## BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

Children who receive a combination of nutrition and other caregiving interventions have improved nutrition and early childhood development outcomes. However, limited research exists on how to feasibly and effectively provide integrated programming. In 2020, USAID Advancing Nutrition developed the Responsive Care and Early Learning (RCEL) Addendum. Materials to support the promotion of additional components of nurturing care are often missing in nutrition and health services, but essential for children’s development. We conducted implementation research on the integration of the RCEL Addendum with existing infant and young child feeding programs in Ghana and the Kyrgyz Republic to assess the feasibility, acceptability, and effectiveness of the RCEL Addendum to promote optimal early childhood outcomes.

## METHODS

The RCEL Addendum promotes responsive care; early learning through play and communication; caregiver well-being; monitoring children’s development; and addressing feeding difficulties. We trained health workers and community volunteers via a cascade approach, then supervised them while they counseled caregivers using the addendum.

The study uses a mixed methods design and includes a pre/post survey of caregivers of infants 0–23 months of age (N=240 in Kyrgyz Republic and N=239 in Ghana) on caregiving practices. Individual phone interviews and pre/post-training evaluations assessed the adaptation process and training approach. We collected baseline data between March and July 2022. We assessed caregiving practices in household interviews using the Nurturing Care Framework Responsive Care Observation Tool and Early Learning Measure and Family Care Indicators.

## RESULTS

- **Effectiveness:** Health worker RCEL knowledge scores improved from 59 to 78 percent in Kyrgyz Republic and 75 to 85 percent in Ghana. More than 95 percent of participants felt well prepared to counsel caregivers post-training.
- **Acceptability:** Respondents noted the training was useful, efficient, relevant, and impactful, despite its density and complexity.
- **Challenges:** Translation was challenging due to new concepts and terms. Caregiver mental health and supporting children with disabilities were new and challenging, but important topics.
- **Ways to Strengthen the Package:** Reduce content, provide additional opportunities for practice, and provide more guidance on challenging topics.
- **Responsive Care Practices:** At baseline, 36 percent of caregiver-child interactions were responsive in the Kyrgyz Republic and 16 percent were responsive in Ghana.
- **Early Learning Practices:** Adult engagement in 4+ activities with the child in the previous three days was much higher in the Kyrgyz Republic (79 percent) than Ghana (17 percent). Mothers accounted for around half of the engagement. Children in Ghana had less access to early learning materials than children in the Kyrgyz Republic.

## KEY TAKE-AWAY

Adaptation and implementation of the Responsive Care and Early Learning Addendum in nutrition programs within diverse contexts is feasible and acceptable.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite challenges, the evaluation highlights the value and acceptability of the addendum and provides guidance for improvement. Endline results will provide data on the effectiveness of the RCEL Addendum in improving caregiving practices. Next steps include incorporating lessons learned to improve the generic and country-specific addendum packages and sharing results and lessons learned.