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

KEY FINDINGS FROM MYANMAR

AUGUST 2018



Parents, caregivers, religious leaders and World Vision Myanmar staff identified a number of positive changes for families resulting from implementation of Celebrating Families. Highlights include:

- ▶ **Substantial changes in parents' and caregivers' emotional care of children.** Many parents perceived a lack of communication between family members. They linked this to the fast pace of change in Myanmar, where technological innovations such as smart phones have changed people's expectations and altered family dynamics. After the Celebrating Families workshop, many parents took steps to address growing communication gaps through the covenant, scheduling regular family time to strengthen bonds with their children.
- ▶ **A shift in some parents from an authoritarian form of parenting, with strict discipline and little negotiation, to an authoritative one that sets boundaries based on communication.** Many renounced corporal punishment, reflecting on the harm it caused them as children.
- ▶ **A growing understanding among parents that they must live their spiritual values in order to impart these to children.** A loving family enables children to conceive of a loving God.



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 August 2018, led by CTPSR Research Fellow, Laura Payne. It was qualitative, including individual interviews and focus groups, with a total of 87 children, parents, 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, such as themed sessions at parents' meetings and women's and men's groups.

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.



Myanmar's journey with Celebrating Families

World Vision Myanmar has long understood the importance of family as a catalyst for improving children's lives. They stress that child protection starts within the family, as children are closer to their parents than they are to others. The National Strategy¹ and Child Protection Assessment 2012² both highlight that a lack of family support and family problems contribute to many of the challenges children face.

The family environment is important for child protection. However, due to poverty, parents are occupied with daily struggle for survival of the family and cannot give much time or attention to children's development or protection. In fact, some of the abusers are from children's own family environment. Thus the family, which is supposed to care for and protect children, can be a threatening environment for children.

Assessment Report of the Child Protection System at the Community Level, World Vision Myanmar

World Vision Myanmar has implemented Celebrating Families since 2015, first training staff and later training church leaders and communities. 1,636 adults have participated so far, including 1,197 church and community members and approximately half of current World Vision Myanmar staff.

“One of the lessons I learned was not beating. The shepherd's stick is for herding and protection from danger.”

Community member and Celebrating Families participant, Mandalay

In Myanmar, Celebrating Families is implemented almost exclusively with Christian parents and caregivers.³ As the country is around 89% Buddhist, this renders a large proportion of the country's most vulnerable families ineligible to participate. In its current formation, the model is not suitable for use with the majority Buddhist population, as it has not been contextualised. Any attempt to use the materials without contextualisation could be inflammatory.

In order to support vulnerable families within the majority Buddhist community, and to facilitate integration with other aspects of programming, World Vision Myanmar had plans to contextualise Celebrating Families. The national office was exploring working with a Buddhist NGO to contextualise and implement a Buddhist version of Celebrating Families. Alternatively, it also has Buddhist staff who could facilitate Buddhist-contextualised workshops.

“To teach children how to love God we first have to show the example to them. Then later we teach them.”

Community member and Celebrating Families participant, Mandalay

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. Most demonstrated awareness of teaching on child rights and positive discipline, but some did not change their attitude or behaviour to corporal punishment. Parents and caregivers had a range of views: some considered it to be both legitimate and effective, others considered it to be legitimate but not effective, and others rejected it on both grounds. Amongst respondents who changed their perspectives and practices on discipline after Celebrating Families, a common theme was the importance of reflecting on their own past.

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 identify positive discipline alternatives beyond talking to their children.

Some participants, male and female, reported that Celebrating Families helped to improve spousal relationships. Generally this did not involve changing the behaviour of their spouse, but was framed around learning to understand their partners and finding ways to live together more comfortably.

Parents and caregivers enabled their children to know God and no longer associate this solely with formal religious instruction. They explained how children's early encounters with God occur within the home, particularly through praying. Several recognised that children learn through imitation, and so they as parents must embody their spiritual values in order to impart these to their children. Others changed their family practices as a result of their reflections after Celebrating Families, for instance by making family worship part of their routine or taking children to Sunday school. Several recognised that, as parents, they must live their spiritual values by showing love and kindness.

"I learned from my own story about the past. When my youngest son was three months old there was conflict in the country and I couldn't bear it... I neglected my children and family... Before Celebrating Families, even the children were not a thought in my mind. After, I have tried to give them time to talk and now they feel they are in my heart."

Community member and Celebrating Families participant, Mandalay

Children themselves reported a closeness to God derived through guidance from family members. They demonstrated a keenness to learn and practice faith and reported a sense of comfort from their relationship with God. However, while they demonstrated agency and active participation, most were probably unaware of their parent or caregivers' journey through Celebrating Families, as few participants discussed this with their children.

Local stakeholders support empowering environments for children

Among faith leaders and communities, there was a clear willingness to assume more responsibility for Celebrating Families, for instance by increasing the frequency and scale of workshops with support from World Vision Myanmar. This reflects well on Celebrating Families and World Vision Myanmar, who have built strong relationships with churches over the long term. However, at the moment churches function more as implementing partners and are less substantively engaged in content development or strategic planning.

Church leaders recounted notable examples of how they had used scriptural resources from Celebrating Families to tackle harmful childrearing practices. Others had been inspired by scripture without making overt references. A few church leaders perceived incompatibility between the lessons of Celebrating Families on corporal punishment and their own theological perspective.

Church leaders did not offer examples of ways in which they had used Celebrating Families to influence policy. They felt it was important to increase the reach and impact of Celebrating Families, but this was framed in terms of educating families rather than influencing policymakers.

The central partners for World Vision Myanmar in implementing Celebrating Families are churches. So far the potential to work with non-church partners has gone untapped. Options include working with Buddhist groups and local agencies, once a contextualised version of the workshop is available.

"I realised as a father that my children not only have physical needs, they also have spiritual needs. I should take my children to God. This is my responsibility."

Community member and Celebrating Families participant, Mandalay



Congregations and communities promote strong families

This is the most difficult form of impact to evidence, as it requires change at the social and cultural level. Such change generally takes place over a long period of time and is very diffuse. The participants who made the clearest attempts to educate others about scriptural teachings were the church leaders. They were also more likely to share Celebrating Families outside of family networks, for instance with their congregations.

Children of Celebrating Families participants were aware of scriptural teachings on family life. Most knew that loving and honouring one's parents is a commandment in the Bible and that God gave the commandment 'As I have loved you, so you must love one another', which they understood to mean that family members should treat each other well.

One issue that hinders congregations and communities becoming more educated about scriptural teachings on families is that many people are unable to attend a workshop. Workshops take place over three days, which many people would not be able to take off work. This limits the pool of people who are able to learn about and then share Celebrating Families within communities.

It is not possible to be conclusive as to whether non-participants in congregations and communities have increased their knowledge and skills to nurture children spiritually. This is because there is insufficient evidence from respondents regarding how they have shared the spiritual nurture dimension of Celebrating Families for such assertions to be made.



“When I preach on Sundays I have included Celebrating Families. I have talked about knowing God, having understanding and obedience, supporting each other's strong points and weak points and giving time to each other.”

Church leader and Celebrating Families participant,
Yangon

“Now once a month we go to a restaurant and enjoy ourselves. After the training we began doing this, because we need to be close to each other. There is so much technology now, the children are on their phones and my husband watches the TV and I read my Bible. We cannot communicate well, so now we make time.”

Community member and Celebrating Families participant,
Yangon



Emerging themes and implications for Celebrating Families as a project model

Change within the family is both personal and interpersonal in nature

In Myanmar, the changes following implementation of Celebrating Families have predominantly affected relationships between parents and children but they also affected relationships between spouses in significant ways. In measuring behaviour change at family level, it is useful to distinguish between the physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions of parental care, as this reflects the unique contribution of Celebrating Families as an instigator of holistic family wellbeing.

Spiritual nurture for children

Celebrating Families in Myanmar has contributed to ensuring that children receive spiritual nurture. Parents enable 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. However, the extent to which participants have shared these insights with others in their congregations and communities was unclear.

Local stakeholders engaged and empowered

World Vision Myanmar's primary local stakeholders are churches, who have shown significant support for Celebrating Families so far and demonstrate a willingness to scale up and roll out. To continue to empower churches, World Vision Myanmar will need to develop their roles so that they can take greater responsibility for running workshops and follow-on activities. This will require strategic planning, resource and capacity development. Where possible, it should also include alignment with existing initiatives for family ministry. At the same time, World Vision Myanmar is seeking to expand the range of local partners it works with. Plans are already in the pipeline to work with Buddhist groups, but it may be possible to work with other local agencies as well. In either case, broadening the range of partners will require contextualising the project model so that it is appropriate for the majority Buddhist population.

Communities and congregations engaged and empowered

In Myanmar most participants spoke of lessons from Celebrating Families filtering out organically, first influencing family members and occasionally rippling across the community. Some led by example, influencing others through their actions, not words. Children of Celebrating Families participants were also aware of scriptural teachings on family life. One issue that hinders congregations and communities becoming more educated about scriptural teachings on families is that many people are unable to attend a workshop due to financial constraints. A range of options are being considered to make Celebrating Families more accessible to working parents.



Recommendations

Adapt Celebrating Families to local context and culture

Families in Myanmar face distinct challenges. Wherever Celebrating Families operates, it is important that family challenges are analysed in detail at a local level. 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. At the launch stage it is also important to recognise that the challenges families face generally stem from a range of interrelated root causes. When Celebrating Families is integrated within other technical areas or programmes it stands the best chance of addressing root causes in tandem.

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 Myanmar, 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, including peer support groups for parents, which have yet to be formalised.

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 early evidence that some social and cultural change is occurring in Myanmar, but additional progress can be made through empowering local stakeholders, contextualisation and planning for follow-up discussions and activities.

Contextualisation

Contextualising Celebrating Families is one of the most critical needs for Celebrating Families in Myanmar. World Vision Myanmar are acutely aware of this and have laid strong foundations to enable contextualisation, building interfaith relationships and working with World Vision Cambodia on a Buddhist contextualised version of Celebrating Families. It will also be important to allow inclusion of Buddhist scriptural teachings, to facilitate local acceptance and to allow the participants to connect with the material on a profoundly spiritual level.

Endnotes

1. World Vision Myanmar National Strategy FY17-20.
2. Tun (2012)
3. No precise figures relating to participants religious affiliation have been recorded, but a small number of Buddhist parents were known to have participated. Often they were recruited by a trusted interlocutor, such as the manager of the venue where the training took place. There has also been involvement from Buddhist World Vision staff, both as participants and facilitators.



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