



Parents Make the Difference

IRC Research Brief

The **Parents Make the Difference** project in Liberia aimed to promote the wellbeing of young children aged 3 to 7 through reducing harsh punishment, improving parenting practices, improving child development, and increasing malaria prevention behavior. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) and research partner Duke University found that **the** **improved** **child** **development** **and** **reduced** **malaria** **incidence** **among** **children** **aged** **3** **to** **7** **years** **old** **in** **Liberia** **who** **received** **the** **intervention** **compared** **to** **those** **in** **the** **control** **group**.

An estimated 200 million children under the age of five in developing countries are not meeting their developmental potential due to exposure to multiple risks including poverty, lack of nurturing and responsive care, and poor health and nutrition.¹ Among these risk factors, harsh parenting has been consistently associated with poor cognitive, social, and health outcomes during childhood and across the entire life course. Research shows that positive parenting practices and a nurturing relationship between caregiver and child can buffer the

to promote children's numeracy, vocabulary, and communication skills; and malaria causes, symptoms, prevention, and treatment. Facilitators conducted a home visit to provide individualized

- 5. The intervention did not have an impact on malaria prevention outcomes.** Reported ownership and use of mosquito nets was high at baseline and post intervention for both treatment and control groups. There was no significant increase in mosquito net ownership or use, or malaria prevention knowledge and behaviors among caregivers in the treatment group.
- 6. Qualitative findings suggested potential unanticipated positive changes in participants' families and communities.** Participants reported decreased marital conflict and improved communication and problem solving within the household. Although this was not a focus of the intervention, some respondents described how changes in their own and their spouse's behavior (e.g., substance use) have resulted in improved relationships. Some participants also reported sharing what they had learned in the program with others in the community, helping to counsel other families, and serving as a role model in the community.

Lessons

- 1. Parenting interventions are feasible and can be delivered in resource-constrained, culturally**

improvement in children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development and wellbeing as a longer term outcome. Measurement of children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes is also a general challenge for the field of early childhood development, and more research is required to develop, adapt, and test the reliability and validity of early childhood development measures for culturally diverse populations. Further refinement of the intervention design, curriculum, and materials related may also be necessary to strengthen caregivers' competencies and skills to enhance child development. Additional content devoted to structured role play and practice, including activities with their children at home or in session, may help caregivers increase their comfort and skill with activities aimed at boosting their children's development. Similarly, the intervention only included one session on malaria prevention, which may not have been sufficient to change their knowledge and behavior in the short-term especially when baseline rates of mosquito net usage were high. Whether parenting interventions can be used to achieve multiple outcomes across various sectors (e.g., health, education, early childhood development, and violence prevention) or not remains an empirical question that requires further research.

- 4. More rigorous and longitudinal research along with cost analysis is necessary to strengthen evidence base in low-resource, post-conflict settings.** Recommendations from recent reviews of parenting interventions in low and middle-income countries as well as findings from this study point to the need for more rigorous study designs, including validation of cross-cultural measures, use of observational methods, assessment of child outcomes, and follow-up of at least 12 months post intervention to assess emergence or maintenance of longer-term outcomes such as the prevention of future problems related to child behavior and emotional wellbeing. Further research is also necessary to understand the relative cost effectiveness of various intervention models, such as the prevention of future problems related to child behavioral and emotional well-being and the scalability and sustainability of interventions when delivered using a public health and social service workforce model.

Endnotes

- 1 Grantham-McGregor, S., Cheung, Y.B., Cueto, S., Glewwe, P., Richter, L., Strupp, B. & the International Child Development Steering Group. (2007). Child development in developing countries: Developmental potential in the first 5 years for children in developing countries. *Lancet* 369(9555): 60–70.
- 2 Betancourt, T.S. & Khan, K.T. (2008). The mental health of children affected by armed conflict: Protective processes and pathways to resilience. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 20(3): 317–328.
- 3 Knerr, W., Gardner, F. & Cluver, L. (2013) Improving Positive Parenting Skills and Reducing Harsh and Abusive Parenting in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review. *Prevention Science*, 14(4): 352–363.
- 4 Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS) et al. (2008). *Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2007*.
- 5 National Malaria Control Program (NMCP) et al. (2012). *Liberia Malaria Indicator Survey 2011*.

The IRC is Evidence-Based and Evidence-Generating

Using findings from the Parents Make the Difference impact evaluation, the IRC is revising the intervention and improving evaluation design to address outstanding questions around the impact of parenting on child outcomes. We aim to further test the intervention through a scale-up in Liberia that will reach 1,000 families, including evaluating the relative effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of parenting skills training through a group-based format only, compared with the group-based intervention plus home visits. Through the IRC's program of research on the prevention of violence against children and youth, this study as well as research in Burundi and the Thailand–Burma border will contribute to evidence-based policy and practice around parenting and violence prevention in low-resource, conflict-affected settings.