

# PREVENTING FAMILY SEPARATION

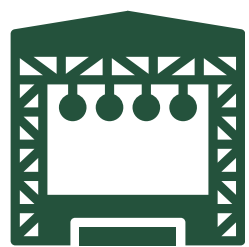
Report by Children's Future International  
April 2025

Using participatory theater  
as a behavior change  
campaign to engage families  
in solving issues that lead to  
sending children to  
residential care facilities in  
rural Battambang, Cambodia

## Background

From October 2023 - January 2025, Children's Future International (CFI) received funding through the Family Care First project under Save the Children and funded by USAID to prevent family separation, reintegrate children to family-based care, and support Residential Care Institutions to plan transition/closure in Battambang Province. The project built on the previous decade of work from Family Care First, however there continued to be support from local authorities, organizations, and families that believed children would be better off in institutional care. In an attempt to better engage with the community and shift public opinion about residential care institutions, CFI's care leavers, interns, and staff collaborated with Lakhon Komnit Organization (LKO) to create a participatory theater performance. The play featured a family struggling with poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, lack of resources caring for children with disabilities, school drop out, and community opinions believing residential care institutions were better options for caring for children.

***"A neighbor once told me that residential care was a good place for children, but after seeing the performance, I've changed my mind. I won't send my kids there."- audience participant***



**10**  
Performances



**1,215**  
Audience participants



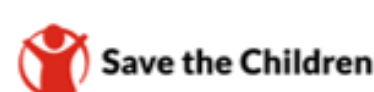
## Research

During January, CFI completed a phone survey, approximately 2-3 months after the performance had taken place. The survey reached 151 people who had attended the theater campaign (F=118) and 51 people in areas that only received the service mapping support (F=29) as well as collecting qualitative data via interviews the day of the event. CFI asked nine questions related to their attitudes towards the topics covered in the play (use of violence, importance of education, institutionalization of children, support services). The methodology was chosen to demonstrate a difference between the "traditional methods" typically used by NGOs via training to local authorities and service map distribution (posters) versus the "innovative" techniques implemented by using theater to engage audience participation in coming up with their own solution and sharing their thoughts and ideas through artistic expression. Overall, the results were very positive, with the percentage of participants from the group that received the forum theater intervention being consistently more in line with the key messages from the performance. All participants were asked the questions and allowed to make comments. Interestingly, participants who had joined the Forum Theater performance had significantly more comments than those who did not. This in itself demonstrates the success of the methodology of empowering communities to share their opinions and views and encouraging the community to discuss the challenges that they face.

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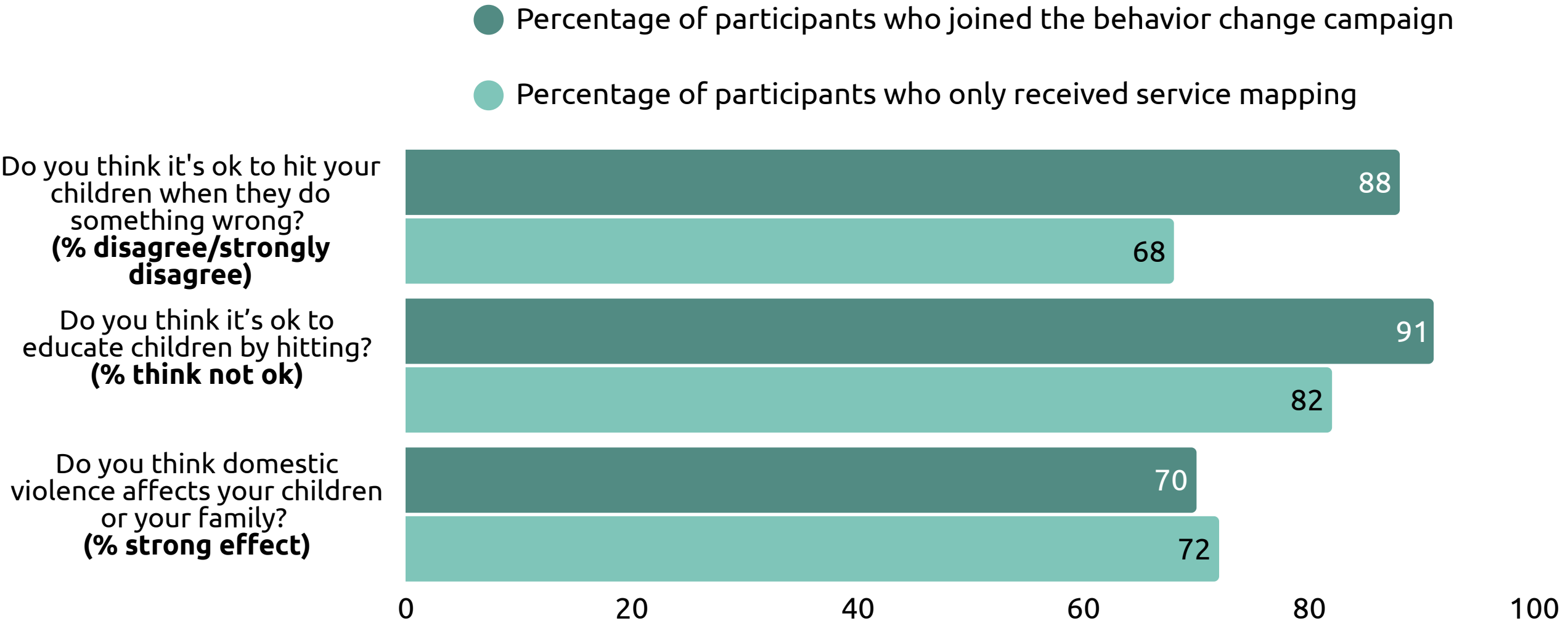
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Violence

The first questions were regarding the use of violence (see graph below Fig. 1). The participants of the campaign clearly understood the importance of not using violence as a disciplinary measure more than participants who had only received the service mapping. Participants understood that it was against the law and discussed the need to use words, guide the children, maintain good relationships and comfort, and avoid making the child afraid or in pain. Those that did think violence was acceptable typically expressed using it in certain circumstances, typically when children were especially misbehaving. Interestingly, there was not much difference regarding the effects of domestic violence in the two groups. This might be due to the fact that the scene of domestic violence in the play was not the one re-created in the forum section of the play where audience members participated in solving the problem.

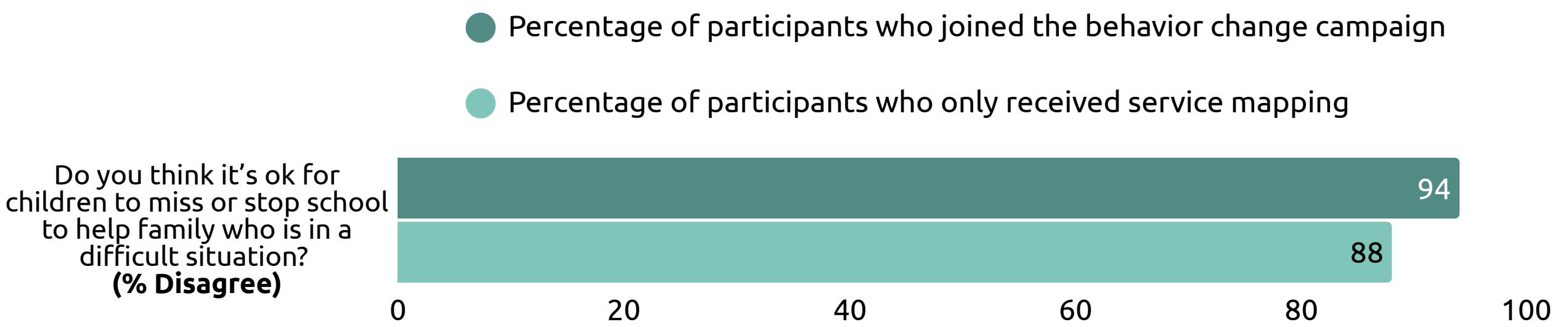


*“I used to hit my children when they made mistakes, without even listening to their side. After watching the performance, I feel deeply sorry—and I will never do that again.” - audience participant*



Education

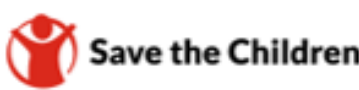
The next question was in reference to preventing children from dropping out of school. The percentage of families who understood was higher for both groups than the other topics, likely because the importance of education is more widely known in the community. However, there is a still slight difference between the two groups, with those having attended the behavior change performances feeling more strongly that it wasn't ok for children to miss school.



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***"I will never let my children drop out of school. I want them to have a better future than mine—one where they don't have to work so hard just to make ends meet." - audience participant***



## Sending children to residential care

The next questions were about sending children to an RCI. This area showed the most dramatic difference between the two groups surveyed, implying that the information was both needed in the community and the Forum Theater helped participants understand that the best place for children is with their families. Participants in the Forum Theater performance expressed trying everything they could to keep their children with them, including giving up food themselves and working additional hours. Families that continued to believe that RCIs were a good place for children focused on the educational benefits that children could receive in RCIs.

**In the future, continued messaging should focus on opportunities to receive a good education while staying with the family.**

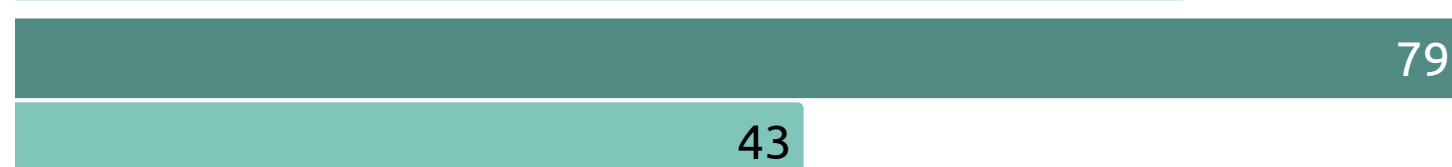
● Percentage of participants who joined the behavior change campaign

● Percentage of participants who only received service mapping

If your family situation is bad  
do you think the RCI is the  
best place for your children?  
(% disagree)



Does sending your child to an  
RCI impact them?  
(% strong affect/affect)



Sending children to the RCI is  
the last choice?  
(% agree)

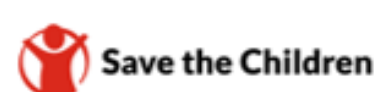


***"I didn't realize how much it can hurt a child to be separated from their parents. Now I understand the emotional cost." - audience participant***

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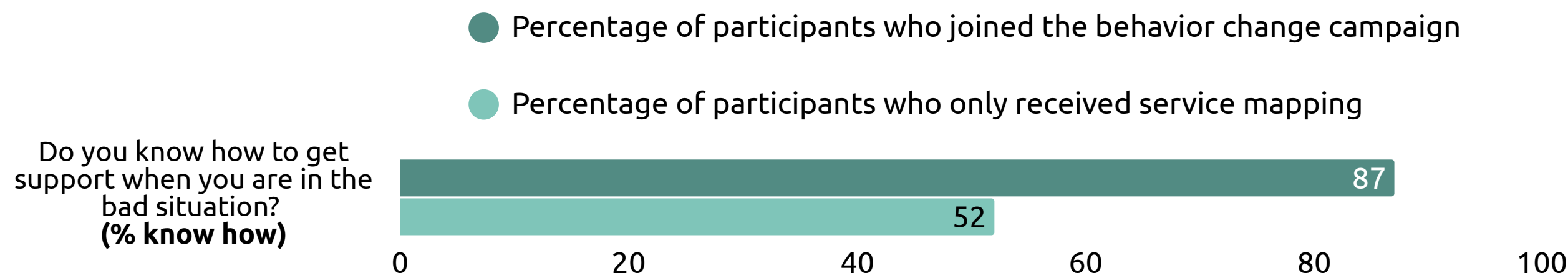




***“I thought about sending my grandchildren to residential care because of my difficult family situation. I felt like I had no other choice. But after watching the performance, I now know there are better options—and I won’t send them there.” - audience participant***

**Awareness of community resources for support**

Finally, CFI asked about the knowledge of families to get help. Most families in both groups identified the local level (village chief and CCWC) as places to seek support. The group who attended the Forum Theater performance were both able to identify additional places to seek help and were aware that the service map could help. This implies that while service mapping can be helpful, it is vital to pair the activity with effective dissemination that teaches key messages in addition to providing the resource.



***“I had no idea the government offered so many helpful services—like counseling, emergency food support, and vocational training. It’s reassuring to know there’s help available.” - audience member***

**Lessons learned**

- In communities where local authorities had a high level of investment in the project and collaboration with CFI, the audience recruitment was good.
- A raffle supported audience retention to the end, since some people leave early when the topic is close to their lived experience because it can make them uncomfortable.
- There was great audience interaction, especially with audience members who shared their direct personal experiences, collaborated in solving the problems, advocated for family based care, and proposed non-violent parenting techniques. We think this type of behavior change campaign could be effective paired with positive parenting workshops.
- Audience members had a high level of empathy for the characters and did not judge them. They clearly understood the messaging and performances were very strong and emotional.
- The local authorities were supportive in engaging in dialogue with community members, including talking about the poor ID card process and other support available from the government.
- Anecdotally, we have heard from some of our active cases after the performance how much it resonated with them and their neighbors and they asked their social worker if we could go back and do more performances. One woman felt more confident asking for help that when her father was sick, she wouldn’t have brought him to the health center because he doesn’t have a Poor ID card. But after the Behavior Change Performance, she felt confident asking for help from the local authorities so that she was able to bring her elderly father to the health center.

**Conclusions**

Although the project was cut short due to funding cuts, there is clearly potential for using participatory theater as a more effective means transmitting key messages and fostering community buy-in for key challenges within the community. CFI had planned to pair the campaign with an online campaign to share the scenes and lessons from the play, which can hopefully still be implemented without donor support.