

Overview of the Approach for Mobilizing Families and Communities in Ethiopia to Adopt Seven Feeding Actions



Alive & Thrive (A&T) is an initiative to improve infant and young child feeding practices by increasing rates of exclusive breastfeeding and improving complementary feeding practices. The first two years of life provide a window of opportunity to prevent child deaths and ensure healthy growth and brain development. Alive & Thrive aims to reach more than 16 million children under two years old in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Viet Nam through various delivery models. Learnings are shared widely to inform policies and programs throughout the world. Alive & Thrive is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and managed by FHI 360. Other members of the A&T consortium include BRAC, GMMB, IFPRI, Save the Children, U -Davis, and World Vision.

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Introduction

Interpersonal communication and social mobilization are part of Alive & Thrive’s comprehensive program in Ethiopia to improve infant and young child nutrition. They are essential in scaling up nutrition along with program advocacy and policy dialogue, mass communications, and strategic use of data to inform program design and implementation. This overview document describes the approach, often referred to as “Smart and Strong Family,” that was piloted by several organizations in Ethiopia to raise awareness in the community of the importance of improved feeding practices and seek the commitment of family members and influential community members to promote and adopt these practices. Some of the tools such as the counseling tool and child nutrition card are widely used throughout the country in the Government of Ethiopia’s Health Extension Program.

Smart and Strong Families taps into two fundamental strengths of community-based health promotion:

- **Trusted messengers.** The power of the community rests with its “trusted messengers,” that is, volunteers who visit their sisters, friends, and neighbors to discuss health actions and negotiate personal solutions to specific obstacles and barriers.
- **Early adopters.** In close knit communities, early adopters can be held up as models, as families that have overcome obstacles to carrying out recommended health actions. This leads to shifts in social norms village by village.

Individuals and communities can be mobilized to act if the actions are feasible and relevant to their specific context and viewed as beneficial to family and community. In Ethiopia, Alive & Thrive promotes 7 Excellent Feeding Actions. A Smart and Strong Family is one that adopts these actions.

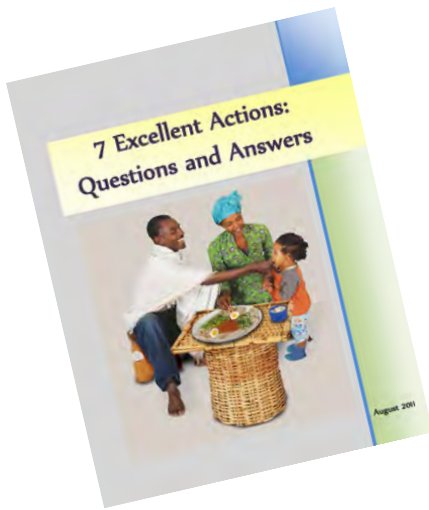
7 Excellent Feeding Actions

Priority feeding actions were identified through formative research and a VIPP (Visualization in Participatory Programs) exercise by the Alive & Thrive (A&T) Ethiopia staff. The draft actions were then vetted with the technical and behavior change team at A&T headquarters and during a workshop with stakeholders. Each of the 7 Actions has **3 components**:

- **Who** the action is addressed to – 4 actions for mothers, 1 for fathers and 2 for both mothers and fathers.
- The small do-able **action** itself.
- The **benefit** that a family will accrue by carrying out the action.



The most important modification that resulted from the vetting process was to reinforce emphasis on animal-source foods. Action #4, which encourages mothers to provide animal-source foods, is repeated as a separate action (#5) for fathers. Giving fathers specific responsibility for providing “eggs and milk” is an innovation in Ethiopia. No other group has specifically brought fathers front and center.



A **Questions and Answers booklet** was developed during the review process to respond to the most common questions parents have about the “why” and “how” of carrying out each action. Booklets were distributed to health volunteers, community leaders, and students involved in the Smart and Strong School program.

Seven Feeding Actions

- 1** Mothers, begin breastfeeding within one hour of your baby’s birth. This will protect your baby from illness.
- 2** Mothers, exclusively breastfeed your baby for the first six months. This is the best way to show your love for your baby.
- 3** Mothers, at six months feed your baby thick porridge. Thick porridge fills your baby’s stomach and so baby cries less.
- 4** Mothers, at six months, add a special food, like milk or eggs, to baby’s porridge. Special foods, especially foods from animals, are essential for your baby to grow strong and smart.
- 5** Fathers, it’s your job to make sure that baby has special foods added to his porridge. Special foods will keep baby healthy and strong.
- 6** Mothers and fathers, at 6 months in addition to breastfeeding make sure that your baby finishes three meals every day. Three full meals will help baby to grow well and stay healthy.
- 7** Mother and fathers, when your baby is sick continue to breastfeed and give your baby extra food. After your baby is better give an extra meal every day for at least 7 days. Extra food during and after illness helps your baby get back to full strength faster.

Teaching Tools

Two frontline teaching tools were developed by A&T for use in home visits and social mobilization activities.

- Counseling tool.** This laminated, 10-panel fold out “brief case” is designed for use by health extension workers (HEWs) and health volunteers during counseling in homes and health posts and centers. Its primary purpose is to clarify the actions to be carried out at the household level. Without a tailored tool to anchor the actions, scaling up can lead to “message drift” – distinct behaviors are modified, dropped, or become diffused into one another. Using the tool effectively requires practice and an understanding that any step towards a more positive health outcome is a success.



Health worker practices uses the counseling tool during training



- Child nutrition card.** This tool is distributed to families. The card encourages them to take action and monitor their personal progress. The primary goal of the card is to ensure that the 7 actions are clear to parents. With each action, there is a box for the family to check if the action is carried out. There is also a place to check “I will tell others about the 7 actions.” The card appeals to a family’s desire to give the child a head start for success in school.



Engagement of Community Leaders

Members of an 8-10 person kebele (neighborhood) committee are responsible for managing Smart and Strong Family (SSF) activities at the kebele level. At least half of the members are women. The kebele president, the agricultural agent, school director and the two health extension workers (HEWs) are members along with diverse community leaders such as a religious leader and a member of a women's association. To avoid duplication, an existing committee with representatives of these groups is recommended.

- Orientation and skills-based workshop.** The workshop is the motor that allows the program to scale up. The workshop launches the Smart and Strong Family approach by introducing the kebele (community) committee to the 7 Excellent Feeding Actions and the 5 Steps of Becoming a Model Kebele. A **workshop guide** outlines the content and methodology for each session. The second day of the workshop focuses on developing counseling skills in using the child nutrition card. Members from the Women's/Health Development Army—a cadre of community volunteers—and other community volunteers join the workshop for skills-building exercises. The success of the workshop is determined by the skill and confidence participants demonstrate when counseling using the child nutrition card. The launch workshop includes group work in which participants discuss the benefits and barriers of each action as well as explore ways of overcoming the barriers. Incorporating this micro-research exercise into community-based trainings helps workshop participants anticipate obstacles to behavior change and negotiate potential solutions. Participants receive a copy of the Q&A booklet on the 7 Feeding Actions to reinforce and clarify the actions.
- Target setting:** After the launch workshop, the kebele committee sets a target for the number of families that will earn a Smart and Strong certificate of merit for having achieved the 7 Excellent Feeding Actions. The committee then helps organize activities and guides the community towards reaching its target. Setting community targets has three objectives:

5 Steps to Beome a Model Community

1. Set up a model kebele committee and participate in the 2-day orientation workshop.
2. Organize a community meeting to explain the program, get community support, and build excitement.
3. Set a reasonable target for the number of families that will earn Smart and Strong Family certificates and conduct a mobilization event where the community target is announced.
4. Launch educational activities in the community such as community conversations.
5. Monitor progress of families receiving certificates and celebrate



- **Expanding reach.** Communities tend to underestimate the number of families that they have to reach – approximately 9 percent of households in Ethiopia have children less than 24 months old.
- **Extending community activities.** Community activities tend to have a half-life. The pace of activities begins to drop off shortly after the initial launch. A target extends the community activity cycle beyond its normal duration.
- **Developing collective efficacy.** Reaching the target develops collective efficacy – the notion among community members that, “We can do this.”

Community Activities

Home visits and group meetings are core activities of the Smart and Strong Family approach. Some communities also involve schools.

- **Home visits:** Health extension workers and members of the Women’s/Health Development Army make home visits. The SSF model recognizes that home visits offer opportunities for individual counseling and encouragement that frequently facilitates a mother’s decision to try a new action. During home visits, volunteers negotiate intermediate solutions with parents for proposed actions and “amplify the voice of the health worker.”



- **Group presentations and meetings** are a complementary community channel to home visits. They are not redundant. Group meetings provide social support, an indispensable component of behavior change. A&T developed **6 Community Conversations** to provide structure for group meetings. The “conversations” emphasize experience sharing and peer assistance for mothers who are having difficulties carrying out any of the 7 Actions. Community Conversations include a session for fathers and a demonstration of special porridge.



Mothers gather for a community conversation on feeding practices

School Support: The Smart and Strong School engages students and their teachers to reach families with children under 2 and increase the number of families carrying out the 7 Excellent Feeding Actions. With support from Alive & Thrive, several organizations piloted the Smart and Strong School with student nutrition teams, composed of an adult and 2–3 students. Alive & Thrive developed **9 Lessons** to guide students and teachers and a small **illustrated pamphlet** with the key messages and images used in the child nutrition card. The lessons familiarize students with the recommended practices and involve practice using the child nutrition card, role plays, preparation of a porridge enriched with egg or milk, and visits to families followed by discussion of the teams' experiences. Activities are often arranged through school activity clubs.



Grade 7 students demonstrate how they train mothers to enrich porridge for their children

Mass Communications

Mass media, especially radio, is indispensable to the success of the Smart and Strong Family approach by strengthening and extending the impact of community work. Radio and TV spots on each of the 7 Excellent Feeding Actions focus on how fathers can support each action. TV and radio dramas and a music video present the actions in an engaging and entertaining way. In some communities, on market days mobile vans show the TV spots and educational videos demonstrating the preparation of complementary foods. Local reporting of events such as Model Kebele celebrations reinforce success and spur on neighboring families, HEWs and volunteers, and other community leaders to reach their target.



Footage from TV spot on Action 1: Initiation of breastfeeding in the first hour



Local media coverage gives visibility to the issues and recognizes Local media achievements



Mobile van displays posters and transports video equipment



In Ethiopia radio spots reinforce community activities

Recognition of Success

Success in implementing the 7 Excellent Feeding Actions is recognized through certificates to families and public celebrations.

Smart and Strong Family Certificates

The role of these certificates is four-fold:

- **Provide positive feedback to families** and promote individual efficacy around the 7 Actions. Too often social and behavior change programs let positive steps by primary beneficiaries go unnoticed. Certificates help bring a family inside the health tent as “doers.”
- **Make results of preventive nutrition visible** in the community.
- **Stimulate grassroots communication** among parents. Certificates are a modest way to tap into pride that naturally accompanies any accomplishment. “What’s that? “We have an 18 month old baby, why didn’t we get a certificate?” To these questions, a proud father is always ready to explain how he helped his family earn his daughter’s “first diploma.”
- **Promote a shift in social norms.** As the number of families with certificates in a kebele grows, those without them are visibly not keeping up.

Important note: SSF Certificates are primarily motivational tools. They are given to families with children at least 8 months old. This allows 2 months for families to develop good habits around the 7 behaviors. Since carrying out the behaviors is self-reported, certificates are not proof a family is carrying out all 7 Feeding Actions.





Mothers proudly display their certificates



Don't forget the fathers!

Public Celebrations

Group and kebele level celebrations are an integral part of the SSF strategy. Celebrations allow the community to recognize efforts on all levels to promote better health. They serve to brand the kebele as a “Model” – an important step in improving the quality of all health promotion activities. Celebrations also provide an opportunity to:

- **Review** the importance of the 7 Actions in public.
- **Recruit** new parents for an upcoming activity cycle.
- **Set** a new target.



Community celebrates being a Model Kebele for improving their children’s nutrition

Conclusion

With doable actions, user-friendly tools for health workers and families, interpersonal communication, and community and media support, change can happen. The Smart and Strong Family approach works at multiple levels and through multiple channels to empower families and communities to take action to protect their children’s health and promote their physical and cognitive growth and development. The visual on the following sums up the Smart & Strong Family approach

Smart and Strong Families: Community Conversation

7 Excellent Feeding Actions

Teaching Tools:

- HEW support
- Child Nutrition card

Model Kebele Committee



- Participates in launch workshop
- Sets target
- Guides community towards goal

BASIC ACTIVITIES

Home Visits



Group Presentations



School Support



Mass media: Reinforces action and extends reach

FAMILIES EARN CERTIFICATE

Smart and Strong Family Certificate

FAMILIES WITH CERTIFICATE ENCOURAGES OTHERS



TARGET



COMMUNITY REACHES TARGET



Celebrates Success