

## Talking about Child Age

**The issue:** Confusing ‘common’ and ‘technical’ language when talking about child age.

### ‘Technical language’

‘Technical language’ is used in the WHO infant and young child feeding (IYCF) indicator definitions, when measuring IYCF practices in surveys and reporting on survey results, in recording child age for monitoring records and in WHO feeding recommendations based on child age.

In these circumstances, ‘age’ is stated according to the metrics that epidemiologists use to write age:

- Exclusive breastfeeding is measured on a sample of infants aged 0-5 months (read as ‘0 through 5 months’, meaning 0-5.9 months). This is a period of six completed months.
- The introduction of solid, semi-solid or soft foods is measured on a sample of infants aged 6-8 months (read as ‘6 through 8 months, meaning 6-8.9 months). This is a period of three completed months.
- When children are categorized into 6-month age groups, the following categories are used:
  - 0-5 months
  - 6-11 months
  - 12-17 months
  - 18-23 months

Using technical language, an infant should be exclusively breastfed from 0-5 months (read as 0 through 5 months, meaning birth through 5.9 months, or ‘up to’ 6 months), a period of ‘6 completed months’

### ‘Common’ or ‘Everyday’ language

When talking with mothers or caregivers, it is both appropriate and necessary to use ‘common’ or everyday language. This includes during counselling, action-oriented group education and mother support groups. We often say that ‘an infant should be exclusively breastfed up to six months’.

It would be confusing for a mother to hear ‘breastfeed your child for six months’, but see a counselling card that states ‘Exclusively breastfeed: 0-5 months’. Therefore, materials targeted at mothers, such as the UNICEF *Community IYCF Counselling Package* Counselling Cards<sup>i</sup>, use ‘everyday’ language. The UNICEF Counselling Cards use the wording ‘less than 6 months’, ‘6 up to 9 months’, ‘9 up to 12 months’ and ‘12 up to 24 months’ when talking about infant/young child feeding recommendations (rather than stating these age ranges as ‘0-5 months’, ‘6-8 months’, ‘9-11 months’, ‘12-23 months’).

***When recording mother/caregiver responses to 'recall' or 'knowledge' questions:***

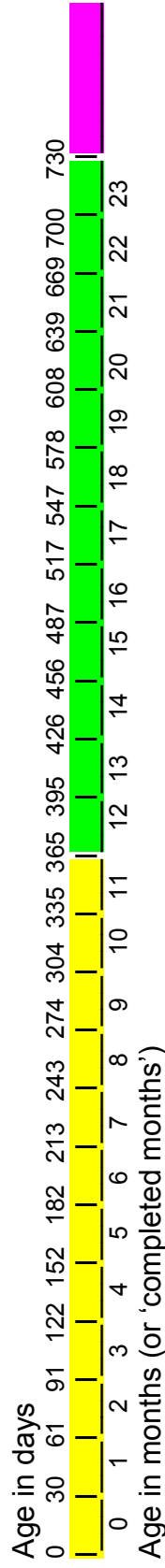
When asking mothers to recall 'messages' they have heard, a mother will respond in everyday language, stating that a child should be exclusively breastfed for 6 months (or whatever her response). To avoid error, do the following:

- In developing responses to a question that assesses caregiver knowledge (such as 'for how long should a child continue to be breastfed?'), offer and record options in everyday language.
- Record the response as exact months and not in categories such as 0-5 months, 6-11 months, etc.
- Record exactly what the mother says, and offer an 'other' option if the mother has not specified any age in an answer. For example, for the mother who says "until s/he walks", then an alternative response that specifies age must be sought.

**When using ‘technical language’, what does ‘0’ months mean?**

For the first 30 days of life (i.e. until an infant celebrates his or her 1-month birthday), a child is said to be ‘less than 1 month’. When age is stated in ‘completed months’ the child is ‘0 months of age’. Stating age as ‘0 months’ is a technical term that can be difficult to understand in practically (“how can a baby be age 0 months”) Written more completely, an infant may be ‘0 completed months of age’.

**How is age recorded in days rather than months?**



**When using ‘technical language’ and stating age in ‘completed months’:**

- 1<sup>st</sup> year of life (yellow) includes months 0-11 (365 days)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> year of life (green) includes months 12-23 (365 days)
- 3<sup>rd</sup> year of life: begins with the purple

**Age in days is calculated as:**

- 0-5 months = 30+31+30+31+30+30 = 182 days
- 6-11 months = 31+30+31+30+31+30 = 183 days
- 12-17 months = 30+31+30+31+30+30 = 182 days
- 18-23 months = 31+30+31+30+31+30 = 183 days

### **Why is it important to state age consistently?**

When using common language where technical language should be used (for example, in talking about survey or monitoring results), or using technical language when talking with mothers, errors and confusion can ensue. Here are three examples of how such errors can occur and some of the implications.

#### **Example 1: Survey data**

A sample of infants 0-5.9 months was included in baseline and endline surveys to measure exclusive breastfeeding. Here is how age was measured inconsistently in baseline and endline surveys.

- In the baseline survey, age was measured carefully and ‘technical language’ was used to define the sample. The sample assessed infants 0-5 months of age so only infants up to the age of 6 months were included. This means this sample included data for six completed months as recommended.
- In the endline survey, common language was used to define the sample. The term ‘children up to 6 months of age’ was used and interpreted as ‘children 0-6 months of age’ for the purpose of the survey sample.

Applying common language to the endline survey meant that the sample included data for seven completed months (0 through 6 months, rather than 0 through 5 months), This means that in the endline, there was a greater percentage of older children than in the baseline sample. Baseline and endline were therefore not comparable. Also, as older children are less likely to be exclusively breastfed than younger children, a survey that includes children over 6 months is likely to demonstrate a lower exclusive breastfeeding rate. Such a survey makes it more difficult to demonstrate improved exclusive breastfeeding in the 0-5.9 month population.

#### **Example 2: HIV and Infant Feeding:**

A study investigated the HIV transmission rate in different age groups. This included the HIV transmission in a sample of breastfed infants under the age of six months (0-5 months). Consider again two studies, one where age is measured precisely using technical language (0-5 months of age), and one with less precise age measures that results in children over six months of age being included in the sample. The longer a child is exposed to the HIV virus, the greater the chance of transmission. There is a greater likelihood of transmission rate being higher in the sample of children that is based on a seven month period as they have had longer exposure. Where the sample of children 0-5.9 months mistakenly includes children 0-6 months, the HIV transmission rate may therefore be overestimated.

#### **Example 3: Communicating with mothers**

Using technical language to advise a mother can lead to miscommunication. For example, advice to exclusively breastfeed for ‘0 to 5 months’ or ‘0 through 5 months’ may be misinterpreted as exclusive breastfeeding to the time an infant reaches the 5<sup>th</sup> month (rather than to the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> month). This may lead to inappropriate early introduction of complementary foods.

For clarity in communication with different audiences, and to facilitate consistent and careful measurement and reporting of age, it is necessary that we distinguish the appropriate uses of both technical and common language when talking about age.

**Quick check guide**

<b>Recommended technical language</b>	<b>How to read technical term</b>	<b>No. of completed months</b>	<b>No. of days</b>	<b>Example of common language</b>
0-5 months	0 <u>through</u> 5 months of age	6	182 days	Less than 6 months From birth <u>up to</u> 6 months
6-8 months	6 <u>through</u> 8 months of age	3	92 days	From 6 <u>up to</u> 9 months
9-11 months	9 <u>through</u> 11 months	3	91 days	From 9 <u>up to</u> 12 months
12-23 months	12 <u>through</u> 17 months	12	365 days	From <u>12 up to</u> 24 months

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF Community IYCF Package.

*Thanks to Mary Lung'aho, CARE USA, for drafting this on behalf of the IFE Core Group. For more information and to respond, contact Marie McGrath at [marie@enonline.net](mailto:marie@enonline.net)*

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