The ICRI Way - “Circles of Caring” Model

Overview of the Circles of Caring Model:

Since ICRI’s founding in 1981, we have been committed to certain key precepts when it comes to meeting the needs of children, their families and communities worldwide:

First, ICRI believes that no lasting change can be made for children, families, or communities without true local “ownership” of programs or projects or change making.

Second, without the integration of key community leaders, parents, and those who experience the challenges sought to be corrected, the potential for successful results is significantly diminished.

Third, change will not be sustainable without a deep understanding of local cultural imperatives and their impact on all aspects of program planning, development, and implementation.

ICRI has continued to hold onto these beliefs throughout our 36-year history and we have learned on every project around the world how absolutely critical it is to the success of our endeavors. We have identified that early childhood programs are the most successful and sustainable when approached with a deeper understanding of local community issues. The challenge in the field of early childhood education is that, all too often, projects are developed too narrowly. Through our extensive work we have developed a unique, sustainable and scalable model called the Circles of Caring. The Circles of Caring model is designed to nurture communities from a 360-degree perspective in order to address and meet the needs of children their families and communities. For every project, ICRI carefully crafts Circles whose components come together to create real and lasting change and are supported by our grassroots community development core values of self-determination, local leadership, community collaboration and empowering the village to raise the child.

Our programs are delivered by ICRI and a team of local experts in the field of early childhood education and care, health, teacher training, and parenting. Programs work to assure brighter futures to many children around the world and assist teachers, caregivers, and parents by providing them access to modern teacher training and a parent education that builds upon their pre-existing knowledge in order to help them become experts on the growth and development needs of their own children. These highly innovative approaches, that follow the most important new concepts in our field, lead to the development of model early childhood centers that have the potential to transform the early childhood development landscape for generations to come.

ICRI has had the honor of collaborating with and receiving support from organizations such as UNICEF, USAID, WHO, regional and national governments, and hundreds of foundations. ICRI also works as an international social entrepreneur from within our NGO framework. We operate income-producing, “sliding scale,” model early childhood programs and a consultation division, often in collaboration with local governments and community based organizations. ICRI has developed and/or operated over 400 programs in over 50 countries.
Below is a typical example of the components that comprise a Circles of Caring project

**Methods and Strategies** - for each project ICRI utilizes a comprehensive set of methods and strategies to meet our goals, achieve our mission and realize our vision. They include, but are not limited to:

- Innovative Action Plan development including realistic fiscal structures to promote and ensure access.
- Sustainable non-profit entrepreneurial structure
- High quality, lowest cost, pro-child building/hut design (utilizing sustainable building design refurbishment with locally found materials whenever possible) to make state of the art early childhood and child & family programs
- Materials and resource development trainings using our book **Straw Into Gold**—on the use of local found objects and recycled materials to create all stimulating, brain building and cutting edge early childhood development activities, which are then placed in activity zones in any ECD and school program.
- Parent trainings
- Teacher trainings
- Parents as Teachers program
- Community strengthening
- Capacity building
- Systems integration
- Public education/awareness
• Evidence-based & culturally-informed practices
• Meaningful engagement of families and community members
• Incorporation of the latest neuroscience research on children’s brain development from birth-8.
• Identification and training of teachers from local communities to serve their own communities.
• Identification and empowerment of parents as community leaders.

1. Comprehensive Early Childhood Education & Care: Through a collaborative process ICRI will identify already existing early childhood education and care programs within a community and work to develop plans for how these programs can be improved and then expanded. Our interdisciplinary approach includes comprehensive, high quality and cross-cutting early childhood practices based on best practices in the field, along with our deep understanding of the latest neuroscience research into how young children learn and thrive. Our interdisciplinary approach includes a program based on the latest low-cost design approaches to high-quality environments. The Circles of Caring early education and care approach is housed in local preschools, with experts present to show teachers and parents how they can best work with their own children to actualize their child's full potential. Parents, teachers, and support staff gain a clear and succinct understanding of the way young children’s brains grow and develop.

2. Child and Family Health:
   
   **At the immediate level** - Each early childhood program establishes an inclusive health clinic on-site to support children, families, and local community members. ICRI works to develop child and family health centers on the sites of either early childhood programs or other early childhood settings; looking first to connect early childhood programs to already existing local health clinics. These clinics allow children and families to receive regular check-ups and developmental screenings. Parents can receive services to meet the needs of their children, including parent education resources and practices to address any health concerns. Pregnant mothers have access to prenatal care and healthy birthing environments. The community also receives regular trainings in physical health, sanitation, and nutrition. Practitioners work with parents to support the development of healthy sleep routines, nutrition, and care for their children.

   **At the mid-term level** we also look to increase comprehensive screening and assessments in child-serving settings, including early childhood education centers, child health centres, and home visiting programs. School and center staff are trained to determine if any children are suffering from developmental, health, or trauma-related issues, and the appropriate interventions and/or referrals for those concerns are implemented. Caregivers are recruited from local communities, and are informed and trained on the use of new screening instruments, as well as, culturally appropriate engagement. We learn from the local community and the local community leaders and elders become our strongest child health advocates. These instruments aid caregivers and health professionals in screening children for developmental or behavioural issues. Individuals are also provided training, tools, and resources on how to analyze results and provide children and families with the necessary support to ensure their needs are met in a healthy and culturally appropriate manner.
For the long-term we work to address the psycho-social aspects of child and family health. This component assures that mental health supports are part of the community's care settings and centers. The integration of culturally accepted healthy emotional supports enhances the community's knowledge and management of mental health and behavioral issues. Also included is a partnership with local family support services to expand and enhance existing home visiting programs to support the social and emotional well-being of all community members. This establishes healthy emotional bonds, providing appropriate interventions for at-risk children and families, and providing resources for families with individuals identified as having developmental or behavioral issues. Furthermore, home visiting programs guide parents in how to create a home environment that fosters healthy physical, social, and emotional development. We honor the cultural roots of family relationships and support home visiting programs provided by trusted community health leaders.

3. Teacher Training: The development of a community teacher education program is tied to our international efforts to train early childhood educators in the highest quality, state of the art, and sustainable curriculum approaches toward the optimal development of young children. It has been our experience that the right teacher training course, taught by locally-trained people, leads to statistically significant gains in the intellectual, developmental, and cognitive growth of children. ICRI establishes local and national "Teacher Resource Centers" where any teacher working in the programs, or in a local preschool or primary school, can partake in the use of found objects and local, culturally-relevant materials that we have stockpiled at our sites. With the materials they can create all educational materials needed for high quality early learning environments.

4. Parent and Community Engagement: The fourth "circle" synthesizes the other three circles into a comprehensive community leadership approach to having families, elders, and key community members work together to provide education and training on establishing healthy, safe, and secure family environments. Parent supports include, health and wellness workshops, leadership and advocacy trainings, one-on-one supports (including home visits) from peers and health professionals, and parent support groups. Community members are also trained to make their own parent resources for use in their homes with their children, through their early childhood program. Utilizing a book written by ICRI, Straw into Gold, educators, parents and caregivers have access to ways of making developmentally appropriate and stimulating toys and activities for children using found objects and recycled materials. A significant factor in this circle is the community led and supported parent engagement and education programs. Each parent focuses on supporting the healthy growth and development of their own children and every other child within the community by building on what parents already know. The ICRI team can also develop practical and accessible trainings and mentorship programs for local and national officials, including community-initiated dialogues, which meet the needs and structures of local and national governments. It is very important to include and educate government officials in a way that they can successfully become advocates for their local communities. From these types of engagements, spatial and political organization can emerge and work towards supporting and addressing other related needs and issues.
*For Circles Three and Four ICRI recommends that teacher, parent and community leader trainings be implemented based on the ICRI model, but culturally tailored and appropriate to meet the requirements of these communities, including advocacy trainings; empowering all three sectors to become advocates for children.