



Improving Child Health and Nutrition in Nicaragua

On a large padded blanket, spread out on the ground, infants lie amongst brightly colored plastic blocks, their mothers talking to them and dangling toys within their reach. Nearby, toddlers and pre-school age children sit at small primary-colored plastic tables connecting blocks or using markers and crayons to make drawings.

For many of the children of this poor rural community, located along a rutted dirt road on the outskirts of the northwestern city of Chinandega, Nicaragua, this is the only chance they get to play with toys. With nearly 53% of the population in Chinandega living in extreme poverty, many of the children of this region barely get enough to eat, let alone toys to play with. Chinandega also has a high infant mortality rate of 49 per 1,000 live births.

In the community of La Tejana, mothers bring their children twice a week to the home of Josefina Garcia, where they participate in an early childhood stimulation program sponsored by USAID. Garcia generously provides her humble dwelling as the Rural Community Children's Center where infants are weighed monthly to monitor growth, and parents and children participate in activities that promote child development. Families gather on a monthly basis to learn how best to feed their children, especially when the child is ill or undernourished.



Photo: USAID/ Jan Howard

Families meet at a Rural Community Children's Center to monitor their child's development and receive complementary food.

These activities in La Tejana are part of USAID's Food Security Program for Nicaragua. More than 21,000 families nationwide are receiving assistance. Food is provided by USAID as an incentive for families to come and receive nutrition counseling on how to improve their diet with readily available ingredients. In many cases, just small changes in feeding habits, such as feeding infants mashed beans instead of just the liquid from cooked beans, makes a great difference in the child's development.

The prevalence of chronic childhood malnutrition, or stunting, fell to 20% in 2002, according to the last national Demographic and Health Survey. Nicaragua's Ministry of Health also reports that since the program began, the number of cases of children with diarrhea and malnutrition has been drastically reduced.

At these community centers, families also learn to prepare a variety of meals with the food provided by USAID. Recipe exchanges and cooking contests have resulted in delicious and nutritious meals that have helped improve children's health and nutritional status. Community members are trained to weigh children, detect adequate or inadequate weight gain, and provide counseling to help mothers improve their children's diet.

Testimony to the success of the program, are the smiling, healthy babies, who meet standard weight requirements. According to Eduvina Hernandez, a mother participating in the program, "We have learned how to prepare a variety of nutritious meals with the food we receive and our children are growing healthy and strong."

Success Story