

Promoting and Supporting Holistic Development: Baby Tents in Post-earthquake Haiti

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The devastating earthquake on 12 January 2010 in Haiti directly affected more than 750,000 children with an estimated 380,000 children displaced living in 1,200 displacement sites exacerbated by a cholera outbreak at the end of the year (UNICEF, 2011). In this fragile context, research was conducted to examine the myriad of responses supporting young children. Initial results highlight the benefits of providing baby tents in which various organisations incorporated the UNICEF Early Childhood Development (ECD) Kit to support their baby tent programming. These baby tents focused on the needs of the very young child, 0-3 years during the first phase response.

ECD in Emergencies

Extreme disasters are key platforms to expose the potential of ECD interventions, particularly as the youngest children aged 0-8 represent the highest percentage of affected populations in today's global emergencies. Recent research shows that over 200 million children under the age of five worldwide are not developing to their (full) potential due to poverty, poor health and nutrition and lack of stimulation, all compounded when an emergency strikes with prolonged disruptions to their developmental potential in both the immediate aftermath and in the longer term (Lancet, 2007). Young children are amongst the most vulnerable impacted from family disruption, loss of social fabric and destruction of support and protective systems yet can be neglected in terms of essential and adequate care and psychosocial needs impacting their early experiences and long term cognitive, psychosocial and neurological development (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007). In these contexts, protective factors are frequently lacking making young children more vulnerable to a multitude of risks from injury, violence and sexual abuse. At the same time, children also possess inherent resilience which ECD programmes have been shown to encourage and facilitate healing, resourcefulness and collective support



“Concern Worldwide” staff at their Baby Tent engage the mothers/caregivers in singing and dancing, creating a special day at the tent.

among the children, family and community (Connolly and Hayden, 2007), necessitating continued and greater advocacy for ECD in emergencies (ECDiE).

ECDiE considers the impact of caretakers, families, safe and predictable environments critical for the overall well-being of young children, including interventions aimed to reduce the loss of human potential during childhood, particularly for the most disadvantaged children and their families in fragile contexts. It aims to provide holistic ECD to “support children’s survival, growth, development and learning – including health, nutrition and hygiene, and cognitive, social, physical and emotional development” (GMR on EFA 2007, p.3) as child development is rapid, critical and highly dependent on adequate stimulation and effective care.

From the research undertaken in Haiti, enabling ECDiE does not depend upon heavy financial investments, but rather requires imparting necessary skills, competencies and knowledge. Therefore integrated ECDiE interventions, amidst the disruption of normal safety nets, include

family-centred and community-based activities that focus on holistic development of young children and their caregivers: targeting caregivers through information sharing, training and support services on prenatal care, holistic child development, home visits, health-related services and comprehensive programmes that combine early stimulation learning opportunities, nurturing environments, nutrition and health, child care and environmental improvements.

The Baby Tent

Baby tents were innovatively utilised in Haiti by an array of international non-governmental organisations, many supported by UNICEF and recipients of the UNICEF ECD Kit; however, for the purpose of this article, the focus will remain on the concerted efforts of two - Concern Worldwide and Accion Contra la Faim (ACF) or Action Against Hunger. Their baby tents provided young children 0-3 and their caregivers a safe place to access support, where mothers could breastfeed, caregivers could receive counselling, psychosocial support and information on child development, and expectant mothers

could receive neo-natal information and advice. Such a tent was the appropriate place for specific attention and support for a baby without a mother, for the newly single father and advice for mothers and parents HIV-positive. Both women and men who had lost their partners and other family members and were left with small children to survive without family support, a home, job, and income were welcomed.

An Integrated Response

For both organisations, the baby tents were viewed as an entry-point for a multi-sector response, providing children and caregivers access to health, nutrition and sanitation services aside from opportunities to play, interact and stimulate the young children through the use of the play and manipulative items in the UNICEF ECD Kits. The tents were outfitted with play mats and mattresses and for simple health and nutrition screenings, some offered the services and expertise of nurses, nutritionists and child psychologists, included hand washing stations and were located near toilet facilities where feasible.

In an interview with Concern Worldwide, the staff member stressed the idea that the baby tent was developed to support multi-sectoral work as an integrated programme. ACF's baby tents functioned similarly with an integrated programme, specifically with nutrition support aiming at not only preventing but curing the treatment of severe malnutrition for children under five, thus involving screenings in the tents alongside psychosocial and play activities organised with the use of the UNICEF ECD Kits.

In an interview, an ACF staff shared the benefits of integrated programming in the baby tents, "Here is where both mental health and care practices are really linked to ECD because our main objective is to reduce malnutrition, but because we know that one of the first causes of malnutrition is inappropriate or lack of care practices and it includes how you play with the child, how you care for the child, how you stimulate him, the attention you give him, etc. And this necessarily involves for us to do some activities, like playing activities and to show the mother the means of stimulating."

A Concern Worldwide staff responsible for managing the baby tents added, "We

realised that for most mothers it was not very easy for them to take care of the baby, to stimulate the baby. They were coming to the baby tent, but they would put the baby on the mattress and they were just waiting and they did nothing with the baby. So we started to organise group discussions to explain why it is important to play with the baby, how to stimulate the baby, what to do when the baby is crying, many very basic things, but just to support the mothers."

Both Concern Worldwide and ACF provided training for their baby tent staff on the UNICEF ECD Kits ensuring that the items were used effectively with the children and caregivers while encouraging their staff to use them in a creative and culturally appropriate manner. The two organisations also collaborated in the sharing and exchanging of best practices with the use of the ECD kits.

Holistic Development

Founded upon principles of holistic ECD, the baby tents upheld and encouraged family and community-based care recognising how best to support the young child. Upon entering the baby tents, it was evident that they were strategically constructed as safe spaces and decorated as cheery spaces. The spaces provided critical connections to varied supports from the emotional to the physical for both the caregivers and their child, and extremely valuable, connected the caregivers to each other.

The baby tent put forth great efforts to fully support the caregiver, recognising that children have ongoing needs that must be addressed by their caregivers whether they require direct supervision, breastfeeding, assistance with feeding and protection from hazards and that their well-being is highly influenced by the emotional and psychological state of their caregivers. It initiated with simply providing daily encouragement and active listening by trained staff attempting to maintain the emotional health of caregivers, with the desired result being that the caregivers would be in the right disposition to have the motivation and desire to stimulate their babies. The Concern Worldwide and ACF baby tents recognised the importance of healthy and happy caregivers, with an ACF staff member succinctly stating, "Everything depends on the state of the mothers."

Fostering Community

Although the habit of the baby tents for both organisations was not to routinely supply gifts of food or non-food items, aside from the provision and access to a wealth of information, psychological support, counselling, friendship, and most importantly from the interviewed caregivers' comments, the aspect of community, motivated continued participation. Frequently, the tents had a social function or party and offered a nutritious snack such as fruit. These simple functions served to boost morale and distract from the day-to-day difficulties and realities. The value of the tent was best described by a young mother as "providing a sense of escapism" if only for a few hours to enjoy some companionship, have a fun moment and a laugh in the safety of the tent. The caregivers coming together to talk and share was psychosocial support in practice. Further, bonding or a fostering of familial bonds was evident in the way that the adults were attentive and cared for each other and all of the children present. This sense of community fostered by the baby tents was remarked upon during interviews with both Concern Worldwide and ACF staff.

Emerging Benefits

Numerous unintended and exemplary beneficial activities also emerged from the baby tents. Some tents have seen the development of work-for-cash programmes; for example, in one tent a Haitian artist taught the women how to make bags and hats out of candy wrappers to sell. Other tents have supported economic initiatives amongst the caregivers such as crocheting or knitting items to also sell. At one such tent it included the knitting of baby hats with the names of the babies of the expectant mothers in the baby tent. The baby hats were then hung up in the tent so when the mothers delivered their child the tent celebrated the birth and symbolically took down the hat to be placed on the newborn. Another baby tent put on a concert as the caregivers enjoyed singing, so the baby tent staff rented choir robes and organised a performance. Still another tent encouraged the talent of a good artist that resulted in multiple paintings of the baby tent and some works for sale. To be underscored is the fact that the baby tents are building on the caregivers' talents and interests and in so inherently supporting their psychosocial

health, providing them with enjoyable and meaningful activities.

Further Research

Holistic ECD responses in situations of emergency provide a window of opportunity to *build back better*¹ with a focus on the well-being of the young child and caregiver. The baby tents in Haiti provide one positive example supporting the young children and their caregivers emotionally, physically and for some economically while positioning ECD in the form of the baby tent as a valuable commodity within the community. However, there remains a call for continued research on supporting the very young child in emergency contexts and for more research, baby tents and beyond, to ensure that both holistic ECDiE is included in the immediate emergency response and that well intentioned interventions are empirically based and do not exacerbate negative outcomes for young children and their families in fragile contexts (Sims, Hayden, Palmer, & Huchins, 2002).

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¹ UNICEF uses the terminology 'build back better' in reference to the need to restore quality education in fragile contexts such as post-earthquake Haiti (<http://www.educationandtransition.org/resources/unique-programme-improves-the-quality-of-education-in-haiti-after-the-quake/>)



Above: Mothers and caregivers bring their babies to Concern Worldwide's baby tent knowing that the little ones will be provided a safe and shaded space to rest under the caring eyes of staff.



Above: The baby tent provides a safe and clean atmosphere for the babies to play with toys, crawl and explore the tent under the watchful and caring eyes of the staff.

Below: The artistic decorations hanging from the roof of the baby tent provide stimulation for the babies as a staff from Concern Worldwide hold them.

Photo courtesy of Lisa Deters



after the long road from relief to recovery. United Nations Children's Fund Haiti Country Office.

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