

play to learn



Bringing playful learning to children affected by crisis

Play to Learn is a trailblazing program from Sesame Workshop, BRAC, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), NYU Global TIES for Children, and the LEGO Foundation that is providing children affected by crisis opportunities to learn, grow, and thrive.

All children need opportunities for play to help them learn and grow. But for children affected by conflict and crisis, play can be especially transformative. Research shows that play is not only essential to healthy child development, but it can also help young children overcome adversity and build a brighter future.

Around the world, one in every six children lives in a conflict zone,¹ and the number of children caught up in conflict and crisis is only expected to grow. With such high stakes, Play to Learn is bringing playful learning opportunities to children and families affected by the Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises, while designing and testing program approaches and educational content that can be adapted and scaled across multiple contexts.

Play to Learn leverages the capacities of all project partners to pursue three core program pillars. First, we are engaging with communities affected by the Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises to understand the needs of families and meet those needs through a combination of educational media and direct services. Second, as we design and test new program approaches and content, we are generating evidence on how to promote play-based learning and mental well-being for children affected by crises globally. Third, through strategic advocacy, we are sharing what we learn with key local, national, and global decisionmakers to increase prioritization and investment in early childhood interventions in crises around the world.

The Power of Learning through Play

Play is an essential part of childhood and one of the most important ways children learn. Simple activities such as stacking blocks, building toys with found objects, or playing follow the leader help children build a broad range of physical, social, cognitive, creative, and emotional skills—laying the foundation for lifelong learning and well-being.

For children who have experienced trauma, play is a critical way to reduce stress, provide a positive outlet for anxiety, and build resilience. Play also promotes joyful, meaningful engagement between children and their caregivers—which research shows is one of the best ways to mitigate the impact of trauma and support caregiver well-being.



A Three-Pillar Approach to Expanding Opportunities for Playful Early Childhood Development

Direct Services & Educational Media

In Bangladesh, Play to Learn is reaching children and families in the Rohingya refugee camps and host community in Cox's Bazar. Through direct services in homes, child-friendly spaces, and health centers, Sesame Workshop, BRAC, and the IRC are promoting playful learning and nurturing care using videos, storybooks, posters, and more. During COVID-19, the project continued reaching families through safe in-person and mobile phone interventions to ensure we stayed in touch during lockdowns with psychosocial support and ways to promote playful learning at home.

In the Syrian response region, Sesame Workshop and the IRC are implementing Ahlan Simsim, the first early childhood intervention of its kind in the region. Supported by the MacArthur Foundation, Ahlan Simsim is delivering early education through the *Ahlan Simsim* television show and direct services. With the LEGO Foundation's support, Play to Learn is deepening the play-based learning aspects of the program, promoting playful parenting and fostering joyful experiences that help children learn and grow. **Together, Ahlan Simsim and Play to Learn are poised to become the largest early childhood development interventions in the history of humanitarian response.**

Research & Evidence

While the importance of play for early childhood development is well established, there is currently little research about what sorts of play-based early childhood interventions work best in crisis and conflict settings. The Play to Learn program sets out to fill these gaps in evidence by generating research—including a groundbreaking longitudinal study—and testing new program models that demonstrate impact for children and their caregivers. **As Play to Learn develops and tests innovative program approaches in Bangladesh and the Middle East, we are working with independent evaluators at NYU Global TIES for Children to generate evidence on what works and what can be effective across multiple contexts, at least doubling the evidence base on ECD in crisis contexts.** In addition to rigorous evaluations of impact, we are conducting process research to support implementation. Adapting these programs and their evaluations to meet the challenges of an unprecedented global pandemic means we are also expanding the evidence base on how to effectively reach children and caregivers remotely, despite new barriers.

Policy & Advocacy

Young children and their families are too often overlooked in times of crisis. Despite clear evidence that early childhood development programming has both immediate and long-term benefits for children and their communities, these interventions remain dramatically underfunded around the world. Globally, ECD accounts for just over 3 percent of all development assistance going to crisis-affected countries, and only 2 percent of humanitarian assistance is dedicated to ECD.² We are working to change this reality through strategic engagement with humanitarian actors, donors, and refugee-hosting governments. We will share what we learn through this project about implementing high-quality ECD programs in crisis contexts, empowering others to adapt, scale, and build upon these lessons to meet the needs of all children and caregivers affected by crisis, wherever they may be. **By bringing visibility to the clear needs of young children and their caregivers and demonstrating the value of meeting those needs through play-based ECD services, we aim to increase prioritization and investment in ECD in crisis and conflict settings globally.**



Watch, Play, Learn: Global Educational Video Content

There are few educational media resources that are easily deployable and applicable across geographies, and yet new crises are always emerging around the world. That is why we integrated a unique feature into Play to Learn: we set out to create materials that could be tailored to meet the needs of children affected by the Syrian and Rohingya refugee crises, but that were also appropriate to support children affected by conflict globally.

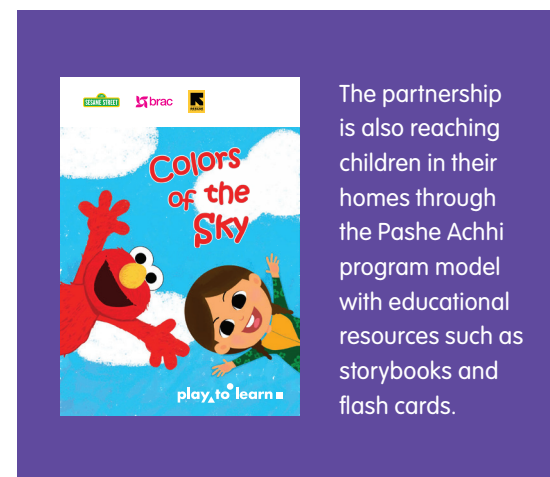
With this in mind, Sesame Workshop created *Watch, Play, Learn: Early Learning Videos*, a set of 140 five-minute animated segments designed for 3- to 8-year-old children. The thematically organized videos feature Sesame's engaging and beloved Muppet characters and are artfully designed to promote specific ECD outcomes in the domains of math; science; social emotional learning; and child protection, health, and safety.

Watch, Play, Learn was developed and tested in consultation with a global advisory council of ECD and technical experts in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Latin America. Through global testing, we analyzed which characters, themes, messages,

and visuals were globally appealing and relevant, allowing us to create a library of content that children around the world can learn from. The videos were designed to easily complement a wide range of ECD content and can be paired with additional materials to extend, reinforce, and contextualize key messaging.

Specifically, the *Watch, Play, Learn* videos can be complemented by locally relevant content that places the videos in recognizable contexts and uses culturally appropriate references and characters with familiar lives, such as our brand new characters Noor and Aziz, below.

Play to Learn and our partners are working together with communities affected by crisis to provide children with opportunities for play-based early childhood development, building strong foundations from which to learn and grow.



Introducing the First-Ever Rohingya Muppets: Noor and Aziz

At the heart of Play to Learn in Bangladesh are two new Sesame Muppets—Noor and Aziz, 6-year-old Rohingya twins who live in a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar. Rooted in the rich Rohingya culture and informed by extensive research and input from Rohingya families, Noor and Aziz will feature in Rohingya-language educational video segments, including wraparound content for the *Watch, Play, Learn* videos—enabling Rohingya children to see themselves represented in our content and to learn from characters who they can relate to, with storylines that reflect their daily lives.





Sesame Workshop is the non-profit organization committed to helping kids grow smarter, stronger, and kinder. Sesame Workshop delivers high quality early childhood programming in more than 150 countries.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) helps people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover, and regain control of their future.

BRAC works to empower people and communities in situations of poverty, illiteracy, disease, and social injustice, seeking positive changes that enable individuals to meet their full potential.

New York University, Global TIES for Children is an international research center that works toward a world where all children have equitable access to opportunities that allow them to thrive in an ecosystem where caregivers and teachers have resources they need to support them.

LEGO Foundation, which is funding the Play to Learn project, is dedicated to re-defining play and re-imagining learning to ensure children build the broad set of skills they need to thrive and succeed. The Foundation works with the LEGO Group to support governments leading on behalf of children around the world.

To learn more about Play to Learn, contact:

Lesley Bourns
Vice President,
Humanitarian Programs,
Sesame Workshop
lesley.bourns@sesame.org



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2. Moving Minds Alliance. "Analysis of international aid levels for early childhood services in crisis contexts" (2020). <https://movingmindsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/analysis-of-international-aid-levels-for-early-childhood-services-in-crisis-contexts.pdf>
3. García, J.L., Heckman, J.J., et al. "The Life-cycle Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program" (2016). <https://www.nber.org/papers/w22993>