The Blue Box: a tool to support early child development

What is the Blue Box?

The Blue Box is a tool to help community workers and caregivers and families support early child development for all children. This includes children at risk of developmental delays (children with medical conditions and malnutrition, children living in challenging environments with high psycho-social distress) and children with disabilities. It mainly targets children aged up to 3 years, since this is the period of maximum development potential.

The Blue Box promotes positive parenting principles and a holistic approach for the development of gross motor skills, fine motor skills, communication and cognitive skills, through play and routine home activities. The approach used in the Blue Box is fully compatible with Care for Child Development (CDD) by UNICEF and WHO, and with the nurturing care framework.

The games and activities proposed in the Blue Box enhance and supplement the recommendations given in the CDD’s counselling cards. Indeed they suggest more specific ideas and instructions about activities and games that are helpful for parents of children who are not developing typically and for whom “regular” activities and interactions need to be adapted, modified or broken down into more simple components. The idea is to take the current trends in early childhood development and supplement them with HI’s disability and rehabilitation expertise.

The tool has been developed in the 90’s in Vietnam and Cambodia and since then has been revised and implemented in several programmes by HI teams; the most recent version is now used in a project targeting children living in refugee camps or displaced in Thailand, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In West Africa (Mali Niger and Burkina Faso) it has been used as part of a comprehensive nutrition programme and complementary to stimulation therapy for children with severe malnutrition and as part of community development interventions. In Nepal it is currently used in remote and underserved communities to support children with developmental delays, impairments and their families.

The “Blue Box” tool includes:

1) A handbook called *The Blue Box-promoting the development of all children through routine and play*. The handbook explains in an easy-to-read mode the core principles of early child development, early stimulation and play to help design information and care-givers education sessions. It also explains how to use the developmental journal and activity cards (see below) step by step.

2) An observation and monitoring tool to support community workers, called the “developmental journal”: a table showing the sequence of key development milestones in children from 0 to 3 years, covering 4 development dimensions (gross motor, fine motor, communication, cognitive skills).

3) A box containing 4 sets of cards (85 in total), each one showing a simple activity or interaction to be done with the child to foster the development of certain skills. Cards are meant to be used by community workers or therapists both to find practical instructions on how to propose the activity and to facilitate communication with caregivers.

4) The “Toy Box”: some suggestions on age-appropriate toys

5) Training modules, designed to be very participatory and practical

How do we use the Blue Box and who is involved?

a) GROUP ACTIVITIES

- Caregivers ECD education sessions in groups, for children at risk of developmental delays (malnutrition, humanitarian crisis).
- Inclusive caregivers ECD education sessions, mother groups in rural areas, usually facilitated by community workers; children with and without developmental delays; children with and without disabilities
• Combined with regular center-based activities: these may be parenting groups or workshops such as baby massage, toy making workshops.

b) INDIVIDUAL SESSIONS
• Individual sessions for children with developmental delays: ECD education session and specific play activities using activity cards. Might be at home or in nutrition centers, health centers, rehabilitation centers.
• Combined with therapy sessions delivered by rehabilitation professionals: early child stimulation therapy for children with malnutrition, physiotherapy
• Families of children with impairments and disabilities might need referral for specific interventions that are not included in the Blue Box such as provision of mobility aids, sign language training or medical attention and drugs such as anti-epileptic drugs.

Training, supervision and monitoring of activities
The Blue Box is meant to be used mainly at the community level and by non-professionals, however rehabilitation profiles (occupational therapists, physiotherapists, health professionals, psychologists, developmental workers) will be involved in trainings, supervision and support for most complex cases.

Training on the use of the Blue Box can be 3-5 days depending on the profile of community workers (type of experience and practice on child development, children with disabilities, child protection or developmental issues in general).

At the end of the training, community workers or Therapists using the Blue Box are expected to:

• Know principles of ECD and early child stimulation
• Know areas of child development and how they are interrelated
• Know how children learn and the importance to play
- To able to identify risk factors for developmental delays
- Be able to identify warning signs of developmental delays and atypical development and refer for further support
- Be able to convey key messages on ways to foster adult-child relationships to caregivers
- Be able to suggest meaningful activities in family/everyday life to foster development

Following the training of community workers, supervision, further coaching and monitoring should be ensured by professionals when needed.

**Expected Role of Community Workers or Therapist using the Blue Box:**

- Provide information on how children develop and what kind of stimulation they need
- Increase awareness on caregiver’s role and the needs of the kids
- Propose new activities to be integrated into the daily life and coach
- Refer to other services if necessary
- Monitor child development over time, check skills and family engagement.

The Blue Box is not a screening tool nor a rehabilitation action plan, rather a tool to support families in positive parenting to foster the development of their child.