

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATORS

In developing counseling cards, communicators should be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the cards, verbal and visual ways of communicating messages, the appropriate use of visuals, and checklists for assessing how the cards are used by health workers and community volunteers.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Counseling Cards	
Strengths of Counseling Cards	Weaknesses of Counseling Cards
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ They provide credibility and recognition for the health agents. The cards allow access to homes. ▪ Good for the first introduction of new practices - very appealing. ▪ Allows the health worker to prioritize and focus on only one message at a time. ▪ The person seeing the image can identify with the person in the card without feeling threatened when the person does something “wrong.” “That person is like me.” Then the viewer is more likely to think, “I can try that practice too.” ▪ The “image” can be duplicated once the population has become familiar with it, so that it can be used in other situations to remind the viewers of the “idea” that the image represents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Expensive and difficult to design. ▪ Difficult to make the image culturally correct. ▪ Hard to get the image to convey the message you want conveyed. ▪ Counseling cards can get boring. Agents need to be trained to use them differently from one time to the next. ▪ The agent has to have very good skills to know which message or card to focus on in which situation. Training community volunteers to do so correctly is challenging.

Verbal Messages on Counseling Cards

Counseling cards usually contain a job aid for the user on the back such as:

- Key message (who, how, why) and supporting information to enable the user to lead a discussion and give accurate information,
- Stories to illustrate the benefits of the optimal behavior and the disadvantages of not practicing it, and/or
- Steps in using a visual or in negotiating a new behavior.

Examples from Ghana of Promoting Early Initiation of Breastfeeding	
What are behaviors?	
Answer	Behaviors are the practices you want the target audience to try and eventually adopt.
Example	The baby is put to the breast immediately after delivery to help ensure a healthy beginning for both mother and child.
What are messages?	
Answer	Messages are the words and/or images used to convince the target audience to adopt a behavior. A message is based on beliefs, barriers, and appeals learned through formative research. In Ghana the formative research revealed that mothers were giving sugar water to hasten the passage of meconium or first stool (often called “cleaning the stomach”). Water and prelacteal foods such as honey were given before initiating breastfeeding as a way of welcoming the child into the world. Messages were developed to address these beliefs and practices.
Example	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The first yellow milk, colostrum, protects against infection and helps to clean the baby’s stomach and eliminate the first black stools.” • “The yellow milk is God’s way of welcoming the child into the world.”

Design of Visual Images

Many visual images confuse rather than convince the viewer of the key message. Guidelines to follow include:

- *Know your audience.* Is the audience visually literate? How many years have they been to school? A population with no schooling may even have difficulty understanding pictures of objects and people. If people have less than six years of schooling, avoid using words on the front of the card.
- *Make sure the image is culturally appropriate* in every way: the clothes, skin and facial characteristics, hair color and style, the background of chairs, mats, beds, family members and items in the room.
- *Illustrate one key message.* This message should be self explanatory. Certain messages may be communicated indirectly. For example, in Bolivia fathers assist in delivery. A counseling card with a message on early initiation of breastfeeding shows the father by the bedside, which suggests his support.
- *Be careful with symbols* that are not universal, such as the use of an *X* over a bottle to indicate that bottles should not be used. This *X* may mean something quite different in some cultures.
- *Consider design options and time factors.* If an artist is hired to draw images, the entire process of drawing, reviewing, redesigning, and field testing the sketches may take up to a year. Another option is to take pictures with a digital camera and to convert them to sketches by manipulating the image on the computer. This could reduce development time. Remember that photographs may require signed permission. Some people find that a drawing allows viewers to imagine themselves in the picture more readily than a photograph that portrays a particular individual or community that the viewer may not identify with.
- *Provide illustrations of proper attachment.* Many counseling cards show incorrect position or attachment. Give an artist or photographer drawings that illustrate proper attachment, such as those found in F. Savage King's book *Helping Mothers to Breastfeeding*.

Appropriate Use of Visuals

Those who will use counseling cards should be trained in their use. This training should include modeling of how to use the cards, role-playing in the classroom, and practice in real life situations in the community. After introducing herself or himself, the communicator should engage the individual in a process of observation, practice, reflection, and action (OPRA).

Introduce Yourself and State the Purpose of the Visit

- Introduce yourself
- Ask if you can talk with the pregnant woman, mother and/or couple with a child under two years
- Relate the purpose of the visit: talk about child's feeding practices (Depends on what you already know about the family. Each organization must define its introductory procedures.)
- Ask permission to fill out an initial visit chart
- Use mother's and child's name during the home visit

Develop the Topic

1. OBSERVE

- Show pregnant woman or mother with a child under 2 years a counseling card
- Ask pregnant woman or mother: **WHO** is doing **WHAT and WHERE** and **HOW** do the characters in the counseling card feel about what they are doing
- Tell the accompanying story on the counseling card in your own words

2. REFLECT

- Ask pregnant woman or mother what she thinks about each person's actions that she heard in the story
- Ask with whom she agrees? Why?
- Ask with whom she disagrees? Why?

3. PERSONALIZE

- What do the women/couples/family/child in this community do in the same situation? Why?
- What do YOU do in the same situation? Why?
- What difficulties have you experienced?
- Were you able to overcome them? How?
- Do you know of anyone who has done something different than what everyone else does? What?

4. ACT

- What is the advantage of adopting the behavior shown on the counseling card?
- Discuss the key messages of today's topic
- Repeat the key messages
- Ask woman/mother/couple if they would be willing to try the practice shown on the counseling card
- Arrange approximate date for follow-up visit
- Let woman/mother/couple know where they can receive the nearest support

Before Follow-up Visit

- Review notes of pregnant woman/mother/couple/ and child
- Recall names
- Review questions discussed at previous visit
- Review willingness to modify behavior discussed at previous visit

Observation Form for Using Visuals

This checklist can be used during training and performance monitoring visits to determine the effectiveness of a health worker or community volunteer in using visuals.

- Introduces her/himself (name and organization)
- Asks name of pregnant woman or/mother with young infant; use woman's and infant's names
- Asks how pregnancy/baby is doing

- Asks if pregnant woman/mother has time to talk a little about her baby
- Shows respect and interest
- Listens and looks attentively
- Shows counseling card
- Asks what people in the card are doing
- Asks if pregnant woman/mother agrees with the practice shown in card. Why? Why not?
- Mentions appropriate messages:
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- Asks if pregnant woman/mother has any questions
- Asks pregnant woman/mother if she would be willing to try this practice
- Informs pregnant woman/mother where to find the nearest support
- Sets up a return visit