Learning into action:

Parenting skills interventions to address child labour in cocoa

This brief summarises what works to implement parenting skills interventions in cocoa-growing communities. It draws on ICI's experience implementing different parenting skills training programmes in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, including the *Families Make the Difference* programme, originally developed by the International Rescue Committee, as well as a pilot project in Côte d'Ivoire that combined parenting and teacher skills training, developed by Investing in Children and their Societies (ICS).

Parenting skills, child development and child labour

Families are crucial to child development. Safe, stable, and nurturing relationships help children grow, learn and cope with adversity. A supportive family environment enables children to thrive and protects them from risks, such as child labour.

This is particularly relevant in cocoa-growing communities in West Africa, where most child labour occurs within a household context and caregivers play a key role in deciding what kind of work children do and under which conditions.

Because the family environment influences both children's development and their exposure to child labour, strengthening parenting skills is a crucial part of efforts to tackle child labour.

What are parenting programmes?

Parenting skills programmes aim to strengthen caregivers' practices so they can provide a safe and nurturing environment for their children. These interventions can focus on a range of areas, including communication, positive discipline, stimulation and play, behaviour management, child development and creating a nurturing home environment.

One example is the *Families Make the Difference* programme, an 11-session programme that helps caregivers build positive parenting skills through group workshops. Training is combined with parent support groups, where caregivers can share experiences. ICI has piloted this programme in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.

Why invest in parenting programmes?

- **Reduce child labour prevalence.** Parenting skills interventions help reduce child labour by strengthening caregivers' knowledge of child development and encouraging them to make decisions that better protect their children. In ICI's *Families Make the Difference* pilot in Côte d'Ivoire, hazardous child labour decreased by 54% among children whose caregivers attended the training sessions. Discover the full results here.
- **Increase protection from child labour harm.** Safe, nurturing, and positive relationships are crucial in protecting children from adversity and promoting their healthy development. These relationships can help mitigate the negative effects of harmful experiences. This is why encouraging positive relationships between a child and their caregivers through training can help compensate for the harm caused by child labour to the child's development. Discover more here.
- **Prevent child labour early on.** Parenting skills interventions reach caregivers of younger children, helping prevent harmful practices before they begin. Early support is known to reduce long-term risks and is more effective, and often more resource-efficient, than interventions introduced only when children are older.
- **Encourage positive parenting practices.** Parenting skills programmes provide caregivers with new knowledge and tools to put into practice. In ICI's *Families Make the Difference* pilot in Côte d'Ivoire, interactions between children and caregivers, such as talking, reading, playing and doing schoolwork together, increased by 25%. Discover the full results here.
- **Improve child well-being.** Positive parenting practices and reduced child labour are linked with improved child well-being. In ICI's *Families Make the Difference* pilot in Côte d'Ivoire, children whose caregivers attended the sessions reported having higher well-being than those whose parents did not attend the sessions. Discover the full results here.

> "The programme taught me the importance of talking with my children to understand their needs, to follow their schoolwork, and not to hit them.
>
> *Mother who participated in the Families Make the Difference programme, Côte d'Ivoire*

What works to implement parenting programmes?

Communicate clearly from the start.
Initial communication should clearly explain what the programme involves, who it is for, and what participants can expect. Beyond mobilising participants, this contributes to community acceptance.

Target couples.
Targeting couples strengthens the programme's impact, as both caregivers influence decisions about children's work, well-being, and education. It also creates space to work on couple communication, which contributes to a more positive and stable home environment for children.

Men's participation is especially important in settings where men are the heads of households. However, men might be reticent to participate as they might perceive these programmes as for women. Early sensitisation, messaging about the programme's benefits and the father's role in child development, and the involvement of community leaders can help encourage men's participation.

Use community structures as entry points.
Leveraging existing community groups such as Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) or similar structures facilitates mobilisation.

Ensure all interested households can participate.
In communities where demand is high, running multiple groups prevents exclusion and reduces frustration. This is especially important when the intervention is linked to existing community groups, such as VSLAs, as limiting the number of participants can lead to tensions within the group.

Run weekly sessions supported by trained and available facilitators.
Weekly sessions give caregivers time to reflect and practise the new skills. This frequency helps build habits and reduces the risk of knowledge fading between sessions. However, it also requires significant engagement and time from facilitators. Ensuring facilitators are available for the programme duration is thus key. Consider creating a pool of well-trained facilitators or backup staff to ensure continuity when primary facilitators face competing priorities.

Select appropriate facilitators and ensure they are well-trained.
Parenting programmes can be delivered by different facilitator profiles depending on the context, for example, in ICI's pilot, ICI Field Officers facilitated the training. Regardless of who delivers the sessions, they should receive training in child development, positive parenting, and group facilitation.

Include teachers to extend the impact beyond the household.
School plays an important role in children's development and well-being. Integrating a component for teachers in the intervention, such as training on positive engagement and non-violent discipline, or involving school management committees in the sessions, helps ensure the programme influences multiple layers of the child's environment. This reduces the risk of school-based violence or hazardous child labour during school hours.

Link with programmes that tackle child labour.

To maximise impact on child labour reduction, parenting skills interventions could be linked with other interventions tackling child labour and strengthening child protection, such as Child Labour Monitoring and Remediation Systems. For instance, awareness-raising sessions conducted as part of a CLMRS could include content on parenting practices to reinforce messages.

Create conditions that enable and encourage participation.

Allow participants to choose session times that fit their schedules and avoid conflicts with market days, farming tasks or religious events. Furthermore, giving certificates or organising graduation ceremonies can motivate sustained attendance.

Go beyond information sharing and promote behaviour change.

Parenting programmes work best when they go beyond sharing information and promote behaviour change. Training should invite reflection from participants, rather than impose practices, prescribe specific behaviours or pressure caregivers to commit publicly to certain actions, as this can push them away. Instead, interactive exercises, reflection activities, role-play, and practical homework tasks help caregivers apply new skills in real-life situations.

- **Create space for personal reflection and experience-sharing**. Inviting participants to reflect on their own childhood and share personal experiences, rather than telling them what they "should" do, fosters trust and engagement, and helps caregivers internalise the programme's messages.
- **Use appropriate visual tools.** Visual aids such as posters can help visualise key messages and support understanding, especially for participants with limited literacy. Tools should use positive, encouraging messaging rather than fear-based or negative imagery.

Collaborate with relevant local actors.

Partnerships with community health workers or other local actors can enhance sessions, particularly when specific topics are covered. Their involvement reinforces training messages and gives authority to the training.

Encourage knowledge-sharing within the community.

This ensures the programme benefits spill over to non-participants. Sharing sessions or community presentations at the end of the programme allow participants to showcase what they learned, appropriate learnings, and encourage wider community engagement. In ICI's *Families Make the Difference* pilot, some of this sharing happened naturally among participants, but planning such activities deliberately can further strengthen knowledge-sharing.

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