

play to learn

# Evidence for Investment

New research on effective early childhood development programming in humanitarian settings



There are more than 108 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, and almost half are children.<sup>1</sup> For the youngest children, these disruptions come during a critical window in their development. 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) and Play to Learn—two groundbreaking initiatives from Sesame Workshop, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and BRAC with funding from the MacArthur and LEGO Foundations—are multi-year investments to address those gaps. Through beloved and new Muppet characters designed to reflect the realities of children affected by displacement; localized multimedia resources; and remote and in-person direct services in homes, schools, community centers, and more, these programs reached children, caregivers, and ECD facilitators affected by crisis through early learning and nurturing care. Ultimately, these partnerships are striving to establish play-based ECD programming as an essential component of every humanitarian response.

A commitment to research and learning is at the heart of these initiatives. Five randomized controlled trials led by New York University Global TIES for Children provide new insights on what works in these contexts to support families and improve children’s holistic development. **The findings indicate that remote programs and caregiver-facing interventions can support children’s development and caregivers’ well-being and demonstrate the power of integrating educational media with ECD services. Collectively, these results have significant implications for delivering ECD interventions in humanitarian and other contexts, including those where traditional in-person services are not available.**

# THE PROGRAMS STUDIED



## Mass Media in Jordan:

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



## Remote Parenting and ECD Support in Jordan:

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. Participants were Syrian and Jordanian families living in Jordan. Facilitators were trained specifically to listen actively and build positive rapport with caregivers.



## Watch, Play, Learn videos in Colombia:

Colombian and Venezuelan families with 4-year-old children were sent playful early learning videos via WhatsApp. Families received 10 minutes of video content twice a week for 19 weeks. The videos used an animated cast of new and familiar Sesame characters to teach math and social-emotional skills.



## Remote Early Learning in Lebanon:

IRC-trained teachers used WhatsApp to call groups of parents of children ages 5-6 three times a week over 11 weeks.

Most participants were Syrian refugee families. 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.



## Father Engagement in Bangladesh:

In Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, BRAC added a 6-month father engagement component uniquely designed for and by fathers to existing programming offered to mothers of children ages 0-3. Rohingya and Bangladeshi families participated in the program, which focused on promoting fathers' well-being, enhancing fathers' relationships with their spouses and children, and fostering responsive caregiving practices.





# Key learnings on the impacts of early childhood development programs—and why they matter

Remote early learning programming can be effective even for young children.

A remote preschool program in Lebanon—which integrated media resources into a curriculum delivered by caregivers—had substantial positive impacts on young children. 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 effective when children do not have access to in-person services.



This is an important finding for populations unable to access in-person preschool in the short- or long-term, whether because of access limitations due to a physical disability, ongoing conflict, a public health emergency, or other barriers to access—challenging assumptions that remote preschool cannot support child learning.

Media can be a powerful learning tool for young children across a range of contexts.

We have rigorous evidence from several studies that media can boost children's learning and development. In Jordan, watching the *Ahlan Simsim* television show had a significant impact on children's ability to identify emotions and to apply the coping strategy of pausing to take a calming breath in emotionally difficult situations. Integrating media assets into remote early learning programming in Lebanon supported parent-child engagement during and beyond the program. And in Colombia, our *Watch, Play, Learn* animated videos also increased children's ability to recognize and use accurate language to name emotions in others. These findings underscore the ability of high-quality educational media to support children's foundational emotional skill development.



These findings are especially important given the high potential for media to reach children at scale. The role of media is particularly crucial for reaching children when in-person services are not possible—encouraging crucial social-emotional development in times of adversity.

Caregivers from diverse backgrounds can meaningfully support learning for their young children.

Caregivers, with support from teachers and the use of educational multimedia resources, delivered the programming in the successful 11-week remote preschool program in Lebanon. Importantly, positive impacts from this program did not differ by caregivers' educational background or literacy level—parents of all educational backgrounds were equally successful at teaching their children. This study demonstrates that caregivers can, with proper support and a significant time investment, deliver a comprehensive preschool curriculum at home.



This finding challenges assumptions that caregivers with limited education would struggle to support remote learning.

ECD programming can successfully incorporate elements designed to improve caregiver mental health.

In a parenting support program in Jordan, facilitators who called caregivers were specifically trained in responsive listening and non-judgmental rapport and used these skills during well-being check-ins in each call. The program drove reductions in depressive symptoms in caregivers, likely due to the positive relationships this training helped foster. And other findings suggest that a parenting program in Bangladesh focused on father's engagement reduced depression and anxiety for fathers who reported the most financial worry and the least education and literacy—those who may have been struggling across several factors before the program began. In both examples, not only do caregivers directly benefit, but because caregiver well-being is closely tied to healthy child development, children benefit from these parental mental health improvements as well.



These findings emphasize that ECD programming can have important benefits for the whole family, supporting children and caregivers simultaneously.

Direct engagement of fathers through parenting programs can positively impact the whole family.

In Bangladesh, a parenting program for fathers improved their engagement with their children and their wife. For example, both fathers and mothers reported improvements in fathers' responsiveness to children's needs, fathers' warmth during play with their children, and fathers' support to their wife.



Although parenting programs are often targeted at mothers, encouraging fathers to be actively engaged in their child's development is an important step toward improving household dynamics and can positively impact the whole family.



Providing caregivers with parenting support can help them engage more positively with their children.

One specific area where we saw changes across contexts was in reducing the use of physical discipline with children. For families living in the camps in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, the father engagement program reduced the occurrence of harsh discipline—both fathers and mothers said that the program helped fathers manage their anger and be less violent in the home. And in Lebanon, parenting support combined with the remote preschool intervention decreased use of physical discipline with children as well. In contrast, the remote parenting program in Jordan did not impact parenting practices—likely due to the program losing key features in its transition from in-person to remote (such as demonstrations, practice facilitation, and feedback), or due to its relatively low dosage.



These findings demonstrate a clear link between protection benefits for children and parenting support for their caregivers—especially in settings where parents are experiencing the stresses of crisis, conflict, and displacement.

Programs can have stronger benefits for children and families who have fewer resources or are facing more adversity.

In Bangladesh, the father engagement program had a stronger impact on lower-resource families: families with lower literacy, less education, fewer household resources, and poorer health saw greater improvements in children’s vocabulary, fathers’ mental health, and fathers’ parenting practices. In Colombia, although our *Watch, Play, Learn* videos didn’t measurably improve math skills among a wider group of children, we *did* see promising trends suggesting that the videos supported math skills among children not attending an early childhood education program. These examples suggest that, in some cases, ECD support may have a stronger impact on families facing more adversity or starting further behind.



Data should be disaggregated where possible to better understand the ways in which programming can bridge such gaps.





# Program design and implementation insights

**Play must be a key component in any program reaching young children.**

Encouraging learning through play means fostering joyful, actively engaging, meaningful, iterative, and socially interactive experiences for children and their families. These opportunities are crucial for healthy development, providing children with opportunities to gain both content knowledge and learning-to-learn skills that will prepare them to thrive later in life.<sup>2</sup> Prioritizing play in humanitarian settings can be difficult when parents have safety concerns, are facing time or resource constraints meeting their children's basic needs, or don't have a model to follow from their own childhood due to generational displacement. In our programs, we encourage playful learning in young children through joyful multimedia resources, nurturing interactions with caring adults, and positive ways to interact with and learn from the world around them.



Parents from across contexts highly value play, often reporting that playing with their children is an important factor in their own happiness that strengthens their relationship with their child and helps them to de-stress.<sup>3</sup> And yet a majority of children report that they don't believe the adults in their lives take the importance of learning through play seriously enough—suggesting a need for further focus on purposefully incorporating play into programming.<sup>4</sup>

**Remote and in-person programs are not directly interchangeable.**

In an audio-only remote parenting program in Jordan, which shifted to remote implementation due to COVID-19, key components of the in-person version (particularly demonstrations, practice facilitation, and feedback) were not 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. In contrast, in the fully remote preschool program in Lebanon, several elements we know to be important for in-person preschool were maintained in the remote model, including strong relationships between caregivers and teachers and teachers and children; strong training and peer support for teachers; a framing of the program to caregivers as schooling; and high-quality multimedia assets integrated into the curriculum.



When disruptions to in-person services require shifting a program from in-person to remote delivery, it is important to identify the components of the initial design that were crucial for success and determine how best to preserve or replicate them remotely.

To engage fathers in the support of young children, design programs specifically for them.

In Bangladesh, the father engagement program was not simply a replication of existing mothers' programming. Instead, the curriculum was shaped by extensive community-driven research and tailored to be culturally responsive to fathers' specific needs. The program was delivered by male volunteers with flexibility to accommodate fathers' work schedules. Importantly, the program also provided support for mothers through weekly sessions—the father-focused add-on brought fathers into the ecosystem of caregiver support rather than taking away support from mothers.



Expansion of father-focused programming to complement existing mother-facing programming widens the circle of support around children and demonstrates the important role all parents can play in the life of a child.

Children and caregivers need enough exposure to educational media to create an impact—but keep in mind that the size of that impact will also be influenced by other factors.

From integrating media into programs around the world, we have gained insight into the minimum amount of time participants should spend engaging with our media content to unlock optimal impacts. Necessary dosage will vary depending on the media resource being used, so studying the impacts of different dosages and creating a related dosage guide can be a useful design input into any program that incorporates video assets. Other factors that may interact with dosage to influence the size of the impact of a media resource include frequency of co-viewing with a caregiver (we know that the impacts of educational media are enhanced when watched alongside a trusted adult); demographic factors including age, gender, disability, immigration status, and more; and whether the child is enrolled in an early learning program.



Ahlan Simsim and Play to Learn partners are producing several resources related to this topic that will be publicly available for use. For example, Sesame Workshop is currently working on a dosage guide that will provide more specific insights into learnings on dosage across programs and can be used as guidance along with other relevant inputs; NYU Global TIES for Children has a forthcoming resource on the relationship between quality and quantity; and IRC and BRAC are producing additional related quality assurance tools.

Lowering barriers to entry for families is key to ensuring success.

Relevant barriers may include familiarity with technology, cost, and the logistical time or location requirements of participating in a program, among others. Programs that were researched in Colombia, Jordan, and Lebanon used low-tech delivery avenues such as WhatsApp or audio calls—technologies families already used. Even so, in Colombia, limited internet availability and high costs of data remained significant participation barriers that required additional program adaptation to ensure continued access. Another barrier families may face is the cost of physical materials needed to participate in programming. Activities in the curriculum in Lebanon used materials found in most homes, such as utensils or cups, or required no materials at all. Flexible logistical options are also key to lowering barriers to participation. Remote programs can be accessed from any location, and programs can often be designed to allow caregivers to schedule calls at times that work for them or participate in make-up calls when possible.



Especially in low-resource or crisis-affected settings or with on-the-move populations, lowering barriers to entry is key to ensuring access and should be prioritized. Although high flexibility may seem in tension with ensuring adequate dosage, it in fact may be the opposite—allowing for flexible participation options in humanitarian settings may allow a higher level of engagement, one important factor in driving outcomes.

## Turning evidence into action

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.



### Endnotes

- 1 UNHCR, “Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2022,” 2023
- 2 Zosh, et al., “Learning through Play: A review of the evidence,” 2017
- 3 The LEGO Foundation, “LEGO Play Well Report 2018,” 2018.
- 4 The LEGO Group, “The LEGO Play Well Study 2024,” 2024.

### Credits

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