

ZUNGUMZA NA MTOTO MCHANGA

Talk to your Baby

A supplement to the
Chole Mjini Trust Fund Newsletter
Issue 4



Chole has taken a lead in a remarkable social development project which is being piloted nationally across Tanzania – *Zungumza na mtoto mchanga*, or *Talk to your Baby*. The fact that the Chole pilot is being run by the Chole Society for Women’s Development and the Harambee Committee is testament to the success of the Chole Project’s commitment to empowerment and local decision making, and to the skills and imagination of the Chole community.

This supplement describes the background to the *Talk to your Baby* project and how it is being implemented on Chole. We will keep you up-to-date with the results in future Newsletters, as they come in.

INTRODUCTION

Janet Townend, a specialist in early language and literacy, has developed the TTYB programme and is now a specialist adviser to the national project. She has lived in Tanzania since 2008 and works with her husband David, who is also employed by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training as a VSO Education Volunteer Tutor / Mentor at Morogoro Teachers’ College.

The genesis of the project was Janet’s observations since 2008, in both urban and rural areas, of babies everywhere with lively eyes, curious about their environment, gurgling and chortling like infants the world over, but with little response from the adults around them. Tanzanian women confirmed that usually infants are not talked to very much until they begin to speak. Babies though are designed for language development, which is a complex natural process, with one key ingredient being the language they hear in their environment. The most important early influence is naturally the mother, and even small babies begin to recognise the tone of their mother’s voice and begin to respond to it long before they can reply. Early ‘language stimulation’ is the foundation upon which the child’s future development is built, and is very important because neurological studies have shown that the brain’s language development peaks in the first year of life. Research in the UK suggests that infants hear between 600 and 2,000 words per hour, depending on the educational level in the home (to put that in context, conversational speech is normally up to 150 words per minute in English) and even in the UK there is concern that babies are lacking the necessary early language input to ensure success later in school and in their future life, because lack of such early input seems to compromise later linguistic development and literacy skills, and possibly other skills too.

Talk to your Baby is being researched and piloted in a number of locations across Tanzania, to gather data and assess the most effective methods of improving the situation. As the first location to move from research and data gathering into actual intervention (see below) Chole has now taken a lead position in the overall project. Once the pilots are completed, in the second half of 2013, and the data are gathered and analysed it is expected that a campaign to disseminate the findings will be conducted nationally. It is worth noting that this project has the potential to provide major long term benefits nationally at very little cost.

THE CHOLE PILOT

The *Talk to your Baby* pilot studies are being conducted as carefully designed research exercises, using both a control group and an intervention group ie one group of mothers and babies will simply be monitored in their development, whilst a second group will be given training and mentoring in talking to their babies. For the pilot centred on Chole 30 mothers and their babies living both on Chole and the neighbouring island of Juani have been recruited as the intervention group, whilst another 30 mothers and babies in two villages on Mafia make up the control group. Because it is so important that bias is eliminated as far as possible the two groups have been briefed that they are participating in a study on early childhood development, rather than being given the exact details of the research.



Learning to use Dictaphones

It is a tribute to the empowering impact to the Chole approach that when the Harambee Committee was asked whether, alongside the CSWD, it could handle such an approach the immediate response was ‘yes’ followed by the comment ‘well now that we have changed, yes we can do it’.

The first step in the research is to establish a baseline – in other words, to document how mothers are actually communicating with their babies now, before any intervention. Enumerators were chosen and trained, and each participating family was visited three times, for half an hour each time; the visits were planned to take place at different times of the day – morning, afternoon and evening. The enumerators recorded both the number of words spoken in the environment, for example between family members, and the number addressed directly to the baby. Each entire half hour session was also recorded on Dictaphone, making the raw data available for later more detailed analysis.

Whilst the initial data gathering exercise was being carried out a second group of trainers / mentors was recruited and trained to manage the intervention with the Chole / Juani group. A two session workshop was then held to introduce this group to the concepts behind *Talk to your Baby*, to which both parents and any other important carer, such as a grandparent or sister, were invited. The first session explained the possible benefits, including better linguistic development leading to improved school results and job prospects, and also that it cost nothing! One immediate unexpected result was the strong support from fathers, who asked why they had never been told about it before.



The workshop introducing TTYB



Not everyone is paying attention!
Some of the infants take a break during training

The second session then focused on practical advice on how to actually talk more to babies, to break down habitual barriers. For example, advice was given on how to simply chat to a baby about what was going on, and to tell their baby what was being done around it.

Advice was also given on using toys as an aid both to talking to and stimulating the baby, during which some superstitious preconceptions had to be challenged, such as a belief that if a baby saw its own image in a mirror then the growth of its teeth would be hindered! All the toys used were made from material to hand, so for example an empty plastic bottle could be filled with shells to make a rattle. Following the workshop session the trainers / mentors will follow up each family each month, with the CSWD giving special support to the families on Juani island, which has a less developed social infrastructure than Chole.



Using a toy to chat

Although the data has to be gathered and analysed the immediate results seem to be remarkable, with babies visibly more animated and a real commitment from the parents. Riziki Hassani, Chair of the Harambee Committee, is even rumoured to have said she would have to have another baby to try it out for herself!

A DVD is under development to act as a reminder for the participating families, and a workshop is planned for July to introduce it and to get feedback and generally catch up.

After a six month period the enumerators will repeat the data gathering exercise so that differences between the intervention group and control group can be analysed, and then in March 2013 simple language comprehension assessments are planned for the babies.

FUNDING TALK TO YOUR BABY

Funding an innovative project such as *Talk to your Baby* is always difficult, because the results are intangible and speculative. The ultimate solution reflected great credit on a number of different people and organisations.

The Chole community was always interested in conducting a *Talk to your Baby* pilot, but the costs, though not very large, were clearly beyond the Trust's resources. At the same time the need for rigorous research in different urban and rural communities and ensuring sufficient scale to give statistical significance always meant that ideally research would be carried out nationally.

With no clear way forward, Anne and Jean de Villiers personally stepped forward to fund the initial stages of the Chole pilot, including recruiting the enumerators, providing them with dictaphones, training them and recruiting the participating families. The result was that the Chole pilot was able to gather momentum before the Lodge closed for the rains between mid April and the end of May.

Then in February the Trust's Chairman in London met a director of UBS to discuss the UBS Optimus Foundation, based in Switzerland, possibly funding a standalone *Talk to your Baby* pilot and other possible projects on Chole. Because Optimus funds projects with national potential and scalability it became clear that such an application for Chole would not be sufficient to meet their criteria. Nevertheless *Talk to you Baby* as a concept was clearly potentially very valuable and easily scalable, so a second meeting was arranged with a representative from Optimus which confirmed that in principal Optimus would be interested in considering an application on a wider scale.

Within a very few days Children in Crossfire, another wonderful charity which does have a nationwide remit in Tanzania, agreed, with the support of UBS Optimus, to make an application which would include the planned Chole pilot, alongside other similar pilots in other communities and environments. A herculean effort by Matthew Banks, Tanzania Country Director of CiC, supported by Janet and David Townend and Optimus, resulted in a comprehensive plan for eight pilot studies being developed and submitted for approval by a mid March deadline.

That application was approved, so now we are looking forward to Chole making an important early contribution to what could be a very exciting project across the whole of Tanzania.

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Training the trainers and mentors



The Chole *Talk to your Baby* team



This is interesting!