

A Study of the Family and Community Support Project in China

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The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) sponsored a Family and Community Support Project in China from 2001 through 2005. Implemented by the China Center for Town Reform and Development, local Chinese governments and relevant organizations, the project aimed at protecting children's rights and well-being, and at developing communities that help children participate fully in school and family life. Three communities, from Beijing, Tianjing and Shanghai, were selected as pilot communities for this project. At the conclusion of the project, UNICEF invited a team of specialists in the field of sociology, program evaluation

and other related disciplines to review and document experiences and lessons learned from the project.

The review and documentation took place in October 2005. To collect data, the review team conducted site visits, held meetings with project stakeholders, held individual and focus group interviews, reviewed project documents and reports and conducted observations. This article discusses the project experience in Da Puqiao community in Shanghai.

The Da Puqiao Community in Shanghai

The population of the Da Puqiao community is about 80,000, with 26,524 families and 36,560 women residents; children and youth up to 18-year-old number 9,542. Local residents enjoy good service from many well-established community centers and facilities, including the Children's Service Center and Workers Club. The community was selected for the project because the local government leaders expressed a strong desire to serve the needs of the residents. The Da Puqiao Community Committee provided full support to the project, which consisted of a Family Information Referral Service Network (FIRSE), a drop-in center and a tutoring program.

Based on the principle of "Centered on Children, Based on Family, and Supported

by Communities”, the project adopted a 3A method in its implementation, that is, Assessment, Analysis and Action. At the beginning of the project, the community conducted a needs assessment survey of children and parents to inquire about their perceptions on education, protection of children’s rights, and community service. Survey data were collected and analyzed. Based on survey findings, plans for project implementation were formulated. Using a participatory approach, project officers provided training on the Convention on the Rights of the Child for children, parents, teachers and the community social workers. Built on varied legal systems and different cultural traditions, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is a set of universally agreed-upon standards and obligations. It spells out the basic human rights that children everywhere have, including the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, social and cultural life. Additionally, to learn more about experiences on family and community support from other countries, the Da Puqiao community invited a U.S. specialist in the Family Information Referral Service Network (FIRSE)—a major component of the project in the community—to discuss its application in the Da Puqiao community.

The Family Information Referral Service Network

The goal of the FIRSE was to provide best information services possible to the

community residents and help children to develop to their fullest. The local government provided office space. A U.S. software company helped set up the computer network. By the end of 2004, more than 1,600 information items were stored in the FIRSE database, which covers health, education, welfare, domestic assistance, social services, and government agencies and so on. University students volunteered their time to collect information for the network. A student said that even though data collection took some of her study time, she learned a great deal in the process and, it was a “win-win” situation for her. Local residents may either call or come to the center to find the information that they needed.

The officials of the Shanghai community government contributed a great deal to fulfill their promise of serving the taxpayers. The local government officials and Women’s Federation leaders attached great importance to the pilot project. Experts on childhood education and computer network applications from different higher education institutions formed a project team exploring different approaches in the software test, data collection and categorization, and staff training. Support from the local government played a critical role in the successful development and implementation of the project.

Drop-in Center

Housed in the same place as the FIRSE, a drop-in center was established to provide

service to children up to 6 years old. The center has invited childhood education experts to lecture on nursing, nutrition, and other development issues of children. The center also invited a pediatrician to come to the center every Friday to answer questions that parents may have. There are many books for children to read and toys for them to play with in the center. The staff taught children to share and care for one another. Many parents expressed their gratefulness to the center staffs because after spending time at the center, their children have become not only happier but also more disciplined.

Tutoring

In the Da Puqiao community, there are some parents who used to be farmers from other provinces. Now they work on different types of low-paying jobs in the community. With their limited education and income, these parents were not able to help their children with their schoolwork, nor were they able to afford tutors to help their children. Some of their children had difficulties catching up with their school work. Therefore, the center recruited retired elementary school teachers to provide free tutoring for the children. These volunteer teachers came to the center every Friday afternoon, helping children with their Chinese, math and English. Some of these teachers also called children now and then offering encouragement and support. Feeling more confident, the grades of these children

also improved.

Impact of the Family and Community Support Project

The Family and Community Support Project had positive impact on the Da Puqiao community and the lives of local residents. It increased people's awareness of the Convention of the Rights of the Child and also helped solve many practical problems that residents had. As a mutual learning process, the project benefited everyone involved, including children, parents, volunteers and government officials. As a result, all parties now work more closely to develop the community that help children learn and grow. Because of the positive influence on their lives, residents of the Da Puqiao community expressed their strong desire to continue to develop the project.

It is worth mentioning that some concepts of the Family and Community Support Project, for example, respecting rights of children, is fairly new to Chinese. Chinese parents tend to have strict control of their children. It takes time and effort for people to absorb the concept and apply it to the local context in China. Some modifications may be needed. In addition, the support of the Chinese government played a critical role in the successful implementation of the project in Da Puqiao community. To expand the project in other communities in China, more policy support from the Chinese government on protecting children's rights is needed.