



# Evidence for Investment

## New research on effective early childhood development programming in humanitarian settings

There are more than 100 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, and almost half are children. For the youngest children, these disruptions come during a critical window in their development<sup>1</sup>. Too often, the lack of early childhood development (ECD) programming in humanitarian contexts has left these children behind, and there is limited research on how best to reach and support them.

Ahlan Simsim (“Welcome Sesame” in Arabic)—a groundbreaking initiative from Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) funded by the MacArthur Foundation and the LEGO Foundation—is a multi-year investment to address those gaps. As the largest early childhood intervention in the history of humanitarian response, Ahlan Simsim is reaching children, caregivers, and ECD facilitators with programming, resources, and the support they need to thrive.


A commitment to research and learning is at the heart of the Ahlan Simsim initiative. [Three new randomized controlled trials](#) led by New York University Global TIES for Children (NYU-TIES) provide new insights on what works to improve children’s holistic development. **The findings indicate that remote programs can support children’s development and caregivers’ well-being and demonstrate the power of integrating educational media with ECD services. These results have significant implications for delivering child development interventions in humanitarian and other contexts where traditional in-person services are not available.**

The Ahlan Simsim initiative has reached more than one million children and caregivers through direct ECD services and playful learning in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria and more than 23 million children across the Middle East and North Africa through an award-winning locally produced Arabic-language version of *Sesame Street*, also called *Ahlan Simsim*. Several of Ahlan Simsim’s in-person models were adapted to remote modalities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. To assess the impact of key elements of the programs, NYU-TIES measured the effects of:


- A remote preschool program that uses multimedia content on child development and caregiver practices among mostly Syrian refugee families in Lebanon
- The *Ahlan Simsim* TV show on children’s ability to identify emotions and coping strategies among mostly Jordanian children in kindergarten classrooms in Jordan
- Audio-only phone calls featuring ECD parenting support alongside health content for Syrian and Jordanian families in Jordan

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, “Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2021,” 2022.


## Key impacts




**A remote preschool program—which integrated multimedia resources into a curriculum delivered by caregivers—had substantial positive impacts on young children.** The Remote Early Learning program, reaching mostly Syrian children in Lebanon, improved children’s language, numeracy, motor, and social-emotional development by engaging parents to guide their young children through learning activities at home. Importantly, positive impacts from this program did not differ by caregivers’ educational background or literacy level.



**Gains in literacy and numeracy from the 11-week remote preschool program were comparable to those seen from a year of in-person preschool.** Remote learning for young children and for families in low-resource settings can be challenging, but this success is evidence that a remote program for young children can be developmentally appropriate and feasible in settings where children do not have access to in-person services or programs.




**An educational television program boosted children’s emotional development and coping skills.** *Ahlan Simsim* is an educational TV program designed for the Middle East region. In Jordan, the program had a significant impact on children’s ability to identify emotions such as “fear” or “frustration” and to apply the coping strategy of pausing to take a calming breath in emotionally difficult situations. The research did not find a similar impact on identification of all emotions or coping strategies, which can be explored in future program iterations.




**Remote ECD parenting programs can be designed to improve caregiver mental health.** The Remote Reach Up and Learn parenting support program drove reductions in depressive symptoms in caregivers. This study offers a window into new ways to support caregiver mental health, which is a core component of holistic ECD. The facilitators who called caregivers in the program were specifically trained in responsive listening and non-judgmental rapport and used these skills during well-being check-ins with caregivers during each call. The positive relationships that this training fostered were key components of the program’s success in reducing depressive symptoms.


## The significance of these learnings




This is an important demonstration that caregivers can, with support from teachers and the use of educational multimedia resources, successfully deliver a comprehensive preschool curriculum at home—**challenging assumptions that caregivers with limited education would struggle to support this type of learning.**



This is an important finding for populations affected by conflict or climate crises, during health emergencies, for families on the move, or in other contexts where in-person preschool is not feasible in the short- or long-term—**challenging assumptions that remote preschool cannot significantly support child learning.**



Social-emotional skills form a crucial foundation for children’s healthy development and are especially important for those who have experienced displacement and adversity. **These findings underscore the ability of mass media to encourage social-emotional outcomes while reaching children at scale.**



In addition to benefiting caregivers themselves, reduced depression among caregivers is a long-term predictor of healthy child development. **This evidence suggests that well-being check-ins can be successfully incorporated into remote programming to encourage caregiver mental health.**

## The programs studied

### Remote Early Learning

Teachers employed by IRC used WhatsApp to call small groups of parents of children ages 5-6 three times a week over the course of 11 weeks. The sessions equipped parents with playful educational activities to do with their child to support emergent literacy and numeracy, social-emotional skills, and motor skills. The teachers also provided links to educational media resources such as videos, storybooks, and songs. Children received packages of worksheets, storybooks, and art materials, and caregivers received pre-paid internet bundles to facilitate their participation.

### Mass Media

Conducted in partnership with the Ministry of Education of Jordan, this intervention reached children ages 5 and 6 in their kindergarten classrooms. Children watched one half-hour episode of the *Ahlan Simsim* TV show each school day for 12 weeks in addition to their regular curriculum.

### Remote Reach Up and Learn

Community health workers called caregivers of children up to age 3 over a period of six months to discuss health, the importance of ECD, and parenting topics such as healthy parent-child interactions and age-appropriate activities to do at home. Facilitators were trained specifically to listen actively and build positive rapport with caregivers.



## Additional insights for future programming

**Programs designed with low barriers to entry and flexible participation options are key for ensuring access:** The Remote Early Learning program allowed caregivers to access content through low-tech WhatsApp or audio calls and participate from any location. Activities in the curriculum used materials found in most homes, such as utensils or cups, or required no materials at all. Additional program-specific materials were provided by the program itself, including simple ECD home kits and digital media content, and the cost of the calls themselves was covered.

**Multimedia content can strengthen learning at home and at school:** Between a television show, short videos, worksheets, storybooks, and more, the Ahlan Simsim initiative utilizes a variety of types of media to engage children in different ways at home and in school, boosting learning outcomes and holistic development across domains. This research indicates that the combination of these media assets is powerful, supporting parent-child engagement and learning during and beyond the program itself.

In addition to the insights we can gain from impactful programs, lessons emerge from the areas where there were not measurable impacts:

**Children and caregivers need enough exposure to content to create an impact:** Sufficient dosage is a key design factor in any program. The Remote Early Learning program involved touchpoints between caregivers and teachers almost daily (two to three 40-minute calls per week, plus follow-up in between) during the 11-week program, while children in the Mass Media program watched *Ahlan Simsim* for 26 minutes each school day for 12 weeks. We saw significant impacts on children in both programs. However, the Remote Reach Up and Learn program only included 7 to 10 minutes of ECD content in three calls per month for six months. This lower dosage may have been insufficient for impacting caregiver practices or child development, as there were no measured impacts on these exploratory outcomes.

**Shifting a program from in-person to remote delivery requires identifying and preserving core program elements:**

In the audio-only model of phone-based Remote Reach Up and Learn, which shifted to remote implementation due to COVID-19, key components of the in-person version (particularly demonstrations, practice facilitation, and feedback) could not be preserved due to the audio-only nature of the adaptation—and the model did not show effects on parenting behavior or child development. Maintaining these elements through videos or images could allow these components to be brought back in remotely.





Taken together, this research demonstrates the promise of ECD programming for reaching young children affected by crises, laying the groundwork for future investment, research, and scale:

**INVESTMENT:** There is enormous need for more ECD support in crisis-affected settings around the world. Learnings from this research can inform development of future programming, including remote programs and those that use multimedia or focus on supporting caregivers. These findings should instill confidence that programming in these contexts is not only possible, but can be remarkably impactful, encouraging additional investment in similar evidence-informed programs.

**RESEARCH:** These impact evaluations measured the effects of select programs in specific contexts, while additional qualitative research helped identify key elements for success. This research lays a solid foundation for further investigation; investments in future research can build on these learnings to test and refine similar approaches in other contexts or with new populations.

**SCALE:** The impact of remote and mass media approaches to ECD programming offers the possibility of reaching millions more children and caregivers around the world, often in the most challenging of contexts. These innovations—in leveraging caregiver engagement through remote programming and in the use of educational media for social-emotional development—can strengthen children’s learning at school and at home, offering them the opportunity to thrive.

### Our research portfolio on early childhood development in crisis contexts

The importance of ECD is well established, but there has been limited research about what kinds of early childhood interventions work best in crisis and conflict settings. Ahlan Simsim and Play to Learn, two groundbreaking programs from Sesame Workshop, the IRC, and BRAC, with funding from the MacArthur Foundation and the LEGO Foundation, are helping to close that gap. Together with independent evaluator NYU Global TIES for Children, we are nearly doubling the evidence base on ECD in crisis contexts by completing five rigorous impact evaluations of ECD programming around the world. These projects are generating research and testing new models to build knowledge about the kinds and costs of different approaches that can achieve impact for children and their caregivers, emphasizing play-based approaches.

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