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Groundbreaking Breastfeeding Program Trains Guatemalan Mothers to Recognize Infant Feeding Cues, Decrease Malnutrition

PHOENIX (May 6, 2015) – 2.7 million Guatemalans are affected by food insecurity, with a striking 43 percent of children under age 5 suffering from chronic malnutrition—a number [Food for the Hungry](#) (FH) hopes to change dramatically through its groundbreaking breastfeeding training program for mothers of infants and toddlers. The completion of the pilot program, Reading and Responding to Your Baby, trains new mothers in rural Guatemala to recognize hunger cues in their infants and achieve successful breastfeeding sessions.

Developed in partnership with the [Carolina Global Breastfeeding Institute](#), a division of the University of North Carolina's School of Public Health and funded by a U.S. government grant from the [TOPS program](#) which is dedicated to excellence in food security programming, the training program teaches mothers that newborns begin to communicate their needs immediately upon delivery. "Over time, babies will be able to communicate more and more," the training material reads. "Our job as caregivers is to listen to what our babies are trying to tell us, to recognize what need or feeling they are expressing, and to respond to our babies' needs and feelings with love."

International breastfeeding expert Miriam Labbok, MD, MPH, IBCLC, director and professor at the Carolina Global Breastfeeding Institute, explains that by empowering a mothers' ability to recognize and respond to babies' feeding cues, and by strengthening the emotional bonds between mother and baby, the program can contribute to improved breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices.

"We believe it will lead to a decrease in global and chronic malnutrition as mothers find greater success in one of the most natural and nutritionally sound ways to care for infants worldwide," said Dr. Labbok.

"There's been a lot of evidence in early child development that suggests that cue recognition – focusing on acknowledging needs – rather than being controlling or laissez faire – is useful in cognitive and language development and for nutrition," said Karen Calani, FH's health and nutrition coordinator in Guatemala. "It does promote weight gain and physical development in children."

FH workers use the Care Group Model to train volunteers in educational messages relating to infant behavior and feeding cues as well as appropriate responsive breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices (i.e. what table foods are age-appropriate).

The volunteers then take what they have learned and, with an educational flipchart, share these messages with an assigned group of eight to 12 mothers every two weeks in either group meetings or one-on-one home visits. The volunteers also make regular home visits during the first month of life for first-time

mothers and mothers of newborns to assist with identification of behaviors and cues and to address any breastfeeding concerns.

The five rural communities selected for the Reading and Responding to Your Baby pilot program are located approximately 12 kilometers from the municipality of San Juan Chamelco in northeastern Guatemala. These communities have a combined population of 6,070 people, with an estimated 285 families with children under 2 years of age.

Before implementing the cue recognition program, FH health and nutrition staff noticed that many mothers in rural Guatemala would carry their babies on their backs or leave the baby in a hammock, making caregivers prone to missing the subtle cues that the baby is hungry (e.g., baby starts sucking on her fist when she wants to nurse).

“Often, the baby gets to the point of being so upset that he/she has a difficult feeding session,” said Calani. “The baby is frustrated and won’t nurse as long, or they give up early, which is particularly bad if the baby was born early or has low birth weight. They need every ounce of milk they can get!”

Care groups provide mothers of newborns the opportunity to voice difficulties and to learn feeding practices that carry over into the toddler ages, such as the value of active participation in solid food meal times, which can positively impact the amount a child will eat each meal.

FH has been working in Guatemala since 1976. Currently, FH is facilitating monthly sessions offering basic nutrition counseling, implementing care groups to nurture families with children under 5 years of age, helping families raise incomes and diversify the types of food that are available, and providing Nutributter as a nutritional supplement to children 6-23 months of age.

About Food for the Hungry

Founded in 1971, [Food for the Hungry](http://www.foodforthehungry.org) provides emergency relief and long-term development programs with operations in more than 20 countries to help the world's most vulnerable people. Learn more by visiting fh.org. Social connections include [facebook.com/foodforthehungry](https://www.facebook.com/foodforthehungry) and twitter.com/food4thehungry.

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