

Insights from a national network of community-based antenatal and postnatal classes

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Background – The first 1000 days of life is a time of significant brain and body development; an opportunity to establish a foundation for lifelong health and well-being. It is also a time of vulnerability to stunting experienced by 27% of children under five in South Africa. Stunting, identified when a child is significantly shorter for their age than expected, results from prolonged undernutrition as well as nutrition-sensitive factors such as maternal mental health. *Flourish*, Grow Great's national network of community-based antenatal and postnatal classes supports moms through this critical period to adopt evidence-based stunting-protective behaviours.

Intervention – Information discussed in *Flourish* addresses nutrition-sensitive and -specific drivers of stunting, including benefits of exclusive breastfeeding for six months, responsive caregiving and maternal mental health. Classes are interactively facilitated by *Flourish* hosts following competitive recruitment, evidence-based training and ongoing coaching support. Since mid-2018, *Flourish* hosts have reached ~30 000 moms nationally, while earning a small income.

Results – Qualitative analysis of responses from 214 women who joined *Flourish* antenatal and postnatal classes between October and December, 2022 showed extremely high acceptability with 100% reporting to have enjoyed their experience. The most cited reasons for enjoying *Flourish* were the opportunity that classes presented for new knowledge (60%) and companionship with other moms (37%).

Responses to the question “*What do you do differently after attending Flourish?*” revealed that 97% adopted stunting-protective behaviours, while 3% reported that they do not do anything differently. Most respondents (56%) reported multiple behaviour changes, 386 in total, covering 28 topics grouped into six themes using an inductive approach. The themes, such as ‘*Self-care*’ and ‘*Responsive Caregiving*’ speak to the *Flourish* curriculum, an indication of the fidelity with which *Flourish* is being implemented.

Lessons learnt – The high acceptability of *Flourish* facilitates multiple stunting-protective behaviour changes.

Key messages – Non-healthcare personal trained and supported to host community-based mom-and-baby groups can effect stunting-protective behaviour change.

Advocacy message – Investing in community-based universal evidence-based antenatal and postnatal classes are an effective behaviour change tool to support pregnant women and their children against stunting.

Keywords

Stunting

Community-based model of care

Behaviour change