play to learn

The Path to Progress: Building Champions for ECD in Crisis Settings

Play to Learn Advocacy Report #2

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SESAME WORKSHOP.

brac

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

NYU Global TIES for Children

The **LEGO** Foundation

Foreword

Play to Learn is a trailblazing early childhood development (ECD) program from Sesame Workshop, BRAC, and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), with funding from the LEGO Foundation and independent evaluation from research partner NYU Global Ties for Children. The project's goal is to help children and families affected by crises around the world secure opportunities to learn, grow, and thrive. The partners do this through direct services and educational media, research and evidence generation, and strategic advocacy.

This report is the second in a series of reports documenting the advocacy work conducted by the Play to Learn program's advocacy working group (AWG). The first report, published in November 2022, focused on advocacy activities and achievements in the first half of 2022, and presented four case studies illustrating advocacy successes from AWG members Sesame Workshop, BRAC, and the International Rescue Committee (IRC). There were several strategies the Play to Learn AWG used to drive change, including: conducting and deploying research; working in partnership and coalition with influential organizations; and building ECD champions in decision making positions.

All of the major advocacy efforts undertaken by Play to Learn partners have involved aspects of champion building. This report provides a deeper dive into the strategy of champion building, documenting how AWG members have: identified and developed champions for ECD in crisis contexts; collaborated with champions in strategic advocacy; navigated changes in leadership affecting champions' roles; and monitored success in champion building efforts. This report will also explore the academic literature on champion building, synthesizing these findings with the experiences of Play to Learn partners to suggest a definition of what a champion is and what a champion building process can involve.

In publishing this report, the Play to Learn AWG hopes to document its approach to champion building on the issue of ECD in crisis contexts, and to share lessons that may inform the future champion building strategies of similarly situated organizations and partnerships.

Thank you for taking the time to learn more about our project, and please reach out to advocacy@sesame.org with any questions, comments, or ideas for collaboration.

Introduction

Early Childhood Development (ECD) in Crisis Contexts

During early childhood, the brain grows more quickly than at any other phase of life, laying the foundation for future health, happiness, and prosperity.[1] But millions of children around the world experience these critical years while living in crisis or conflict situations: as of 2021, more than 1 in 6 children in the world lived in an active armed conflict zone,[2] and in 2021, nearly 37 million children were living in forced displacement.[3] A significant body of evidence demonstrates that prolonged adversity during early childhood can disrupt brain development, with devastating, long-term effects on health, learning, and behavior.[4]

ECD interventions support children and their families from birth to age eight. They are multi-sectoral by nature and encompass a wide range of services and supports, including health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, safety and protection, and education. Across countries and contexts, there is clear evidence that ECD interventions have both immediate and long-term benefits, including higher wages earned as adults, greater educational attainment, reduced violence, and improved mental health outcomes.[5]

ECD in emergencies (ECDiE) programming refers to the provision of ECD services in crisis- and conflict-affected settings. Research on the specific impact of ECD interventions in crisis settings remains limited, in part due to the dearth of ECD programming in these settings.[6] Despite its demonstrated benefits, ECD programming accounts for just over 2% of humanitarian assistance funding globally.[7]

The Play to Learn Program

Striving to fill these gaps in ECDiE provision, the Play to Learn project is a groundbreaking partnership between Sesame Workshop, BRAC, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and the LEGO Foundation, with independent evaluator NYU Global TIES for Children (NYU TIES). Established in 2018, the program leverages the capacities of all partners to make high-quality ECD programs an essential component of humanitarian and crisis responses. There are three core pillars of this work:

- Engaging with communities affected by the Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises to understand the needs of families, and meeting those needs through a combination of educational media and direct services;

- Generating new research and evidence to understand how to best reach and support children affected by crisis globally with play-based learning approaches; and

- Engaging in strategic advocacy with key local, national, and global decision makers to increase prioritization of and investment in ECD interventions in crisis settings around the world.

The Play to Learn Advocacy Working Group and this series of reports

The Play to Learn Advocacy Working Group (AWG) includes representatives from Sesame Workshop, IRC, BRAC, the LEGO Foundation, and NYU TIES. The AWG is responsible for the third pillar of the Play to Learn consortium's work: strategic advocacy.

The goal of the Play to Learn AWG is for local, national, and international stakeholders to prioritize and invest in high-quality ECD programs that utilize learning through play approaches, especially in response to crisis and conflict. Because of the large and growing need for ECD programming in crisis contexts and the desire to make systemic change, the Play to Learn AWG focuses on actors with the potential to drive investments, programs, and policies that are sustainable and scalable. Play to Learn partners seek to build strong working relationships with these government and institutional actors, and to apply lessons learned in program implementation to influence policy. The partnership has focused on influencing three groups of actors with this work:

- Humanitarian actors (such as UN agencies and NGOs) that are the key implementers and coordinators of many humanitarian responses;

- Donors, including both government and private entities, that contribute significant funding to humanitarian responses and, as a result, have a significant role in shaping policy and programming; and

- Refugee-hosting governments, which are key to securing ECD services for children living in these countries.

To reflect on and share findings from its work, the Play to Learn AWG commissioned a series of reports, to be published between 2022 and 2024. Through a series of illustrative case studies, the first report documented the process and impact of major advocacy efforts to influence the three core targets. This report, the second in the series, provides a deep-dive into one of the Play to Learn AWG's central advocacy strategies: champion building.

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Building Champions for ECDiE

The Play to Learn AWG and its members engage in a collaborative form of advocacy, seeking to foster positive working relationships with actors including governments and multilateral stakeholders who hold the keys to change. The Play to Learn AWG's theory of change focuses on convincing institutional stakeholders—including humanitarian actors, donors, and refugee-hosting governments—to increase prioritization of and investment in ECD in crisis contexts. Within this overall advocacy approach, one key strategy is champion building, which the first report in this series defined as: "A specific type of relationship building…a champion is a person with a high-level rank and/or influence within a government or institution, who uses their positioning to advance an issue or idea."[8]

This report dives deeper into the strategy of champion building, with a focus on the following questions:

- What is champion building and why is it important in advocacy?

- What is unique about champion building in the context of ECD or ECDiE advocacy?

- What are the key elements of the champion building process?

- How have Play to Learn partners engaged in champion building, and how has this strategy impacted the achievement of overall advocacy goals?

- What lessons have Play to Learn partners learned about champion building, and how could these inform future work by the AWG and the field more broadly?

Methodology

The Play to Learn AWG brought on an external consultant team, Understory Consulting, to document the process and results of advocacy driven by the Play to Learn consortium. In researching and writing this report, Understory conducted a series of interviews with advocacy staff representing Sesame Workshop, IRC, and BRAC. Understory also reviewed Play to Learn AWG-related materials (such as strategic plans, annual reports, and fact sheets), and conducted a literature scan on champion building in advocacy work. After synthesizing its findings, Understory facilitated a reflection meeting with AWG members to discuss the research findings, align on key themes, and develop lessons to inform future champion building work on the issue of ECD in crisis settings.

Champion Building as an Advocacy Strategy

Defining a Champion

In interviews with Understory Consulting, Play to Learn partners shared their own definitions of what makes a champion. An advocacy staff member at Sesame Workshop defined a champion as "a person in a position of influence…who takes on an issue as their own, who internalizes the value of it and independently supports the issue by finding ways to move it forward." An advocacy staff member at IRC shared the following definition: "A decision maker or influencer with oversight over the policy change we seek…who becomes a reliable advocate on our behalf to internally or externally shift dynamics." Another IRC staffer said: "Champions are those that have an internal motivation [to support the issue]…a champion is your partner through the whole [advocacy] process, from designing the campaign to celebrating victories." BRAC emphasized the importance of grassroots champions, with a staffer telling Understory: "Community members and frontline workers are key champions because they have the lived experiences and are the voices of community needs."

Across these definitions, there are several key attributes of a champion that rose to the surface, including: influence, motivation, proactivity, lived experience, and partnership. These attributes are also reflected in the academic literature. There is a significant body of research that seeks to define what a champion is. In 2021, Itad (a global development-focused consulting firm) released a report on champion building based on a comprehensive review of the existing literature. Itad focused its work on "grasstops" champions (individuals occupying leadership or decision making positions), and defined a champion as: "an individual who is influential, aligned, committed, and capable [in advancing an issue or set of issues] and who

demonstrates their commitment through action." Synthesizing various definitions, the report identifies 10 characteristics of a champion: "1) Influential; 2) Credible; 3) Connected; 4) Has integrity; 5) Committed; 6) Passionate/Enthusiastic; 7) Persistent; 8) Proactive; 9) Has relevant skills; and 10) Politically expert."[9] A 2010 report from the Aspen Institute's Continuous Progress Strategic Services puts forth a broader definition, defining issue champions as those who exhibit three broad traits: "1) Demonstrates awareness; 2) Promotes awareness and understanding; and 3) Advocates for improved policy and practices."[10] And, in a 2017 report, Scaling Up Nutrition (a network of nutrition-focused advocates) defines champions as: "individuals who use their platforms and influence to position [the issue] as a key political priority at global, regional, national and local level." Scaling Up Nutrition thinks about champions at three levels, ranging from grasstops to grassroots: "high level political and popular champions" (including heads of state and celebrity influencers); "working-level" champions (including ministers and Members of Parliament); and "grassroots" champions (including health workers, teachers, and community leaders).[11]

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Synthesizing the perspectives of AWG members and the academic literature, there are several common elements that make an individual a champion. Within these commonalities, there are also meaningful distinctions between different types of champions along the spectrum of grasstops to grassroots, and the ways each can contribute to effective advocacy. The following framework represents the Play to Learn AWG's definition of what makes a champion:

What is a champion?

- Demonstrates commitment to an issue and general support for the solutions proposed by the advocate
- Is aware of the dynamics underlying the issue, including political and interpersonal dynamics
- Has influence over the discourse surrounding the issue and/or the design and implementation of solutions
- Is proactive and demonstrates ownership in prioritizing the issue and advancing meaningful solutions

High-level policymakers

Have the ability to make decisions on key policy changes and/or resource allocations (e.g. elected government legislators, ministers, senior leaders of multilateral institutions)

Have the ability to drive the prioritization of an issue at the national, regional, or international level

Policy implementers

Have the ability to influence the implementation of various policies, or the translation of resources into effective programming (e.g. manager or advisor-level staff at government ministries/agencies, multilateral institutions, or implementing NGOs)

Affected communities

Have the ability to speak directly and credibly to an affected community's lived experience of an issue, and how policies/programs can best meet that community's needs (e.g. community leaders, frontline workers)

Champion building then involves the fostering of champions across these categories. It is a particularly personal and involved type of relationship building, requiring regular communication, trust, and mutual alignment. Whereas other forms of advocacy relationship building may involve short engagements or singular requests, champion building aims to form a long-term partnership between advocate and champion. In many ways, the champion ideally becomes an additional advocate, proactively seeking out ways to advance the issue as a priority, and with a level of power and influence that the advocate does not necessarily have.

As described by an advocacy staff member at Sesame Workshop: "Champion building is bringing people in a position of influence along on a journey on a particular issue.. It's not about convincing someone to do something. It's about helping them understand the alignment between the issue at hand and their own priorities, and equipping them with what they need to advance both." Meanwhile, an advocacy staff member at IRC emphasized the partnership aspects of champion building: "Champion building is entering into a partnership…it requires trust and transparency." Across the board, Play to Learn AWG members spoke of the continuous communication involved. For example, BRAC provided this description of its champion building efforts with leaders of government ministries: "We directly liaise with policymakers throughout our process, presenting the importance of ECD in various forms and participating in an ongoing dialogue with decision makers."

Why Champion Building is a Key Element of Advocacy

Though the relative importance of champion building as an advocacy strategy may vary based on issue and context, researchers and practitioners generally agree that champion building is a core component of effective advocacy. Champions provide validation, credibility, and amplification for the advocate's position, and often have the ability to directly advance change in ways that the advocate cannot.[12] For example, a grassroots champion (from an affected community) may use their voice to demonstrate that the advocate's goal is based on and responsive to community needs. Meanwhile, a grasstops champion (a parliamentarian, for example), may use their position to directly advance a policy that the advocate puts forward. As such, advocates often have a high reliance on champions to make the change they want to see in the world. According to an advocacy staff member with IRC: "Our goal is to influence and strengthen the existing systems so that they deliver a better outcome for children. We cannot do that alone…we need higher-level attention to this issue and that is where our champions come in."

The literature emphasizes the importance of having a diversity of champions, especially on complex issues involving multiple stakeholders.[13] ECDiE is one such issue. As outlined in the first report of this series, ECDiE is a complex issue, involving multiple sectors (e.g. health, nutrition, education, protection, sanitation) and a variety of stakeholders with the power to influence service provision (e.g. multilateral institutions, donor governments, refugee-hosting governments). For example, within the UN's humanitarian architecture, there is no dedicated cluster for ECD, but there are several clusters that must be engaged in order to meet the holistic needs of young children and their families in humanitarian settings.[14] Because of the multi-sectoral nature of ECDiE, advocates often need to develop multiple champions across sectors, and also have champions that understand ECD from a holistic perspective.

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The Elements of Champion Building

Based on the experiences of Play to Learn partners and a scan of the literature, this report breaks the champion building process into five stages (detailed in the chart below) that appear common to champion building efforts. While these stages are useful for designing a champion building strategy and as a structure for this report, both the academic literature and the experiences of Play to Learn AWG members emphasize that champion building is "not always linear," and that any champion engagement strategy must be "fluid and dynamic."[15] As such, the following stages provide a high-level way to think about the champion building process, but champion building in the real world does not always follow a linear trajectory, and these phases are often pursued simultaneously or in other non-sequential ways.

Stage	Description
Identifying potential champions	• Mapping the stakeholders involved in a particular policy or programming decision • Among these stakeholders, identifying and prioritizing potential champions with the power to advance the change sought • Identifying what success looks like with each potential champion, or how they can contribute to success
Establishing relationships with champions	• Making contact with potential champions, providing information and establishing the importance of the advocate's issue, and finding opportunities to collaborate • Understanding champions' priorities and helping them achieve them • Maintaining regular communication with champions and providing support as needed
Leveraging champions in advocacy work	• Identifying critical moments to collaborate with champions in strategic advocacy, and co-designing approaches for maximum impact • Supporting champions in their own self-directed advocacy
Monitoring the impact of champion building	• Evaluating the relationships between the advocate and their champions, the champions' commitment to the issue, and the champions' impact on the success of the overall advocacy strategy • Making adjustments to the champion building strategy based on this evaluation
Navigating changes in leadership impacting champions	• Analyzing shifting dynamics and maintaining championship through leadership transitions (via identification of new champions, or building of multiple champions across political divides)

The next sections of the report detail each phase of the champion building process, including key insights from the academic literature and illustrative examples from the work of Play to Learn partners.

Identifying Potential Champions

A logical place to begin discussion of the champion building process is how to identify potential champions. According to the literature, there are several key factors that mark an individual as a potential champion:

- **Influence**[16]**:** Does the individual currently have, or will they in the future have, influence over decisions related to the issue?

- **Commitment**[17]**:** Has the individual demonstrated a commitment to the issue, or a level of interest that suggests the possibility of a future commitment?

- **Alignment**[18]**:** Does the individual's position on the issue align with the specific advocacy goal? Even if there isn't full alignment, is there enough common ground to enable collaboration and partnership?

- **Capacity and capability**[19]**:** Does the individual have the capacity (time, resources) and capability (skills, expertise) to fill a champion role? If the individual doesn't currently have these capabilities, can they be developed over the course of the champion building process?

One common way to identify potential champions is by stakeholder mapping. Stakeholder mapping refers to a process of identifying all of the actors who may impact a particular advocacy outcome (e.g. a desired policy change) and mapping those actors according to their institutional affiliations and/or roles in the process. The picture created here can be an essential tool in champion building, allowing the advocate to select champions who influence key stages of the process and who may be committed, aligned, and capable.

For example, when IRC and Sesame Workshop were looking for champions to advance the prioritization of ECD by the United States government, stakeholder mapping was a key first step. According to an advocacy staff member at IRC: "We did an extensive exercise going through all of the folks in Congress and assessing who we could target, based on who they are, what office they were in, what committees they sat on, and what positions they'd taken." This stakeholder analysis led to champion building efforts with specific targets—for example, identifying Senator Bob Casey and Representative Ted Deutch as potential co-sponsors of the MINDS Act (a piece of legislation co-written by IRC to address mental health issues through US foreign assistance). A similar stakeholder analysis was conducted by a different group of organizations to identify possible sponsors for the landmark Global Child Thrive Act, which became law in January 2021 and formalized the US government's commitment to ECD in US foreign assistance.[20]

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While an up-front stakeholder analysis can be a key step in identifying potential champions, there are

also champions who emerge unexpectedly, while the advocacy work is already underway. This speaks to the dynamic nature of champion building work. One example of this real-time champion identification comes from IRC's advocacy work to scale up school readiness programs in Iraq.* The goal of this advocacy campaign was to encourage the Iraqi government, through the Ministry of Education, to expand access to the school readiness program for incoming first graders. IRC already had a strong champion within the Ministry, the Deputy Director of the Technical Committee for ECD ("the Deputy Director"). However, while advocating for expansion of the school readiness program, it became clear that IRC would also need a champion within the Ministry's Department of Training and Supervision, which has oversight over teacher training. An IRC advocacy staff member told Understory: "We didn't include them [the Department of Training and Supervision] from the beginning, and that was a mistake on our side…we realized we needed a second champion in that department and we had to make up for that, and in that work, we gained a big champion."

Through an assessment of department staff, IRC identified a leader within the Department of Training and Supervision who was motivated to work on ECD, and whose priorities aligned with those of the project. Once this new champion was engaged in the process, IRC collaborated with her to advance the school readiness program. The champion formally and publicly endorsed the school readiness program, as did the Ministry of Education, and the program was included in the country's annual education plan. The implications of this win were significant. The school readiness program pilot reached 119 schools in 2021, but after being included in Iraq's annual education plan, the program expanded to reach 1,800 schools in 2022. IRC's experience in Iraq points to the nonlinear nature of the champion building process, and the need for nimbleness in champion building work.

The literature on champion building emphasizes the importance of identifying a diversity of potential champions. The Itad report recommends that the advocate "be intentional about expanding the diversity of voices advocating for an issue."[21] There are several ways to think about diversity among champions. One has to do with demographic diversity, and in particular ensuring that the voices of affected communities are incorporated. According to a BRAC staffer: "The need for change should be voiced from the affected communities themselves, whether it's the forcibly displaced Rohingya people living in Cox's Bazar, or the host communities in Bangladesh, for example."

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This philosophy emphasizes the importance of grassroots champion building as a way to shift power to affected communities and to ensure that advocacy work is responsive to community needs. IRC's work in the Middle East also relies on grassroots champions. For example, in its ECD advocacy in Syria, IRC partnered with several local organizations to form the ECD Syria Network in 2021. IRC held workshops for partners to learn about ECD in greater depth, and to build partners' capacity as advocates. Within this coalition, IRC considers the Hurras Network (a small, local NGO focused on child protection) to be a significant champion. IRC has no direct access to government decision makers in Syria and so relies on the Hurras Network both to represent the needs of the community and to liaise with the government.

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* The program, co-developed by IRC and the Iraqi Ministry of Education, uses characters from the *Ahlan Simsim* TV show to teach key concepts, and uses interactive activities to develop socioemotional skills. While the programming is not PtL funded, it was informed by and based on learnings from the school-readiness PtL work in Jordan and the adjacent advocacy work is enabled through systems strengthening capacity funded by PtL.

Another important way to think about diversity among champions is by level or function. For example, both BRAC and IRC emphasized the need for champions at both the policymaking and policy implementation levels. High-level policymakers are necessary for their decision-making influence and their ability to "understand the vision," and policy implementers are also necessary to translate this vision into reality on the ground. Sesame Workshop echoed this point of view, with an advocacy staff member telling Understory: "You can have leadership from on high, but if those people aren't going to be doing the follow-through, then you can run into trouble."

There is a need for champions at both the policymaking and policy implementation levels. High-level policymakers are necessary for their decision-making influence and their ability to "understand the vision," and policy implementers are also necessary to translate this vision into reality on the ground.

While identifying and cultivating a diversity of champions is key to success, advocates must also be wary of targeting too many champions. The Itad

report recommends: "Get the balance right between quality and quantity. Many stress that quality is more important than quantity; that is, a smaller number of effective champions is better than a greater number of less effective champions." Having too many champions can also strain an advocate's capacity. According to an advocacy staff member at Sesame Workshop: "Don't let your ambition get ahead of your capacity…We had someone who jumped at the opportunity to be a champion, and we haven't yet been able to meet the excitement he has. It's a bit of a cautionary tale. Once you ignite a champion, you have to have the capacity to match their appetite for action."

Finally, Play to Learn AWG members highlighted the importance of reputational considerations in identifying potential champions. According to an advocacy staff member with IRC, an advocate must "do homework" in researching potential champions, in order to avoid individuals who may have a negative impact on the advocacy effort. This may include conflicting political agendas between the advocate and the potential champion; a lack of follow through on the part of the potential champion; or reputational issues with the potential champion that may reflect poorly on associated advocates.

Establishing Relationships with Champions

For Play to Learn partners, establishing relationships with and developing champions is often a long-term process, involving regular communication, collaboration, and support over multiple years. This echoes the literature: "There is strong consensus that champion building involves a long-term commitment…some early results from champion building might occur in the medium term (1-3 years), but it is likely to take at least four years before there is robust evidence of an investment paying off."[22]

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In building relationships with champions, members of the Play to Learn AWG and other advocacy experts agree that it is essential to understand what motivates your champions. Possible motivations for champions include: a desire to make a positive impact on their community, personal experience with an issue, a need for funding, or a desire for public recognition. By understanding these motivations, the advocate can develop the champion by acknowledging and, where possible, meeting their needs and building a relationship that is truly symbiotic. A staffer with IRC told Understory: "We should always be asking: what's in it for the champion? For example, do they need visibility? We can provide that."

Once equipped with an understanding of a potential champion's motivations, there are multiple tools an advocate can deploy to foster that champion.[23] Generally, a champion building effort will involve a combination of tactics, several of which have been utilized by Play to Learn partners. For example, in its work to embed ECD into the core humanitarian architecture, Sesame Workshop identified the director of the Coordination Division for the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) as a potential champion. Cultivating this individual as a champion was especially valuable because OCHA oversees the production of the Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO), which is the world's most comprehensive assessment of humanitarian needs. Incorporating ECD into the GHO would be a game-changer for children in humanitarian settings around the world. In addition to this individual's influence, Sesame Workshop had also been told that he was open-minded and potentially interested in the issue of ECDiE. As such, Sesame Workshop approached him to moderate a panel on ECDiE at the May 2022 Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week (HNPW). He accepted the invitation, which also provided him with an opportunity for additional visibility and public championship on the topic. After the panel appearance, Sesame Workshop continued to build the relationship, asking the director directly about including ECD in the GHO, and to be put in touch with the staffers within OCHA to work with on it. Sesame Workshop then worked with OCHA staffers to provide examples of the importance of ECD in humanitarian settings and draft language for the GHO report. The end result was the inclusion of ECD in the 2023 GHO.

Other champions, once sufficiently invested, may take action to advance the issue on their own. The Prime Minister of Albania provides a strong example of this. In the wake of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, several former Sesame Workshop staff members took refuge in Albania with the Prime Minister's support. Under the Prime Minister's leadership, Albania was

one of the first European countries to open its doors to Afghan refugees in need of safe harbor. Sesame leaders visited the staff and the Prime Minister to express gratitude and share insights from work in similar contexts, thus deepening the relationship.

Sesame Workshop later honored the Prime Minister for his leadership and generosity in welcoming Afghan refugees at an Annual Benefit event. After learning more about ECDiE and Sesame Workshop's work, the Prime Minister used part of his remarks to invite Sesame Workshop's President to address the UN Security Council on the challenges facing children and families affected by crisis, showing his willingness and enthusiasm to use his position to champion the issue. This opportunity helped Sesame Workshop raise the profile of ECDiE in an unexpected and valuable way—and solidified a clear champion for this work.

BRAC focuses on champion building through education and capacity-building initiatives. In an interview with Understory, BRAC noted that "a core need [for building policy-maker and implementation champions] is to create awareness among key stakeholders on the emergent need of ECD, which we provide through things like course offerings on ECD."

BRAC has significant technical expertise in the field of pre-primary education in Bangladesh, and uses this expertise to advocate for effective solutions at the national level. This advocacy requires extensive collaboration with different government agencies, including the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) within the Bangladesh Ministry of Education. To develop champions in key agencies, BRAC encourages leaders within the government to enroll in its courses on education and ECD. One such leader held a senior role at the NCTB, with significant influence over policy decisions. His activation as an ECD champion began with his enrollment in a master's program at BRAC University's Institute of Educational Development. There, he completed courses on the value of ECD and the importance of play-based learning within holistic ECD approaches. This NCTB leader has now become a champion and teacher; BRAC regularly invites him as a guest speaker to seminars and events where he showcases BRAC's play-based learning programs. In his work at the NCTB, this senior leader played a key role

in designing the new national pre-primary curriculum for 4-year-old children and revising the pre-primary curriculum for 5-year-old children, both of which integrate play-based pedagogy and psychosocial wellbeing. In 2023, the new pre-primary curriculum will be piloted in 3,214 government primary schools. This model of champion building via learning opportunities is a significant pillar of BRAC's advocacy strategy. According to an advocacy staffer with BRAC: "Influential people receive information from our courses, they understand the importance of ECD through that, and then effectuate that through their leadership roles in government."

"Everyone was challenging the [school readiness] program...and there was a point where we [IRC] wanted to defend the program. But we didn't have to, because two of our champions defended the program themselves. The champion was saying, 'This is my program, this is a program I believe in.' And this was that moment where you see a person go from being an ally to a champion."

There is not always a clear moment when an individual shifts from being an interested party or an ally into being a true champion. However, the experience of Play to Learn AWG partners suggests that this shift has something to do with proactivity. According to a staffer at Sesame Workshop: "[Becoming a champion] is that distinction between an individual being willing to do something we ask and actively doing it themself." A staffer at IRC shared a story of a meeting of high-level government education officials in Iraq, where it became clear that their allies had become champions: "Everyone was challenging the [school readiness] program—the efficiency, the logistics, the resources required—and there was a point where we [IRC] wanted to defend the program. But we didn't have to, because two of our champions defended the program themselves. The champion was saying, 'This is my program, this is a program I believe in.' And this was that moment where you see a person go from being an ally to a champion."

Leveraging Champions in Advocacy Work

Once an individual has been identified and developed into a true champion, the focus turns to strategically leveraging that champion in advocacy work. This is not always as straightforward as making an ask and expecting a champion to fulfill it. By definition, champions are proactively engaged with the issue—they have their own opinions about the solutions to pursue and the most effective way to pursue them. As such, engaging champions in advocacy work is a collaborative partnership. According to a staffer with IRC: "Ideally, it should be a true partnership, where you talk transparently about goals, work together to identify the right strategy, and then make informed decisions with shared information."

"Ideally, it should be a true partnership, where you talk transparently about goals, work together to identify the right strategy, and then make informed decisions with shared information."

For example, IRC's advocacy work to scale up school readiness programs in Iraq involved partnership with two champions in the Ministry of Education. An IRC staffer told Understory: "We have a champion focused on the content and pushing ECD in the curriculum, and then another champion who was able to influence getting the curriculum integrated at the national and local levels." IRC emphasized that there was constant communication with their champions through the process: "We talked to our champions frequently…if not everyday, then at least twice a week. It's not out of duty. We enjoyed talking to them, and it was a partnership." The impact of these champions on the success of the advocacy campaign cannot be overstated: "They made it happen, they facilitated the whole process… they helped us better understand how things work in government, and they led the project through the bureaucratic process, making it much more smooth than when we were handling it on our own."

In Bangladesh, BRAC's champions were similarly involved in co-designing the national pre-primary curriculum that was implemented in pilot form in January 2023. To continue building momentum for play-based learning, BRAC has deployed its champions to speak on the issue in high-visibility settings. In 2022, BRAC and the Bangladesh ECD Network held a series of webinars on play-based learning during COVID-19, mental health, and other key ECD topics. In these webinars, BRAC showcased its government champions, including key leaders at the NCTB, the Bangladesh Shishu Academy, and the Prime Minister's Office. The champions highlighted their collaborative work with BRAC in advancing play-based pedagogy in Bangladesh. According to a BRAC staffer, these moments significantly raised the profile of ECD: "Our champions offer us the scope to showcase play pedagogy and mental health on the national and international scale… Due to their networks and connections, they were also able to take the conversation further and have in-depth discussions with the Minister of Education as well as other key ministry officials. This was a critical stepping stone for us as it brought our programs into the national limelight."

Monitoring the Impact of Champion Building

Part of the champion building process should involve reflecting on one's champion building work, measuring its impact, and identifying areas for improvement. This report, a reflection on the champion building work of the Play to Learn AWG, is one such exercise.

The literature on champion building stresses the importance of monitoring as a tool for evaluating the effectiveness of the strategy.[24] There are several metrics by which champion building strategies can be measured, including: actions (instances where a champion does something to concretely advance an advocacy goal);[25] quality of relationship (an assessment of the state of one's relationship with the champion);[26] and influence (the extent to which one's champion's influence over a particular issue or decision has grown).[27] As suggested by their descriptions, these metrics are not strictly quantifiable and can often be difficult to assess or measure. Actions are the most easily and widely tracked of these metrics, but metrics on quality of relationship and level of influence can be more subjective. Sometimes, monitoring frameworks will use scorecards with rating scales in an attempt to quantify progress in these indicators over time.[28] This approach is most common in legislative or parliamentary settings, where frequent votes on or sponsorship of related legislation can create a concrete track record.

While all Play to Learn partners report on their advocacy progress and contacts, there is no single approach to directly measuring the impact of champion building work. Each organization does generally track engagement with each champion and the ways in which champions contribute to the achievement of advocacy goals. For example, IRC uses an internal results tracker to document its communication and collaboration with champions, and to track that progress over time. There are some quantitative data points in this tracker (e.g. number of meetings and/ or frequency of communication), and there are also qualitative entries, documenting each champion's impact or influence toward an overall goal. BRAC's advocacy monitoring process includes tracking changes in government approaches to ECD, and continued conversations with government leaders.

As with all advocacy work, champion building can be a long haul, and it is important to have realistic expectations for the speed at which ultimate goals will be achieved. There will not always be an action or a concrete outcome to report at the end of each year, and in the interim, it is critical to continue to invest in relationships and to document progress as clearly as possible.

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Navigating Changes in Leadership Impacting Champions

Given the long-term nature of advocacy work, all advocates must eventually navigate changes in leadership. For elected officials, these changes may occur somewhat predictably, tied to election cycles. For other administrators and bureaucrats, changes in leadership may be more unpredictable, though bureaucratic staff tend to be a part of an institution longer than elected officials. In any case, effective champion building strategies must prepare for the likelihood of leadership transitions impacting champions.

For organizations engaged in long-term champion building work, preparation for leadership changes can be a constant effort, emphasizing the cyclical and nonlinear nature of the champion building process. According to a staffer at BRAC, which has champions within several Bangladesh government ministries: "Positions in the ministries are always changing—there's lots of turnover, and lots of people shifting between departments. With our key ministries for us we are always monitoring who is making decisions at those ministries." BRAC proactively builds relationships with a wide range of staff at these ministries, so that when leadership changes occur, they are likely to have a pre-existing relationship: "We need to always have that communication, build that rapport, invite them to different forums and meetings."

When it comes to working with elected officials, Play to Learn partners have invested in building champions across partisan divides, attempting to insulate progress on ECDiE from electoral results.

When properly engaged, champions can also help navigate these leadership changes. Beginning in 2020, IRC engaged in a campaign to create national standards for private nurseries in Lebanon, working closely with the national Ministry of Public Health. Through this campaign a policy implementing champion emerged. However, during the process of creating the national standards, there was a change in ministerial leadership. An IRC staffer told Understory: "Our champion had a close relationship with the initial Ministry of Public Health leadership, and after that change [in leadership] happened, we were worried about where our project would fit in." In navigating this transition, IRC emphasized the importance of transparency: "This is where transparency and honesty is key. We approached our champion transparently about our goals and our concerns, and she gave us advice on how to build support with the new political party in power, and how best to engage with the new minister." In partnership with its champion in the ministry, IRC was able to maintain focus on its ECD goals through a potentially difficult leadership change.

When it comes to working with elected officials, Play to Learn partners have invested in building champions across partisan divides, attempting to insulate progress on ECDiE from electoral results. This has been especially top-of-mind in Sesame Workshop and IRC's advocacy with the US government. The 2021 enactment of the Global Child Thrive Act (GCTA) represented a landmark achievement, improving the prioritization and coordination of ECD investments in US foreign assistance. Essential to the passage of this bill was the sponsorship of legislators from both the Democratic Party (Representative Joaquin Castro and Senator Christopher Coons) and the Republican Party (Representative Brian Fitzpatrick and Senator Roy Blunt). Having bipartisan bill sponsorship was a core component of the strategy, and essential to ultimate success.

As the advocacy work pivoted to the bill's implementation, bipartisan support remained critical, especially with the 2022 midterm elections on the horizon. According to a staffer with Sesame Workshop: "We were very mindful heading into the election of the likelihood of a turnover in Congress, so we started to identify a broader set of potential champions…For example, we started meeting with a Congresswoman from California, and gauging her interest in taking a leadership role. She's likely to be a prominent voice in the [bipartisan] Problem Solvers Caucus and the [Republican] Women's Foreign Policy Group." Getting the Problem Solvers Caucus to take on ECD is a major goal for Sesame Workshop, since this caucus is equally divided between Democrats and Republicans and seeks to foster bipartisan collaboration on policy issues. Since the passage of the GCTA, Senator Blunt has retired, leading Sesame Workshop and IRC to seek another Republican champion in the Senate. This need to replace champions informs the overall champion building strategy: "We're looking at up-and-comers in both parties and starting to meet with them…we're looking at members of Congress who will have longevity." Again, this speaks to the cyclical nature of effective champion building: to ensure the durability of past gains, the advocate must always be in the process of identifying and cultivating the next wave of champions.

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Lessons Learned from Play to Learn Champion Building Work

Champion building offers the opportunity for tremendous impact. With the right mix of champions, an advocate can achieve policy changes and program expansions on a scale that would not be possible when acting alone. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to champion building. Each advocacy campaign will have its own strategic considerations based on the ultimate goal, the political context, and the capacity of the champion. However, there are some common themes that emerged from the experiences of the Play to Learn AWG's champion building efforts.

✓ Remember that champion building is a long, non-linear, and iterative process. It may proceed in fits and starts, with dividends coming at unexpected moments.

Champion building doesn't happen in a straight line—especially, perhaps, within the context of crisis settings. Advocates may be juggling multiple phases of the champion building process simultaneously, and certain stages may require revisiting when circumstances or situations change. As an IRC advocacy staff member noted: "It's not always about a clear targeting strategy…sometimes you get into the room, you see where the enthusiasm and decision making power is, and you design and adjust your strategy as you go."

✓ Identify a diversity of potential champions across a variety of dimensions (including level, function, and demographics).

For complex and multi-sectoral issues such as ECDiE, it is important to identify a diverse array of potential champions. Both high-level policymakers (who are able to legislate or administer policy changes) and policy implementers (who are responsible for effectuating change on the ground) are important champions. It is also critical to elevate champions from affected communities who can speak directly to gaps in ECD provision and advance community-driven solutions. The Play to Learn partners are working closely with the Moving Minds Alliance to identify future opportunities in this area. This is especially important on issues related to humanitarian crises, where there are large power imbalances—and often tremendous distance—between those with decision making authority and the communities impacted by their decisions. Advocates have a responsibility, in the words of a BRAC staff member, to "shift this balance of power."

Be strategic and realistic in the identification of potential champions.

Just because an individual has power or influence does not mean they are a good target for champion building. Look for individuals who have demonstrated interest and general alignment on the issue. "I think it's important to push the open doors," shared an advocacy staff member at Sesame Workshop. "You don't need to create a champion out of your toughest critic. You don't need to continue knocking your head against whatever immovable object there is." Advocates should also have a clear view of as many of the behind-the-scenes issues as possible, identifying the champions most able to untangle messy bureaucratic or political problems rather than exacerbate them. Finally, it takes considerable effort to develop and support a champion. At the outset, it is critical to ensure that the engaging organization has enough capacity to see it through. In rare cases, this has proved challenging for Play to Learn AWG members.

When cultivating champions, be prepared for failure and attrition.

When it comes to cultivating champions, be prepared for inevitable failures and know when to cut loose from a champion building effort that isn't going anywhere. Even when a champion is successfully cultivated, there is no guarantee that this individual will remain committed to the issue or choose it among competing priorities. This speaks to the importance of continuously refreshing one's list of potential champions, and building multiple relationships so a champion failure in one instance is not catastrophic to the overall campaign goals.

Understand what motivates each potential champion and align interests where possible.

Advocates have many assets to offer a champion, including funding and access to public-facing leadership opportunities. By understanding what motivates champions, advocates can build relationships that are mutually beneficial. Transparency is key to achieving this. Be open about specific goals and encourage champions to do the same. Look for common ground and opportunities for engagement that are win-win.

Invest in the relationship, building rapport through regular communication and providing support as needed.

Send notes, pick up the phone, and meet face-to-face when possible. This can be informal and non-transactional. In some contexts, Play to Learn partners often communicate with their champions multiple times a week, often "just to check in." When champions request support, be as responsive and helpful as your capacity allows. These day-to-day interactions build trust and lay the groundwork for more intensive collaboration.

When engaging in strategic advocacy, treat your champions like partners in a collaborative process.

The relationship between advocate and champion should be a collaborative partnership. By sharing learnings and co-designing approaches, both advocate and champion will be most successful in driving impact on their issue of focus. As such, the advocate and champion should be aligned from the outset on what success looks like, what strategies and tactics will be most effective, and each party's roles within this plan. When roadblocks are encountered, the advocate should consult with the champion on potential solutions, and vice versa.

Showcase champions in moments of high-visibility, shining a spotlight on the issue.

A champion can provide essential credibility and visibility for an issue and proposed solutions. Leverage key opportunities by putting champions front and center. This is especially important for issues such as ECDiE, which are underserved and not always well understood. Having champions publicly embrace the issue expands the arena of influence and reaches new stakeholders.

Monitor and reflect on champion building efforts, using these moments to adjust the strategy as needed.

It is important to be patient in champion building work. Often, an advocate will have to invest a lot of time before seeing concrete results in terms of actions and outcomes—and when these results do arrive, they are not always easily quantifiable. At the same time, advocates must regularly assess champion building efforts, including the state of relationships with champions, champions' level of influence, and champions' impact on advocacy goals. Establish a system for this sort of monitoring, and a cadence for reflecting on results. For example, IRC keeps a champion building tracker which documents the organization's progress in cultivating and maximizing influence through ECDiE champions. Consider whether strategy adjustments are needed to improve and accelerate impact.

Think strategically about how to maintain championship through leadership transitions.

In governments and bureaucracies, leadership changes are inevitable. If unprepared for these changes, an advocate can be caught flat-footed. It is essential to frequently update a list of potential champions, identifying individuals who may be likely to replace those currently in leadership positions. Champions can be helpful in doing this, as they will often have more visibility to the inner workings of their governments, agencies, or departments. If a champion moves on to a new position, it is also important to think strategically about how to maintain their championship, and what opportunities their new role may provide. When it comes to elected officials, ECD has been and can continue to be an issue that bridges political divisions. But, in order to ensure the sustainable prioritization of ECD by governments, advocates must intentionally invest in champion building across political parties. Play to Learn AWG members have effectively developed multi-party support in both the US and Lebanon, and this has been key to sustaining impact through changes in government control.

Conclusion

The Play to Learn partnership represents a unique collaborative of organizations, all dedicated to advancing ECD in humanitarian settings. Partnering with champions gives an advocacy campaign a number of advantages, including access to institutional and political knowledge, a built-in public platform, and the ability to move an idea from concept to implementation. Play to Learn partners would not have achieved the advocacy wins they have reached to date without champions. This report documents the process and impact of champion building across contexts, including in IRC's efforts to scale up school readiness programming in the Middle East; IRC and Sesame Workshop's work with the USG to prioritize ECD in humanitarian settings; BRAC's work to integrate principles of play-based learning into Bangladesh's new pre-primary curriculum; and Sesame Workshop's ongoing advocacy to embed ECD into the core humanitarian architecture.

These semi-annual reports are meant as signposts in an ongoing process of reflection and improvement. As such, future reports will explore the design and execution of other key advocacy strategies, the achievement of new milestones, and the ways in which past learnings translated into strategic adjustments and even greater impact.

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