, some participants mentioned that the advice to visit a doctor has financial repercussions, and that many parents do not apply to the doctor because of this problem.

Some participants had problems understanding some of the danger signs described in the booklet. Specifically, they had problems understanding the sign "the baby is unable to drink". Some mothers thought that this advice was connected only with tonsillitis.

Participant # 4. What do they mean that the baby is unable to drink?

Participant # 5. Why should a child have difficulties with drinking when child has caught a cold or is coughing? As I understand, this is a sign of tonsillitis, but not of cough.

(Focus group conducted in Polyclinic # 1, Yerevan)

The danger sign "difficult breathing" did not seem to be well understood by mothers. Some parents whose children had been diagnosed with croup or stridor suggested that the booklet contain information regarding how mothers can recognize the signs of these diseases.

All participants agreed with points of managing fever, cough and sore throat. They stated that they usually use the methods detailed in the booklet. Many mothers stated that the booklet's advice to sponge down babies with warm water in order to reduce fever represented new information for them, and some disagreed with it. There was a lack of clarity as to how high a fever should be before the caretaker tries to reduce it.

Participant # 5. Isn't it dangerous to undress a sick child and to sponge down the child's body with cool water? And one more thing - the temperature will then rise again.

Participant # 2. I think that you should not decrease the temperature unless it is very high. 37-38 degree is not harmful, it is even protective.

(Focus group conducted in Polyclinic # 1, Yerevan)

Several mothers expressed doubts about using Panadol. They feel that it is not helpful in the management of fever.

Many mothers expressed a desire to receive more specific information about ARI and its management. Specifically, participants wanted to know more about diseases such as croup, stridor, bronchitis, etc. Mothers wanted more information about some of the home treatments suggested in the booklet, with proportions of various ingredients specifically noted.

The booklet is written in language that, for the most part, was understandable for mothers. There are some expressions that mothers had trouble with. There is a translation problem for the expression “overcrowding contributes to catching cold and cough”.

*Participant # 5. And one more point - what does mean by “overcrowding contributes to catching cold”?
How? Is it just because there are many people in the room and they often open the door and cause drafts?*

(Focus group conducted in Polyclinic # 1, Yerevan)

In addition, there were some problems with the sentence about vitamin A. Participants asked that the booklet mention the names of some fruits and vegetables that contain high quantities of Vitamin A which are in general use among the population. Mothers also expressed some doubt concerning the importance of exclusive breast-feeding and the advantages of breastfeeding a child until 2 years of age.

The majority of mothers found that the quality of pictures of the booklet is satisfactory, although some of them felt that the pictures could be more interesting.

The majority of mothers stated that they would recommend this booklet to their friends and family members because it contains necessary basic information, especially for those women who will become mothers for the first time.

The Booklet “If Your Child Has Diarrhea”

The majority of caretakers felt that this booklet was more helpful than the ARI booklet. Some caretakers stated that the booklet contained new and important information for many mothers. Information on Rehidron, feeding patterns during diarrhea, and the need to increase liquids for children with diarrhea was felt to be especially helpful.

The major messages and rules contained in the booklet were felt by participants to be understandable. Some participants noted that there was a contradiction between Rules 1 and 3. While Rule 1 mentions that caretakers can give herbal tea to children with diarrhea, Rule 3 states “do not try to stop diarrhea artificially with the help of medicine, food or herbal methods”.

Participant # 5. I want you to pay attention to the following point: here is written “try to stop diarrhea, using herbal tea” and in the end is written “don’t try to stop diarrhea, using any artificial method, like medicine, meals, or herbal method”. It’s not understandable and is contradictory. I have repeated this from the booklet, and it’s unclear, which plant exactly they mean. We know our traditional, national herbs. But it’s better to be written which herbs exactly should be used to stop diarrhea, and which ones should not be used, such as artificial methods. Which ones should not be used? I don’t know.

(Focus group conducted in Polyclinic # 1, Yerevan)

The majority of mothers agreed with methods suggested in the booklet to manage diarrhea, especially with the practice of giving Rehidron. In all four focus groups, questions arose about the advisability of using enemas to manage diarrhea. Although the booklet does not broach the topic of using enemas to manage diarrhea, it is an extremely common practice in Armenia. Mothers wanted to know if the use of enema was advisable, and if so, how often?

The majority of mothers agreed with the advice given in the booklet regarding feeding practices during diarrhea. Several mothers stated directly that they felt that children with diarrhea should not be given milk, a practice that is advised in the booklet.

Participant # 1. There seems to be a mistake in the booklet, because here it is written that in case of diarrhea milk should be given to the child, but we know that milk is not good in this case.

Participant # 2. Here it is written, that first we should give the sick child milk, and then we should give them rice gruel. But we know that it should be done in the reverse order: gruel should come first. Maybe milk cleans the bowels?

(Focus group conducted in Polyclinic # 1, Yerevan)

Participant # 6. I agree that starting from 2nd-3rd day child can be feed by different products, because his organism can then assimilate it and the organism requires more food to rehabilitate itself. But you should not give him milk, if it is not breast milk.

(Focus group conducted in village Zangakatun (Ararat Marz))

Mothers agreed that breastfeeding children should be given more breast milk when they have diarrhea. One participant did not agree that formula should receive the same treatment.

Participant # 5. I agree that breastfeeding children should be fed more during diarrhea, but I do not agree that the baby who is fed by formula should be fed also more during diarrhea with formula. When child is less than 1 year old and if the formula is the reason of baby's liquid stool, what should be done in this case? There is nothing about it in the booklet.

(Focus group conducted in Polyclinic # 9, Yerevan)

Mothers expressed a need for more information regarding the feeding patterns and treatment that they should practice, as is illustrated in the following passage.

Moderator: What information about diarrhea would you like to receive that you are not getting in this booklet?

Participant # 2. Which medicines exactly are very good to stop diarrhea, and which are absolutely safe for child's health. Please, add the list of it, along with detailed description of how to use it.

Participant # 1. The booklet should contain concrete prescriptions of home remedies.

Participant 4. The solution of potassium permanganate is also very useful (to treat diarrhea).

(Focus group conducted in Polyclinic # 1, Yerevan)

Mothers felt that the booklet should contain advice to feed pomegranate skin to children, which they feel is an excellent local treatment for diarrhea. One mother reported that her child refuses to eat or drink when she is sick, and noted that the booklet does not contain suggestions regarding what to do in this event.

Several caretakers wanted more information about blood in the stool, and how to recognize it.

Participant # 6. There is a point in the booklet about the blood trace in the stool. It's better to describe in more detail which kind of blood trace is dangerous. Once we noticed such a trace in our child's stool, and we were frightened and immediately visited the doctor. But he said that it's not dangerous, it's just due to the new flu virus that our child had caught. Then he described what a blood trace for diarrhea meant, and now I know that bloody lines in stool are not dangerous, but when it's like bleeding, it's very dangerous, because it can be the sign of dangerous diarrhea.

(Focus group conducted in Polyclinic # 1, Yerevan)

Other caretakers wanted more information on the different types of diarrhea, such as dysentery and salmonella.

Moderator: What information about DD would you like to receive that you are not getting in this booklet?

Participant # 1. I would like to get description of how to distinguish common diarrhea from infectious diseases such as salmonella.

Participant # 4. I would like to know how to differentiate signs of common liquid stool from cases of infectious intestinal diseases. Maybe by color or something else.

(Focus group conducted in Polyclinic # 9, Yerevan)

In general, the language used in the booklet was well understood by participants. The expression “adapted milk mixtures” was not understood by many participants.

The overall impression from this booklet was generally positive in all four focus groups. The majority of participants agreed that it contained important information and that they would recommend it to their friends and family members. They suggested that UNICEF consider preparing and distributing similar booklets about the management of other diseases.

Conclusions

This report will conclude by summarizing the primary results from the focus groups, and making suggestions for revisions. It is realized that space limitations in the brochure may make it impractical to incorporate all of these recommendations.

The Booklet “If Your Child Has Caught Cold”

- The danger sign “the baby is unable to drink” needs to be more fully described.
- Mothers are unclear as to what constitutes “difficult breathing”. This term needs some elaboration. Mothers would like to have more information about “difficult breathing” that is associated with serious ARI disease (croup, stridor, etc.), in order to differentiate them easily from simple cold with cough.
- It should be added in the booklet that sponging down with warm water should be done when a child has a high temperature to avoid convulsions, and stressed that sponging down with warm water is not dangerous for the child in the management of fever.
- Within space limitations, mothers would like to have specific instructions on how to prepare the home remedies recommended in the booklet. As Anahit in Polyclinic # 1 in Yerevan said, “I would like information on the proportions of recommended drinks: if it's tea with honey, so how many parts of tea and how many of honey, etc. The same about milk with sodium. And how many times per day”.

- The expression “overcrowding contributes to catching cold and cough” needs to either be retranslated or qualified with a further explanation.
- It would be helpful to reinforce the importance of breast milk, and emphasize the advantages of breastfeeding through two years of age.
- In conjunction with the recommendation to feed ill children food rich in Vitamin A, the names of several foods that are commonly used in the population should be added.

The Booklet “If Your Child Has Diarrhea”

- Caretakers perceive a contradiction between Rules 1 and 3 in the diarrhea booklet, in terms of the recommendation to (not) use herbal remedies in the management of diarrhea. This issue should be clarified.
- Given the widespread cultural practice of enema to manage diarrhea, the booklet should address this point directly. American pediatric specialists who have been consulted by the CHSR on this matter have stated that no positive effect can be expected from treating diarrhea with enema, and that it effectively represents a diversion of the caretaker’s resources.
- Several caretakers expressed doubts about the advisability of giving milk and formula to children suffering from diarrhea. If this practice is to be advocated, it will need additional reinforcement, given cultural practices in Armenia.
- As with the ARI booklet, caretakers want specific, concrete instructions that describe how to manage their children’s diarrhea at home. The inclusion of this information would serve as a very useful reference for Armenian caretakers.
- Mothers are unclear about how to recognize blood (due to dysentery) in their child’s stool. This point would benefit from further explanation.
- Mothers have requested that the booklet contain additional information about diarrheal diseases (such as dysentery, salmonella, etc.), describing their source, and how to differentiate between “common liquid stool” and more serious cases of diarrhea. UNICEF should consider whether caretakers would benefit from having this type of information.
- Mothers had trouble understanding the expression “adapted milk mixtures”. This expression requires either a revised translation or additional explanation.