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**Understanding ‘Celebrating Families’
contribution to family wellbeing**

KEY FINDINGS FROM AFGHANISTAN

AUGUST 2018



Celebrating Families participants and World Vision Afghanistan staff identified a number of positive changes for families resulting from implementation of Celebrating Families. Highlights include:

- ▶ **Changes in parents and caregivers' awareness of the stages of child development and how to facilitate these through caregiving, learning and play.**

They were able to reflect on how the cultural and political context in Afghanistan shapes conceptions of childhood and the role of children. Many made changes to allow children to express themselves, such as by encouraging questions and allowing them to choose their own clothes.

- ▶ **A disavowal of all forms of violence against children by many parents, caregivers and professionals.**

This included rejecting corporal punishment within the home, school and Mosque, and eliminating other forms of harm that children might encounter, such as forced marriage and gender discrimination.

- ▶ **Roll-out of the lessons of Celebrating Families to the wider community by child-focused professionals.**

There was particularly strong evidence of follow-up activity among religious leaders, who used their existing networks, and Shura members, who held family celebrations.



In 2018, the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations was contracted by World Vision to conduct two in-depth, qualitative analyses of Celebrating Families, focusing on implementation in Afghanistan and Myanmar. These were commissioned to build the evidence base for understanding how Celebrating Families is effective in supporting parents and caregivers in developing nurturing environments for children. Data collection took place in July 2018, led by CTPSR Research Fellow, Laura Payne. It was qualitative, including individual interviews and focus groups, with a total of 99 children, parents, child protection actors, faith leaders and World Vision staff participating.

About Celebrating Families

Celebrating Families seeks to ensure that all families enjoy positive and loving relationships and have hope for the future. It supports families as places that allow children to experience the 'love of God' by addressing the beliefs, convictions and cultural norms that contribute to harmful practices in child rearing. Through Celebrating Families, participants are equipped with the knowledge, skills and tools to create safe and nurturing environments within the family home and community, enabling children to experience positive and peaceful relationships.

Delivery is through a three day reflective workshop, which encourages parents and caregivers to reflect on their childhood experiences and understand how these influence their approach to parenting. It invites participants to envision a different future, breaking with practices and forms of communication that caused them pain. The workshops support parents and caregivers to make changes in how

they behave towards and communicate with children, inviting them to make commitments through a religious or spiritual commitment. This is supported by extra-curricular activities to support families' holistic development.

Target participants include parents and caregivers, religious leaders, community leaders, school teachers, social service personnel, local family focused organizations and local government units. Activities with children support their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual development, and increase bonding and understanding with parents.

Celebrating Families is implemented alongside other programming and is often integrated within activities on child protection, education and livelihoods. The curriculum can be contextualized for use in multi-faith and non-Christian contexts and additional guidance supports implementation in fragile and conflict-affected places.



Afghanistan's journey with Celebrating Families

Celebrating Families has been implemented in the Herat, Badghis and Ghor provinces of Afghanistan since 2014 and has been integrated within projects on livelihoods and community resilience, child development, emergency health and protection, and faith and social change. In total 1,358 people have been trained, including religious leaders, school teachers, members of local shuras (councils formed to discuss particular issues), members of the government's Child Protection Action Network (CPAN) and World Vision Afghanistan staff members. These stakeholder groups were strategically selected as they are positioned to promote Celebrating Families within their spheres of influence, as well as apply them within their own families. This approach to recruitment is distinctive to World Vision Afghanistan.

The integration of Celebrating Families within World Vision Afghanistan programming reflects the country office's awareness of the barriers that harmful social norms can present to development. It is often within the family that harmful social norms are lived and transmitted to the next generation, manifesting in practices such as early and forced marriage, corporal (physical) punishment, exploitation and withdrawal from education, and so the family is therefore a key area of focus.

“Celebrating Families without the faith component would still have an impact. But the religious texts give it richness and meaning. It is a source of trust and confidence.”

CPAN representative and Celebrating Families participant, Badghis

World Vision Afghanistan staff also understand the centrality of Islam as the primary lens through which moral, social and political issues are approached within Afghanistan. Whether old or new, social perspectives rooted in Islam are considered to be well reasoned and evidence-based. They are also less likely to be received as foreign to Afghan society and culture. Celebrating Families, rooted in faith and designed to engage participants on a deeply spiritual level, is well positioned to engage families and communities in Afghanistan.

Given these circumstances, World Vision Afghanistan have contextualised Celebrating Families so that it is suitable for Afghan Muslim participants. The process of contextualisation has been conducted at national level with significant input from Islamic religious scholars. The format and key content of the curriculum remain the same, though some of the religious and scriptural resources have been changed. The contextualisation has included the insertion of Hadiths and Koranic principles.

“Social norm change is not always done with community development, but it is important to address the root causes. We decided to use it [Celebrating Families] as often as we could.”

World Vision Afghanistan staff member, Herat City

Celebrating Families helps deepen family relationships and increase spiritual nurture

After the Celebrating Families workshop, many parents and caregivers made changes to improve quality of care and strengthen family relationships. Changes to physical care were modest but important, and included organising dental appointments and vaccinations, supporting schooling and providing clothing appropriate to the weather. Changes to emotional care were substantial, shifting from an authoritarian approach, with strict discipline and little negotiation, to an authoritative one that sets boundaries based on communication. Most parents could articulate children's rights.

Parents became more aware of the impact of harmful behaviours on children. Many reduced levels of violence within the home but some still struggled to find positive discipline alternatives. Some female participants struggled to negotiate gendered power dynamics to protect children from harm. To tackle this, it may be possible to raise the esteem of women's learning and participation in Celebrating Families, for instance through a graduation event. Training several adults from the same family may also create critical mass.

Parents showed understanding of holistic child development. They were aware of the 'growing steps' of children and the need for play. Parents were keen to fulfil children's wishes but struggled to engender a sense of hope given societal instability and the precariousness of life in Afghanistan. Children in western Afghanistan encounter poverty, violence and injustice, if not within their families then within their communities. Parents sought more guidance on how they could communicate these issues with children, in an age-appropriate manner, and help them to deal with conflict-induced trauma.

Most parents were aware of scriptural teaching on child rights and positive discipline and referred to specific Islamic teachings introduced through Celebrating Families. Religious leaders had a higher baseline understanding but found the process useful for articulating Islamic teachings about the family. Parents did not report significant changes in relationships between adults in the home as a result of Celebrating Families, though men affirmed the need to respect women and parents.

"I didn't know about the rights of my children before the training but I could learn about these issues after the training. I was very violent against my son. I said to him, 'I will beat you if you don't study'. But now I have stopped the violence. Now he is doing his homework eagerly by himself."

Mother and Celebrating Families participant, Badghis

Local stakeholders support empowering environments for children

World Vision Afghanistan made the decision to recruit Celebrating Families participants from child-focused professional groups, including religious leaders, Shura members, school teachers and child protection workers. This lends itself well to empowering local stakeholders. A significant degree of post-workshop follow-on activity has taken place. Much of this has been organic and led by the participants themselves, without significant support from World Vision.

- Religious leaders tended to integrate Celebrating Families within existing activities, including worship and pastoral support. They leveraged institutional structures already in place.
- Shura members initiated new activities, demonstrating energy and commitment in using Celebrating Families to tackle harmful practices in ways that address contextual drivers, including both poverty and social norms.
- Teachers' efforts to tackle harmful practices were mostly reactive, as their work exposes them to disclosures of child protection and welfare issues. Teachers are not always able to address harmful practices directly with parents, for fear of making the situation worse. For instance, one teacher described a student who disclosed being bitten by her mother in an argument. The teacher advised her to mend the relationship with her mother but did not address the violence directly with the family for fear of exacerbating the situation.

"There are lots of obstacles, especially for the female teachers and shura members. They say 'I accept this but how can I make my family aware?' For instance, mothers-in-law may say they have more experience, how can you tell me what to do? So the participants say 'can you invite my mother-in-law too, and elders and husbands?'"

World Vision Afghanistan staff member, Herat City

Members of the government's Child Protection Action Network were exposed to other sources of training because of their specialist roles. Given the high levels of pre-existing child protection knowledge and activity, it is challenging to isolate the impact of Celebrating Families on their work.

Most respondents reported a strong sense of ownership over Celebrating Families and felt a responsibility to create change within their professional spheres. Some would like to see Celebrating Families deployed more in rural areas, where the need is greater and the opportunities to learn parenting skills are fewer. Some participants also wished to see workshop participants recruited from the whole community, rather than the key stakeholder groups they came from, though this is unlikely to yield the same results in terms of sustainability and structural change.

Congregations and communities promote strong families

This is the most difficult form of impact to evidence, as it requires change at the social-cultural level. Such change generally takes place over a long period of time and is very diffuse. Nevertheless, respondents clearly understood that sharing knowledge was a crucial link in the chain towards social change and recounted examples of how they had instigated changes in other parents' practices. For instance, one female participant had encouraged her sister to continue her daughters' education.

Most examples of respondents influencing change within congregations and communities were practical in nature. Some respondents inferred connections as to how these activities supported children's spiritual nurture. They recognised that improvements in children's physical and emotional wellbeing laid the foundations for spiritual nurture, which children may otherwise be shut off from. Others made explicit connections between their activities and children's spirituality, though it is not possible to be conclusive about the extent to which this was internalised by community members.

In general, respondents were not specific about the extent to which they relayed scriptural teachings in their discussions with family members, friends and neighbours. Most spoke of lessons from Celebrating Families filtering out organically, first influencing family members and then sometimes rippling across the community. Some led by example, influencing others through their actions, rather than using words.

“Children are not grown in a children’s environment, they are not treated as children mentally and physically. They [adults] assume children should already know everything and this causes them to grow up hard.”

Father and Celebrating Families participant, Herat City

“It is our responsibility to do this [share Celebrating Families with others]. The Mosque is a gathering place where we can share points with the people. If these points are for the benefit of families and children and they don’t contradict Islam then we share them... In my own work I say that Allah is not allowing people to make early marriages and I advise parents that they should consider their children’s opinions.”

Religious leader, Herat City

“If a child can feel love, what is a more spiritual experience than that? If a parent can wake up to corporal punishment, and they say they weren’t aware of the harm they were doing, then that is enormous spiritual change.”

Celebrating Families participant, Herat City



Emerging themes and implications for Celebrating Families as a project model

Change within the family is both personal and interpersonal in nature

Change within families occurs at the personal and interpersonal levels. In Afghanistan, it has predominantly affected relationships between parents and children, rather than between adult family members. In measuring behaviour change at family level, it is also useful to distinguish between the physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions of parental care. This reflects the unique contribution of Celebrating Families as an instigator of holistic family wellbeing.

Spiritual nurture for children

Celebrating Families in Afghanistan has contributed to ensuring a holistic approach to nurture by parents, including emotional and spiritual domains. Parents enabled their children to know God and no longer associated this solely with formal religious instruction. Several recognised that they must live their spiritual values by showing acts of love and kindness. Others also introduced their children to God by inspiring awe and wonder at creation.

Local stakeholders engaged and empowered

Local stakeholders have been empowered to tackle harmful practices and support the spiritual nurture of children. World Vision Afghanistan's approach to recruiting workshop participants is distinctive, as they recruit through professional networks rather than seeking volunteers from the community. This has paid off, in that it has increased the ownership and engagement of local stakeholders and embedded learning within child-focused institutions. It has also created Celebrating Families advocates within communities. However, there has been a trade off in terms of accessibility for non-professional parents, whose experience of Celebrating Families is through outreach activities rather than direct training.

Communities and congregations engaged and empowered

In Afghanistan, most participants spoke of lessons from Celebrating Families filtering out organically, first influencing family members and then sometimes rippling across the community. Understanding more about the character and extent of wider social change instigated by Celebrating Families will require routinely tracking activity over time. A tool for capturing this information would strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of Celebrating Families.



Recommendations

Adapt Celebrating Families to local context and culture

Families in western Afghanistan face many challenges but also draw on forms of resilience that are embedded within culture, tradition and faith. Wherever Celebrating Families operates, it is important that such challenges and forms of resilience are analysed in detail at a local level before implementation. This should be a qualitative data gathering exercise that complements the existing key performance indicators. Qualitative data at a granular level will elicit detail that illuminates family cultures and relationships, allowing changes in these to be measured alongside more obvious changes in family practices. It will also allow the project model and its theory of change to be adapted to local context. Finally, at the launch stage it is also important to recognise that the challenges families face generally stem from poverty or other circumstances in the physical environment, as well as culture and lack of awareness of children's rights and theories of childrearing. Where Celebrating Families is integrated within other technical areas or programmes it stands the best chance of addressing each of these root causes in tandem.

In Afghanistan, parents have to contend with the additional complexities of raising children in a conflict-affected society, including sheltering them from conflict-related violence and instability, dealing with trauma and preventing the normalisation of violence within children's worlds and minds. Developing World Vision's resources on implementing Celebrating Families in conflict-affected contexts would support them and others in other conflict and post-conflict environments. Providing follow-on activities to support psychosocial wellbeing would also be beneficial.

Provide parents with tools for positive discipline

One important aspect of Celebrating Families is that it seeks to eliminate violence in the home, particularly as a form of discipline against children. In Afghanistan, parents absorbed lessons on positive discipline but still require concrete strategies for this that go beyond renouncing violence and communicating with their children. These could be provided within the workshop or through follow-on activities.

Invest in lasting social and cultural change

Creating impact in the wider community and society requires change at the social and cultural levels. This takes place over a longer period of time and is very diffuse. The Theory of Change hypothesises that local stakeholders such as faith leaders, faith-based organisations and local agencies will be instrumental in instigating wider social and cultural change, working with and through congregations and communities. There is strong evidence to demonstrate that this work has already begun, with Shura members hosting events for families and religious leaders incorporating Celebrating Families into teachings. Ongoing investment in their ability to maintain their knowledge and offer orientation to others in their community is essential to ensure the good work started can continue. Such investment would include World Vision Afghanistan supporting follow-on activities led by participants and establishing regular peer support opportunities for parents and caregivers.



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