

My First Baby Guide:

Addressing the Reproductive Health Needs of Married Adolescent Girls in Western Nepal

Background

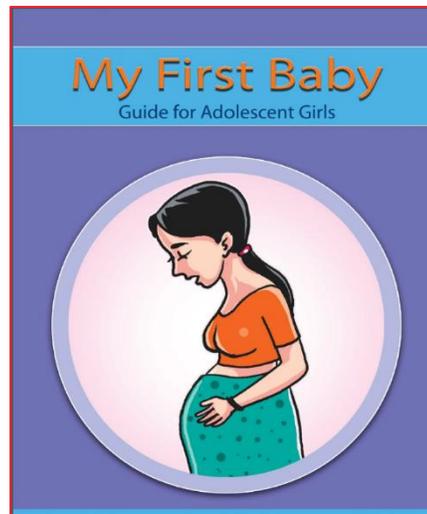
Due to the pervasiveness of early child marriage in Nepal, Save the Children recognizes the need for expanding comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services that reach married adolescent girls and first-time parents. This vulnerable population has unique needs requiring programs and services that specifically address their medical, educational, and emotional needs. Too often when a girl marries, she is expected to leave her school and family behind, thus keeping her outside of the health care system with minimal access to lifesaving resources and information on reproductive health, safe motherhood, childbirth, and childcare.

Global statistics indicate that early marriage and pregnancy are linked with higher rates of preterm birth, stillbirth, low-birth weight, stunting, and neonatal deaths. We know that younger mothers tend to delay seeking antenatal care and postnatal care much more than older mothers. They often do not understand how to care for themselves during and after pregnancy, and do not recognize danger signs nor access care from a health care professional accordingly. Young mothers and mothers-to-be are particularly vulnerable to iron deficiency anemia, a major cause of post-partum hemorrhage and maternal mortality, due to multiple factors including blood loss during menstruation, poor hygiene, and an iron-poor diet. Child marriage is significantly associated with decreased knowledge and use of contraceptives prior to the birth of the first child, high fertility (three or more births), and rapid, repeat, and unwanted pregnancies.

“I feel like someone wrote this guide just for me. I want to take it home right now and show it to all my sisters so they can learn about these things too.”

**–15 year-old participant from
Pyuthan District**

My First Baby Guide



The *My First Baby* (MFB) guide was originally developed by the Save the Children International Bolivia country office in 2010 for use with group social support sessions called “Mamas Jovenes” (Young Mothers). The Mamas Jovenes program in Oruro was a clinic-based intervention for pregnant and young mothers groups, with a trained facilitator that promoted a social support system among girls based on trust and common experiences. In Bolivia, the intervention was adopted by the Ministry of Health and continues today, even after Save the Children has phased out of the Oruro impact area.



First version of the *My First Baby* Guide

MFB Guide in Nepal

Save the Children has been working with adolescents in rural Nepal for more than 15 years through sponsorship programs and other Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health programs in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, Family Health Division, which agreed to pilot the guide in existing Save the Children program areas.



In 2012, sponsorship programs were expanded to include married adolescent girls. A total of 28 Married Adolescent Girls Groups (MAGs) were created in two districts in Western Nepal – Kapilbastu and Pyuthan. The girls meet on a weekly-basis and learn about and discuss topics related to nutrition, hygiene, sanitation, livelihoods and reproductive health, including pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum, and newborn care. Unlike the groups in Bolivia, in Nepal the groups are not supervised by an external facilitator at the health center, but are peer-led by selected and trained MAG group members.

These groups presented an ideal platform to adapt the Bolivian *MFB Guide* for the Nepali context. In 2012, before beginning to adapt it, focus groups were held with adolescent married girls, their husbands, and mothers-in-law. Conversations with the girls revealed that although they had a basic understanding of available contraceptive methods, they were far less knowledgeable regarding facts about pregnancy and routine care-seeking, with an alarmingly low understanding of the danger signs and potential complications of pregnancy and birth preparedness. They also expressed a lack of confidence in their skills regarding proactive self-care, breastfeeding, and newborn care. In some parts of Nepal, girls are so protected during pregnancy that they are not allowed to go

alone out of the house, prohibiting them from seeking health care in times of need.

Based on these discussions, the guide was developed and adapted to the realities and needs of young Nepali married girls and their families. It was pretested and adapted based on feedback from 12 of the 28 MAGs on the content, visual aids, and reading level, and then field tested. Select members from the MAGs individually went to local schools to teach a session from the guide with school-based adolescents, in order to determine the acceptance of the guide in a broader setting.

Following the field-testing, Save the Children organized a master Training of Trainers to train 20 national peer educators, developed a facilitators guide, held community awareness campaigns, and recruited and trained 46 peer educators (two for each group). There are a total of 26 sessions in the guide that are designed to be covered in a 6-month period during the groups' bimonthly meetings.

The next steps for *MFB* in Nepal are to engage with professional medical organizations, district and local maternal and newborn health providers, and other key stakeholders to train and sensitize them on the unique and special needs of pregnant adolescents, the benefits of healthy timing and spacing of pregnancy, delaying early childbearing, and age-appropriate care and support during labor and the postpartum period. Beyond the potential for improved health outcomes for mothers and newborns, there is a broader vision of helping to influence policy implementation on the age of marriage in Nepal, and allowing girls to complete their schooling.

Topics Covered in the *My First Baby Guide*:

- Healthy timing and spacing of pregnancy
- Fertility and menstruation
- What to expect during each trimester
- Importance of antenatal care
- Healthy behaviors during pregnancy
- Danger signs of pregnancy
- Birth preparedness plans
- Stages and danger signs of labor
- Newborn care
- Breastfeeding
- Family planning and contraceptive methods