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# 2023 Annual Report



PHOTO: SHAFIQUI ALAM KIRION | SESAME WORKSHOP

## Investing in the power of play for learning, healing, and well-being

Play is much more than fun. It's how children learn and build cognitive, physical, social-emotional, and creative skills that last a lifetime. For children who have experienced a traumatic event, play is a lifeline—a way to relieve stress, regain a sense of normalcy, and create moments of joy. All Play to Learn interventions utilize play and play-based nurturing interactions with caring adults to enable the holistic development of young children. With this support, we hope that all young children, no matter their circumstance, will be given the tools to thrive.

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# Welcome!

Play to Learn is an initiative from Sesame Workshop, BRAC, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and New York University (NYU) Global TIES for Children launched in 2019 with the support of the LEGO Foundation. We set out to achieve three goals: bring playful learning and nurturing care to one million children affected by the Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises in Bangladesh, Lebanon, and Jordan; produce rigorous evidence about the best ways to support children in these conditions; and place children at the center of humanitarian responses through strategic advocacy. Five years later, we are proud of what we have accomplished.

**Reach:** Our play-based content and media-enhanced program models are now used in 32 countries, reaching 2.5 million people through direct services and 31 million children through broadcast channels. As a result of Play to Learn, the children reached had opportunities to engage in early learning, healing, and healthy development at one of the most crucial times in their lives.

**Research:** In 2023, Play to Learn completed three impact evaluations of innovative and scalable program models. In Lebanon, our research illustrates that our remote media-integrated preschool program can boost foundational learning and social-emotional development for young children, regardless of their parents' education levels, with effects comparable to those of a year of high-quality preschool. This opens new potential for children in areas where in-person preschool is not feasible. In Colombia, we found that quality media content can improve children's ability to recognize emotions. In Bangladesh, we have shown that when we purposefully include fathers in early childhood programs, it can have positive effects on family dynamics known to improve child outcomes, such as reducing harsh discipline, increasing engagement of fathers with their spouses, and improving fathers' beliefs about play and fathering. Among more disadvantaged families we found even stronger effects, including reduced depression among fathers and improved child vocabulary. And our final year offers the promise of additional insights that will benefit the wider field of early childhood development (ECD).

**Lasting impact:** Consortium partners have worked to secure lasting changes in the way ECD is coordinated and financed. Through advocacy with refugee-hosting governments, major donors, and leaders in the humanitarian system, we have contributed to strengthening systems that deliver ECD to all children (Jordan), expanded the age range for and access to ECD (Bangladesh), improved measurement of and funding for children's needs (Colombia), and increased financing from major donors (United States, France, Canada).

The project's final year is set against a backdrop of growing need, and, in the geographies where Play to Learn is focused, declining resources. Since we began this work, the number of forcibly displaced people has gone from 79.5 million to 110 million people by mid-2023. Roughly 8-10 percent of whom were under the age of five. To maintain the momentum of the LEGO Foundation's bold 100-million-dollar investment, Play to Learn is institutionalizing learnings internally and in the global bodies we participate in, finding opportunities for scale and sustainability of our content and program models, and most importantly, continuing to bring attention to the ways that play can meet the needs of young children and families affected by conflict and crisis.



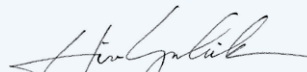
Lesley Bourns, Sesame Workshop



Erum Mariam,  
BRAC



Marianne Stone,  
The International Rescue Committee

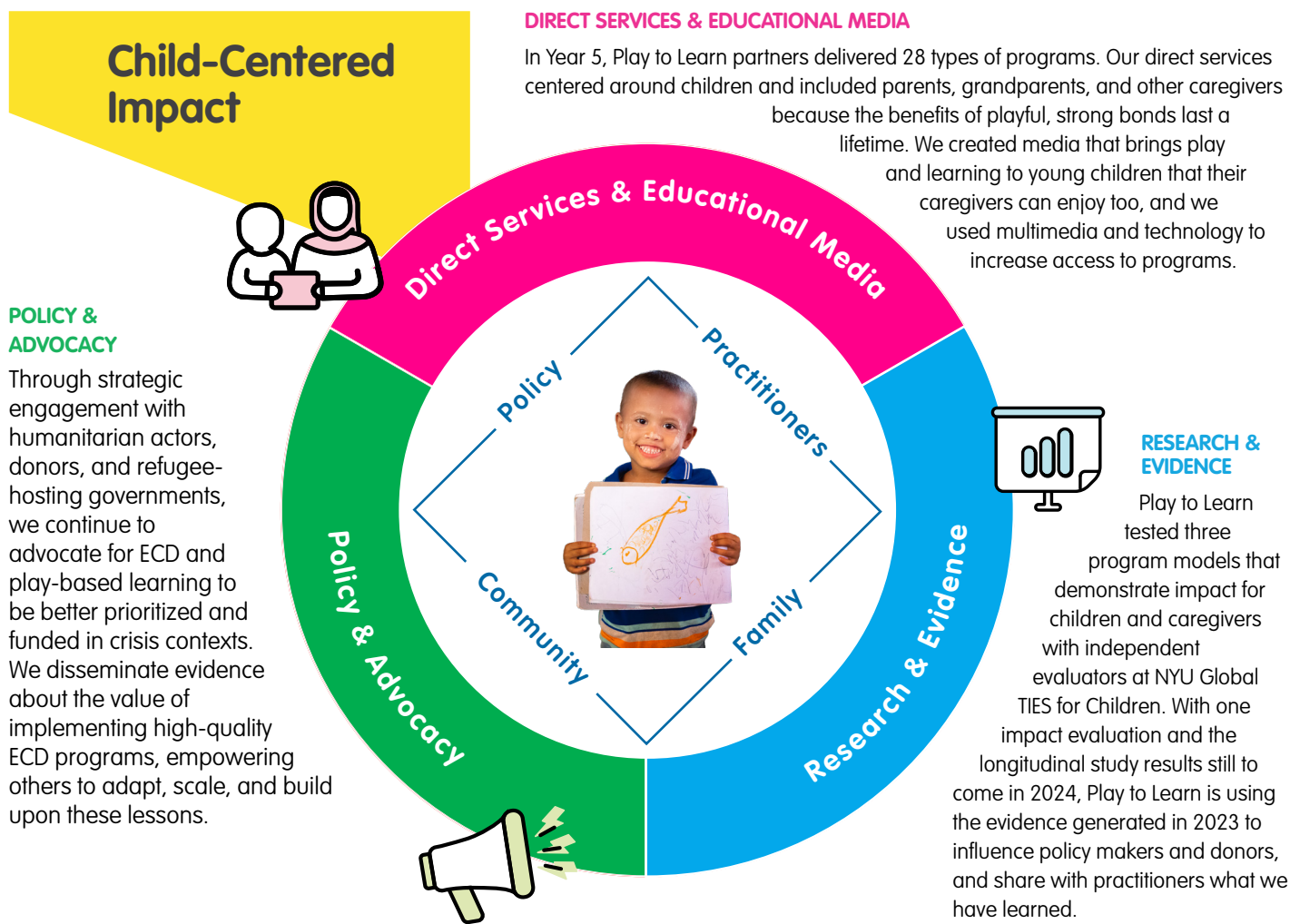


Hirokazu Yoshikawa,  
NYU Global Ties for Children



# About Play to Learn

Play to Learn’s vision is to harness the power of play to promote learning and healing for young children affected by conflict and crisis. Through the combined expertise of Sesame Workshop, BRAC, the IRC, and independent evaluator NYU Global TIES for Children, Play to Learn works to strengthen and support the ecosystem around young children at the individual, family, community, and policy levels. We do this through three pillars of work: designing direct services and educational media that are relevant and feasible to deliver in a variety of contexts; generating evidence that increases our collective knowledge about how to reach and support young children during a critical period of their development; and advocating at local, global, and regional levels for humanitarian and government systems to include the needs of young children when making policies or allocating funds.





SECTION

1

# Delivering Impact for Children and Families

## Delivering impact for children and families in crisis contexts

This section focuses on families who participated in some of our most unique Play to Learn programs: a parent-child well-being program in Colombia that used *Watch, Play, Learn* videos to strengthen the bonds between parents and children; a program in Cox's Bazar that supports fathers to take an active role as a nurturing, playful parent; and a multi-media enhanced remote early learning program in Lebanon that delivered playful early learning when in-person services were closed. NYU Global TIES for Children evaluated the models in Bangladesh and Lebanon as well as the effects of viewing play-based, educational content on its own in Colombia.



YR 1-5: 1,803,612 children

YR 5: 1,069,907 children



YR 1-5: 670,994 caregivers

YR 5: 382,796 caregivers



YR 1-5: 26,157 facilitators

YR 5: 7,119 facilitators

Play to Learn has reached a total of **2,500,763** children, caregivers, and facilitators over the five years of the project

Play to Learn uses contextually appropriate, play-based programs to support children, their caregivers, and the practitioners that work with them

Monitoring data from programs in the Middle East showed that at least:



87%

of trained facilitators demonstrated effective pedagogical practices, including play-based learning

Monitoring data from programs in Rohingya camps showed that:



70%

of children reached a target for their holistic development, including creative, physical, cognitive, emotional, and social skills

90%

of participating caregivers reported having a healthy emotional relationship with their children by the end of the program

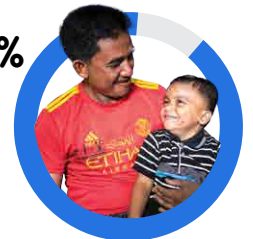




PHOTO: FEDERICO BOTTIA | SESAME WORKSHOP

## **WATCH, PLAY, LEARN EARLY LEARNING VIDEOS: Educational media strengthens caregiver-child bonds**

Johana describes her four-year-old son, Jacob, as a restless and clever boy who loves to learn and play with toy animals. She and Jacob live in Jamundí, Colombia, where they participate in the Semillas de Apego (“Seeds of Attachment”) program for families affected by violence and forced displacement. The program is designed to support caregiver mental health and foster more nurturing parent-child relationships to improve child development outcomes.

### **Learning social-emotional skills through playful videos**

In 2023, Semillas de Apego partnered with Sesame Workshop to integrate Play to Learn’s *Watch, Play, Learn* into their in-person group sessions and provided videos for families to watch at home. The videos promote social-emotional skills by introducing vocabulary to name emotions and modeling coping strategies. Johana soon noticed how the videos were helping Jacob to identify and manage emotions. She remembers, “My son would say to me, ‘Mom, are you sad?’ And I replied, ‘Yes, my love, I am very sad.’ [Jacob said,] ‘Breathe, Mom, breathe.’ So I said, ‘Yes, my love, I’ll breathe. Show me how.’ And he explained to me how I should breathe.”



### **INTRODUCING WATCH, PLAY, LEARN**

Sesame Workshop created a portable, scalable library of short, animated videos that children anywhere can relate to and learn from. Designed to reflect the needs and experiences of children affected by crisis, the *Watch, Play, Learn* videos feature beloved Sesame Workshop Muppets engaging in learning through play to promote skills in math, science, social-emotional learning, and health and safety. These videos deliver play-based learning on their own when viewed independently by children, and they are even more powerful when parents or facilitators use them as tools to promote joyful play and learning at home or in early childhood programs. The relevance and appeal of these videos may also help increase attendance at education activities, particularly for girls who have less access to technology at home or in their communities.



### Fostering emotional security between children and caregivers

Over half a million children under age five have been affected by civil conflict in Colombia, and many others have been forced to migrate with their families from Venezuela. Exposure to conflict and displacement during a child's early years can have devastating long-term effects, but research shows that secure emotional attachments between children and caregivers can mitigate the effects of adversity and promote healthy development.<sup>1</sup> "We understand that during early childhood, what is needed the most is quality time and, above all, a sense of calm from the parents," said Daniela, a Semillas de Apego facilitator, "...[children] need a safe haven, a place where [they] can feel secure, confident, and calm." That's why Semillas de Apego used *Watch, Play, Learn* videos to promote quality time for bonding and to support both caregiver and child well-being.

### Videos foster emotional connections in families

The videos proved to be a powerful tool in helping caregivers and children connect and communicate, especially about emotions. Semillas de Apego reported that caregivers were better able to recognize their children's emotions and provide support in the regulation process. NYU Global TIES for Children also evaluated the *Watch, Play, Learn* video content in Colombia separately from the Semillas de Apego program. This study focused on families not participating in a Play to Learn direct service, who received videos twice a week. The research showed that watching the videos alone had positive effects on children's ability to identify, express, and regulate emotions.<sup>2</sup> The results from the impact evaluation of the content combined with the evidence from the direct service integration demonstrate the power of educational media to make a meaningful impact on children and caregivers.

"[My children] are just in the process of formation, and I know that with those tools, that stays with them for life," said Johana. "Later on, they will also have their own children, and with that learning, they can instill the teachings in them, and perhaps be more tolerant, more understanding, and not forget that with breathing, you can manage any emotion."

**"My son would say to me, 'Mom, are you sad?' And I replied, 'Yes, my love, I am very sad.' [Jacob said,] 'Breathe, Mom, breathe.' So I said, 'Yes, my love, I'll breathe. Show me how.' And he explained to me how I should breathe."**

– Johana, mother of four-year-old Jacob

### CARING FOR THE CAREGIVERS IMPROVES OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

From birth, children look to caregivers to help them learn, grow, and thrive. Positive relationships with caring adults are essential to supporting children's healthy development, but a caregiver's ability to provide nurturing care is shaped by their own experiences and well-being. That's why supporting young children means caring for their caregivers too. Research shows that ECD programs that include support to caregivers' mental health as well as parenting resources improve outcomes for children.<sup>3</sup> Sesame Workshop's partnership with Semillas de Apego emphasizes the importance of promoting caregiver well-being to support children's development. Semillas de Apego participant Melissa, mother of three-year-old Sofia, said, "If I manage my emotions, I'll be an example for Sofia, and Sofia will learn to be a girl who takes things calmly, with a pause, who has confidence, security, because I'm providing that to her."



PHOTO: FEDERICO BOTTIA | SESAME WORKSHOP



PHOTO: SHEIKH SHANANUZZAMAN ANGKAN | BRAC IED

## FATHERS IN FOCUS: Engaging fathers to promote positive, playful parenting

### A demand for father-centered programming

In the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, mothers participating in a Play to Learn parenting program voiced an important request: they wanted a similar parenting program for their husbands. While parenting programs often focus on mothers, fathers also have a crucial role to play in caring for their children and creating a nurturing home. BRAC used this community feedback to develop a home-based parenting program designed for fathers of children under age three.

Over six months, trained father volunteers, accompanied by para-counselors, facilitated home visits in the refugee camps and host community to support fathers' well-being and promote positive, playful caregiving. The impact was powerful. One mother said, "In earlier times, [my husband] didn't show much care for the children, and he didn't pay much attention to their needs. But now he shows affection for the children." She described how her husband helps to bathe and feed their children, and enjoys reciting rhymes, making toys from recycled materials, and playing the *jhunjhuni* (a musical instrument) for them.

### Evidence of success for fathers and children

An independent evaluation by NYU Global TIES for Children found that fathers who participated in the program reported increased responsiveness to their children's needs, engagement in playful activities, and collaboration with their

wives to support their children. Fathers also described their renewed relationships with their children and increased confidence in taking more active roles in their children's development. This study was the first randomized controlled trial (RCT) on father engagement in early childhood in a humanitarian context, and it reinforced the promise of involving fathers in positive caregiving and fostering a playful learning environment at home.

**The program had positive effects on several family dynamics that improve child outcomes. These include:**

- Engagement of fathers with their wives
- Parenting practices by fathers, including reduction in harsh discipline
- Beliefs, held by fathers, about fathering, family engagement, and play for children



Learn more here!



PHOTO: SHEIKH SHANANUZZAMAN ANGKAN | BRAC IED

### Designed by and for fathers

What made the program so effective was that it was specifically designed by and for fathers. Based on fathers' input, home visits were conducted by male facilitators and scheduled around fathers' work hours. Fathers' input also shaped the program's focus on mental health and emotional regulation as they navigate the challenges of providing for their families in the refugee camps. The RCT found the program's most significant effect on fathers' emotional regulation was improvement in anger management and reduction of harsh discipline of children at home. One father recalled that a facilitator told him, "People's anger is like rain. If both people get angry, then there will be a storm. But if one person keeps calm, then there will be no storm."

Mothers too reported how the program increased fathers' warmth and play in interactions with their children. They noted how their husbands offered support more frequently and collaborated with them to meet their children's needs. These changes demonstrate the power of engaging fathers—alongside mothers—in supporting their children's development and fostering more peaceful, playful, and loving homes for their families.

### CO-DESIGNING PROGRAMS WITH THE COMMUNITY

BRAC centers the voices and needs of the served communities across all of their program models, and used many of the techniques and strategies refined over the past five years to design the father engagement program.

BRAC's community-driven approach also supports the preservation of Rohingya culture, connecting children with their cultural heritage through Rohingya dialect, traditional games, *kabbiyas* (folk rhymes), *kissas* (stories), and art motifs. Opportunities to participate in rituals and cultural practices lead to a sense of belonging and strengthen children's resilience, especially in the face of displacement.



PHOTO: RAFIZ IMTIAZ | BRAC IED

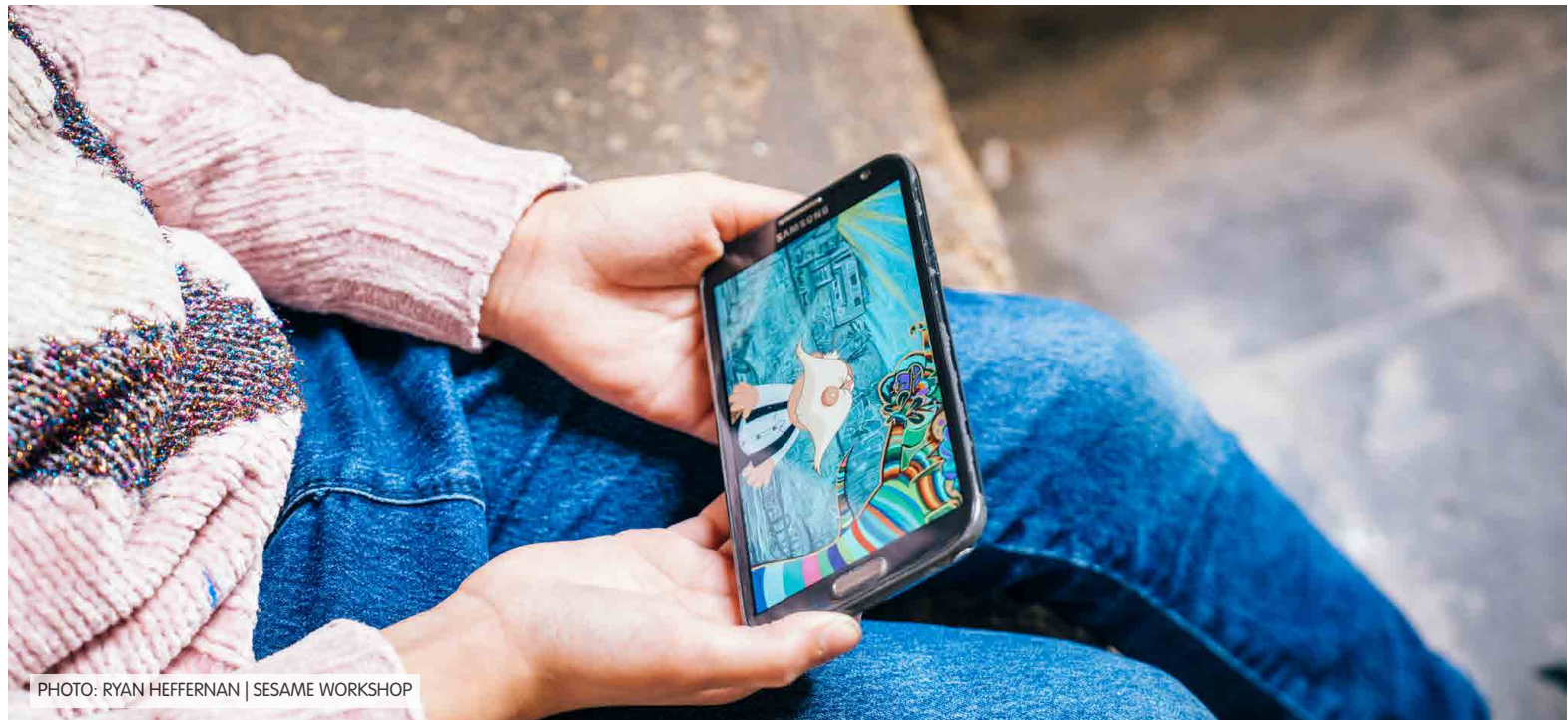


PHOTO: RYAN HEFFERNAN | SESAME WORKSHOP

## LEARNING BEYOND CLASSROOMS: Expanding access to playful learning through remote delivery

Mohammed is a six-year-old boy whose family fled Syria in 2014 and sought refuge in Lebanon. His family lives in an area of Lebanon where there is little access to early childhood education (ECE). But when COVID-19 shut down preschools, Mohammed's family had the opportunity to enroll him in the IRC's Remote Early Learning Program so that he could learn the skills he would need to succeed in primary school and beyond.

### Regular calls help parents support learning

His parents received calls three times per week from teachers who provided play-based learning activities to help Mohammed build literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills. Educational media was integrated throughout the curriculum, including interactive videos from *Ahlan Simsim* (or "Welcome Sesame"), the local version of *Sesame Street* in the Middle East and North Africa. "It's a rewarding experience," his mother said. "They send us videos over WhatsApp, and I teach him."

### Supporting parents – children's first teachers

By supporting parents in their role as children's first and most important teachers and playmates, the program had tremendous impact on children's learning. Research by NYU Global TIES for Children found that this 11-week remote program produced effects on emergent literacy and numeracy skills comparable to one year of in-person preschool.<sup>4</sup> The program also had significant positive

impacts on play and overall development. As the first study of a remote, short-term early learning program, these findings are game-changing for children around the world who do not have access to traditional preschool, especially in low-income or crisis-affected areas, where as many as 80 percent of children cannot access ECE programs.<sup>5</sup>

**The 11-week Remote Early Learning Program produced effects on emergent literacy and numeracy skills comparable to one year of in-person preschool, and had significant positive impacts on play and overall development.**



Learn more here!

### Program benefits extend to the entire family

Mohammed's father also noticed how the program impacted the whole family. "As a parent, I personally benefited from this program," he said, "and all of our children too, not just Mohammed. Hind [Mohammed's sister] benefited from the program as she assists in teaching Mohammed." Moreover, many caregivers reported how the program bolstered their own and their children's well-being by promoting joyful, playful interactions and building nurturing family bonds that helped to offset the negative effects of the economic and political crises in Lebanon.

### Potential for further adaptation in areas affected by conflict and crisis

By sharing lessons learned from this program, Play to Learn is laying the groundwork for others to adapt and build on this remote program model to expand access to playful learning for children everywhere, especially in areas affected by conflict and crisis. For example, this model has already been adapted and piloted in Iraq, demonstrating the powerful potential for future reach and impact.

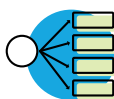
**"As a parent, I personally benefited from this program, and all of our children too, not just Mohammed. Hind [Mohammed's sister] benefited from the program as she assists in teaching Mohammed."**

- Father of child in the IRC's Remote Early Learning Program

## Critical components of Remote Early Learning Program success:



Strong relationships between caregivers and teachers and teachers and children



Teachers were very adaptable and parents were very committed



Teachers had prior early childhood experience and strong in-service coaching



The program used multi-media content

### THE IRC HAS ALSO PIONEERED REMOTE ECD SERVICES IN BANGLADESH

Senu lives with her three children in a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh. Out of concern for her children's well-being amid crowded conditions and limited services, Senu enrolled in the IRC Bangladesh's Integrated Health, Nutrition, and ECD Program. Through regular Interactive Voice Response calls, Senu gained tips about childcare, nutritious foods, learning through play, and other topics she could use to support her children's holistic development. This program model is being evaluated in 2024.



PHOTO: INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

## Pathways to inclusion for children with disabilities

Across all ages and abilities, children can engage in joyful, meaningful, and iterative learning through play. Here are two stories that illustrate how Play to Learn programs support the inclusion of all children, including those with disabilities.

### Asmida's story

Five-year-old Asmida lives in the Rohingya refugee camps. From birth, Asmida faced physical and mental challenges, and her parents struggled to find support for her. When they first enrolled her in a BRAC Humanitarian Play Lab (HPL), Asmida was unable to participate in several daily activities. But the Play Leader, Fatema, was determined to help Asmida participate alongside her peers.

BRAC provides trainings for Play Leaders and para-counselors to recognize and effectively cater to the unique needs of children with disabilities. With support from Fatema and a para-counselor who provided Asmida's family with psychosocial support, Asmida made tremendous progress. Her mother said, "I've noticed significant improvement in her ability to express herself and use physical gestures. I now believe the HPL is truly transforming not only my Asmida's life, but also the lives of hundreds of Rohingya children in our camp."

### Ahmad's story

Five-year-old Ahmad was excited for his first day at an IRC Preschool Healing Classroom in Lebanon. But when his classmates began a "Hands of Friendship" activity, making colorful handprints, Ahmad became anxious and stressed because part of his left hand had been amputated. Recognizing Ahmad's anxiety, his teacher gently guided Ahmad to create his handprint using his right hand.

The IRC emphasizes disability inclusion in facilitator training. With his teacher's ongoing support and encouragement, Ahmad overcame his initial hesitations in the classroom and eventually joined in dancing, clapping, and spinning along with his classmates. These joyful, socially interactive experiences are especially important for children with disabilities, who are too often excluded from opportunities to play, learn, and grow alongside their peers.



PHOTO: ANANDA KUMAR BISWAS | BRAC IED



SECTION

# 2

## Scaling and Sustaining Impact

## Scaling and sustaining play-based early childhood interventions into the future

In this section, we illustrate the opportunities that Play to Learn has created to ensure that we generate impact beyond the life of the grant. In Bangladesh and the Middle East, we partner with government ministries that have the mandate and infrastructure to reach millions of children. Where there are active emergencies or gaps in government services, we are partnering with local organizations and putting communities in the lead to expand access to early learning and nurturing care for all children. We are also harnessing the power of educational media and digital technology to reach families wherever they are, complementing existing services and maintaining continuity of play-based early learning in the face of disruption.

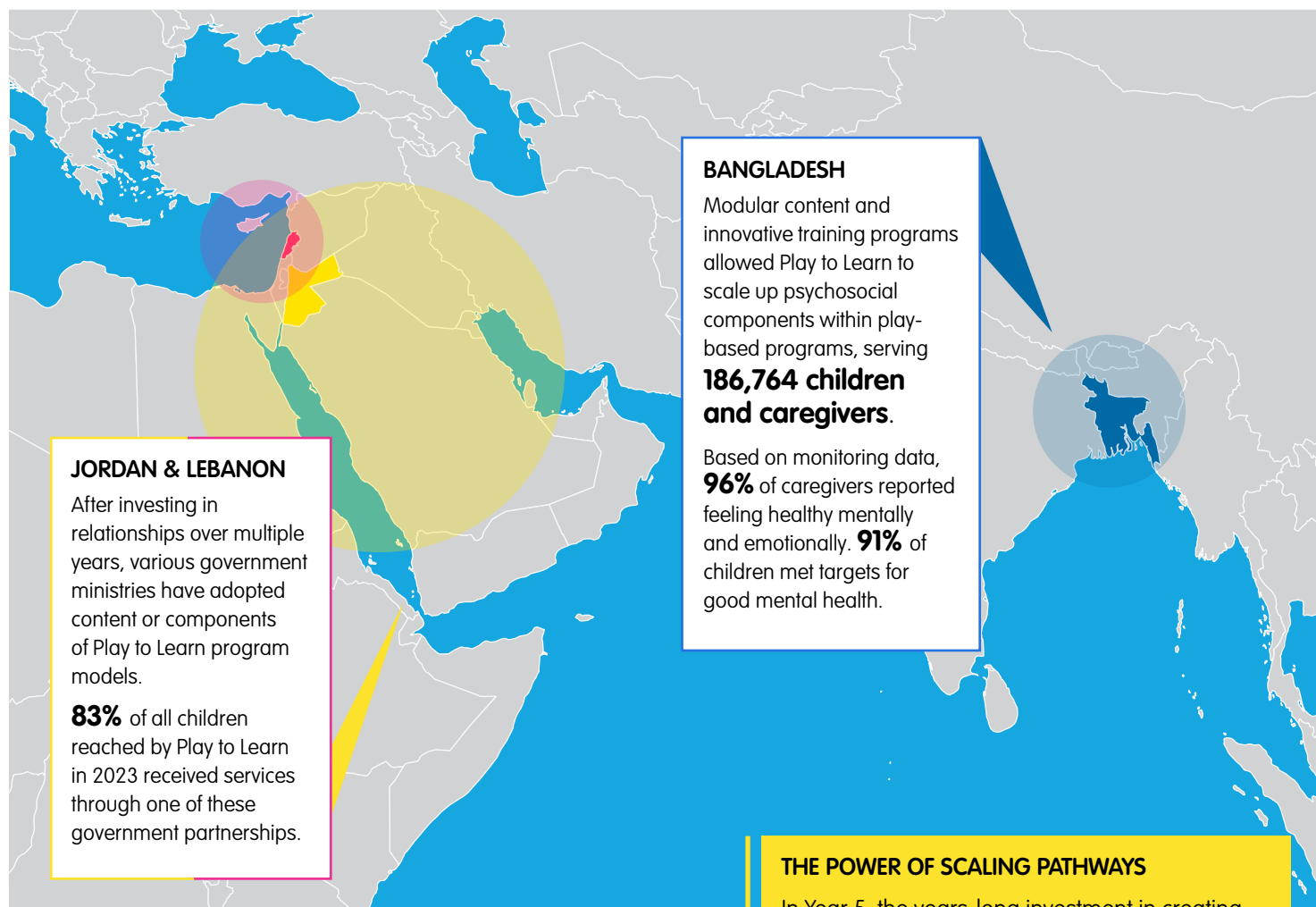






PHOTO: INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

## Creating pathways to scale and sustainability in partnership with governments

Because both BRAC and the IRC are trusted by key stakeholders including government ministries, Play to Learn could leverage its flexible and modular approach to embed play-based content, curriculum, and tools into government programs.

### Working with the national education system in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, BRAC is offering specialized trainings and consultations with government officials to integrate play-based ECD and social-emotional learning into the national education system. BRAC also partnered with the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and the Directorate of Primary Education to offer specialized training on ECD and play-based learning to more than 2,000 government education officials across the country. Looking forward, BRAC plans to continue serving as a trusted government partner on priorities such as developing guidelines for contextualized outdoor play activities, facilitating trainings on play-based ECD for head teachers, and enhancing parent and community engagement in government primary schools.

### Integrating ECD into health systems in Jordan

In Jordan, 86 percent of all children receive early childhood vaccinations through primary healthcare centers, making these clinics a key entry point for reaching caregivers with tools to support children’s development. Yet, healthcare providers reported feeling ill-equipped to respond to

broader questions about child development. In response, the IRC and the Ministry of Health (MoH) co-designed an intervention that integrates ECD knowledge and playful learning tips into the official training for healthcare providers. We complemented this training with resources to help providers deliver key messages during check-up visits, along with “playful learning corners”—interactive spaces for children to engage in playful activities in clinic waiting rooms. As of late 2023, this program has trained almost 250 midwives, reaching over 815,000 children. With funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the MoH aims to scale up this program to support almost 40 percent of children under age five across the country.



PHOTO: INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

## Establishing standards for nurseries in Lebanon

In Lebanon, the IRC and government partners identified nurseries as a critical entry point for future socio-economic development and supporting women's participation in the workforce. However, many nursery staff lacked training on playful education, safety, and nutrition best practices for child development, and nurseries lacked national quality standards. To meet this need, the IRC collaborated with the Ministry of Public Health to launch new quality standards to improve the quality of care across all national private nurseries, alongside a new "under three years" program curriculum. As of late 2023, the Ministry of Social Affairs also finalized quality standards for all public nurseries, along with subsequent assessments and training for daycare staff. These assessments have informed further investments aimed at improving access to, and quality of, nurseries in Lebanon moving forward.

## Key insights from working with governments to scale

Across these partnerships, our modular approach has enabled us to use a variety of content formats and delivery approaches that can be adapted and scaled, decreasing the upfront design time by leveraging what we already know works. Our experience also demonstrates the importance of identifying multi-sectoral entry points for reaching children through national systems and partnering within these systems to co-design interventions that improve outcomes for children and families, while paving the way for lasting change.

### Understanding the System

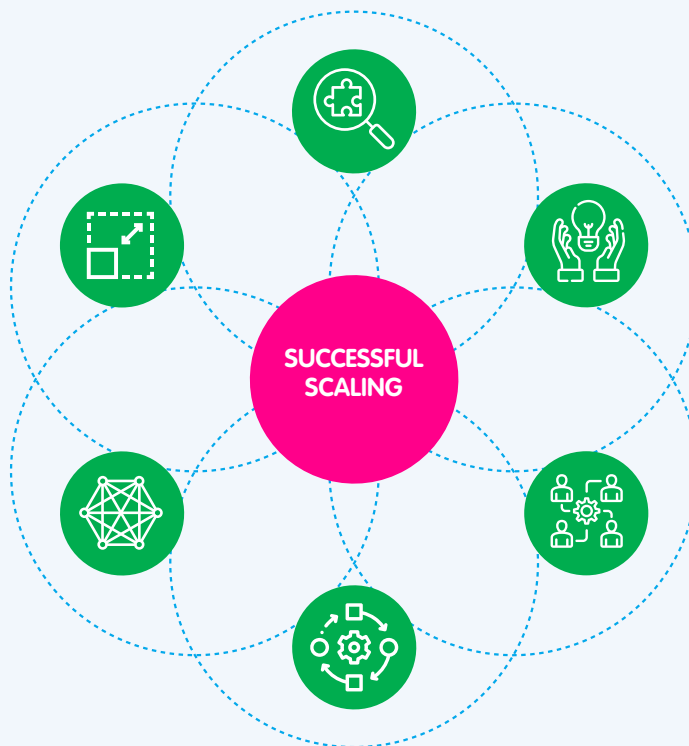
Build and maintain an understanding of the system surrounding children and families to identify partners within it.

### Investment for Scale

Allocate resources to innovation, learning, and adaptation to develop context-specific solutions and facilitate scale. This includes a focus on governance and coordination as well as dedicated staff focusing on systems-level work towards scaling.

### Systems-thinking Approach

Develop system-influenced solutions for effective scaling. This means understanding and addressing complex challenges by examining the interactions among various components within a larger system.



### Adaptive Management

Adopt an intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context.

### Ownership

Cultivate local ownership so that scaling partners see the intervention as their own and are committed to sustaining it in the long term.

### Collaborative Partnerships

Dedicate effort to establishing equal, cooperative partnerships built on common objectives and an aligned vision.

Adapted from [Insights from the Ahlan Simsim Scaling Journey](#) (2024). The International Rescue Committee.



PHOTO: INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

## Strengthening community-based leadership to advance sustainability and equity at scale

In the context of a crisis or where there are gaps in government services, reaching all children—particularly the most marginalized—requires delivering direct services. Collaborating with local and community-based organizations not only ensures that services are contextually relevant but also cultivates a sense of community ownership that promotes sustainability.

### Reaching children in remote areas of Jordan

In Jordan, for example, our partnership with the Ministry of Education supports every child who participates in government-run early education programs, but some children in remote areas of southern Jordan have limited access to government services. The IRC partnered with six community-based organizations to deliver playful learning and parenting programs to address the service gaps in these areas. Another approach for expanding reach was inspired by mobile health units that traveled to underserved areas to administer vaccines and health information. Ahlan Simsim launched “Smile Caravans” in partnership with the national non-governmental organization (NGO) Princess Taghrid Institute to bring play-based ECD services and multimedia content to remote and hard-to-reach locations. Smile Caravans expanded in 2023 to reach children in all 12 governorates across the country—including communities in informal tented settlements, Bedouin areas, Syrian refugee camps, and other rural and urban areas that no other ECD service providers have reached before. This is an example of Ahlan Simsim’s innovation, driven by

systems-based reflection on who was not being reached by services, when designing for increased scale and access for the most vulnerable.

### Training Play Leaders to expand reach in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, BRAC facilitated capacity development initiatives that have significantly enhanced the skills and knowledge of Play Leaders from the Rohingya and host community. With these new skills, a single Play Leader can now effectively manage an HPL independently, a task that previously required two Play Leaders. This will enable these community members to operate more HPLs, expanding access to playful learning to more children. In addition, Play Leaders strengthened their capacity to combine play-based learning with psychosocial support to promote the mental health and well-being of children who attend HPLs and their caregivers. Looking ahead, BRAC plans to extend this capacity by training Play Leaders on a home-based childcare model and para-counselor model, promoting community leadership of these initiatives into the future.

By strengthening local and community-based leadership, we are advancing equity at scale by reaching more children with contextually relevant playful learning opportunities, while cultivating local ownership for long-term sustainability.



PHOTO: YULIYA ACHYMOVYCH | SESAME WORKSHOP

## Putting our globally relevant content to the test: Responding to new crises in new areas

### A universal tool to support children affected by crisis

Six years ago, the LEGO Foundation posed a question: What tools can help deliver playful learning to children in any situation? Sesame Workshop took up this challenge and conducted rigorous research, consultation with advisors, and formative testing with families around the world to create *Watch, Play, Learn*—a global library of animated videos ready-made to reach and teach children everywhere. In 2023, Sesame Workshop rolled out the *Watch, Play, Learn* library, starting with pilot partnerships reaching displaced families in Bangladesh, Colombia, and Kenya, as well as through broadcast media. The scalability and demand for *Watch, Play, Learn* became increasingly clear as Sesame Workshop and partners leveraged the videos to support families in Gaza, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, and Ukraine.

### Responding in Ukraine

In Ukraine, Russia's invasion upended millions of children's lives, exposing them to violence, displacement, and uncertainty. Though Play to Learn did not originally plan to respond in Ukraine, Sesame Workshop moved quickly to dub all 140 episodes of *Watch, Play, Learn* into Ukrainian, and partnered with local organizations to integrate the videos into education and protection services, reaching more than 2,500 children. Sesame Workshop also partnered with Ukrainian broadcast network *PlusPlus* to air *Watch, Play, Learn* on TV and streaming, reaching almost one million viewers. Moreover, the Ukrainian government included *Watch, Play, Learn* as a recommended resource for kindergartens in its guidance for the 2023-2024 school year, further affirming *Watch, Play, Learn*'s relevance and power to restore access to early learning amid disruption.



PHOTO: BONFACE OSONGO | SESAME WORKSHOP

The scalability and demand for *Watch, Play, Learn* is increasingly clear—in 2023, the library of animated videos reached **31 million children** in 24 countries in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa.

# Critical ingredients for scaling play through media

In 2023, Sesame Workshop worked with 15 partners in eight countries to deliver play-based early learning to children affected by conflict and crisis. Through our work, we have identified four key ingredients for scaling or sustaining play with high-quality educational media.

01

## FLEXIBLE, STACKABLE CONTENT

The *Watch, Play, Learn* library has videos available in 27 languages that easily integrate into diverse learning environments, supporting tailored experiences to meet the unique needs of children affected by conflict and crisis.

02

## DIGITAL AND UNPLUGGED TOOLS THAT SOLVE FOR EASE AND SPEED OF EMERGENCY RESPONSE

The *Watch, Play, Learn* app, designed for use in low-tech settings, offers a user-friendly interface for accessing content anywhere. The *Watch, Play, Learn* Toolkit provides ready-to-use technical and operational print resources to facilitate rapid program design and rollout.

03

## STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Collaborating with governments and humanitarian organizations provide the networks and infrastructure at community levels that let us reach more children. Governments in Lebanon, Pakistan, and Ukraine have integrated *Watch, Play, Learn* into their own education curriculum. In addition to consortium partners, Sesame Workshop has also seen demand from a range of international and national NGOs to integrate these videos into their programs.

04

## MODELS FOR SCALE

In 2023, Sesame Workshop created a scale framework that drives towards reach, engagement, and impact. We developed five models for scaling *Watch, Play, Learn* in humanitarian contexts leveraging broadcast, direct services, and digital mass media.



**SECTION 3** Contributing to Transformational  
Change in Policy and Practice

## Contributing to transformational change in policy and practice

Only two percent of humanitarian assistance worldwide is dedicated to ECD.<sup>7</sup> We are working to change this reality by giving voice and visibility to the needs of young children, and advocating for humanitarian actors, donors, and refugee-hosting governments to increase political support and financing to meet these needs. We are also documenting and sharing our proven, scalable program delivery approaches and educational media content with a wide range of implementers and donors to strengthen the quality of early childhood interventions and increase access to playful learning in crisis contexts worldwide.

### YR 1-5 Outcomes

**12** national and international non-governmental stakeholders

that targeted prioritizing and investing in ECD models into new or existing policies or programs



**115** materials developed and disseminated to decision-makers and stakeholders

which provide Play to Learn's evidence, analysis, policy recommendations, technical guidance, or messaging

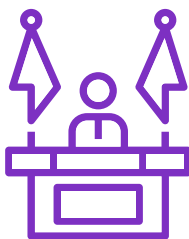


**163** presentations, workshops, high-level discussions, or technical support engagements

with key stakeholders sharing Play to Learn models and findings

**7** commitments (policy, financing, or programming)

secured from targeted donors that indicate prioritization of early childhood development in crisis contexts



**11** government ministries or other government actors

in target contexts that invested in or integrated ECD models into new or existing policies or programs



**23** coalition strategies and joint positions

informed or influenced by Play to Learn/Ahlan Simsim engagement

**23** targeted officials who took increased action





PHOTO: SHEIKH SHANANUZZAMAN ANGKAN | BRAC IED

## STRENGTHENING COORDINATION: ECD in Emergencies (ECDiE) Coordinator Learning Cohort

### Coordination is essential to delivering holistic ECD services in crisis settings

Because early childhood services cut across multiple sectors in humanitarian response—including health, nutrition, child protection, and education—ECD often falls between the cracks in program planning and financing. But coordination both within and across sectors can ensure the visibility of children’s needs, more effective planning and delivery of ECD services, and adequate funding to expand access to vital early childhood programming. That’s why Play to Learn launched the ECDiE Coordinator Learning Cohort, in partnership with the University of Virginia’s Humanitarian Collaborative, to contribute to strengthening ECD coordination in crisis settings globally.

### Bringing together individuals to improve ECDiE coordination

Initially launched in October 2021, the cohort brought together individuals supporting ECDiE coordination in Bangladesh, Colombia, Jordan, and Lebanon to exchange learnings from their work, and expanded a year later to include Syria, Uganda, and Ukraine. Throughout 2023, the cohort advanced three global objectives: documenting the cohort members’ experiences to identify the most effective models for coordination; generating resources for future coordinators; and directly contributing to strengthening coordination in their own national settings.

### Sustaining and documenting the findings of the ECDiE Coordinator Learning Cohort

To support the long-term sustainability of the cohort, we reviewed a wide range of options for transitioning its leadership to another entity and ultimately collaborated with the Moving Minds Alliance to integrate the expertise of the cohort members into the alliance. Sesame Workshop also launched a collaboration with the Global Education Cluster and Education Cannot Wait to secure a wider base of sustainable financing for future ECDiE coordinators. See the full set of resources produced by the cohort [here](#).



Access the full set of resources produced by the cohort [here](#).





# ECDiE Coordination Cohort: Local progress and global impacts



## LOCAL IMPACT



### COLOMBIA:

The coordinator in Colombia orchestrated a pledge for the Global Compact on Refugees, with goals around financing, multi-sectoral coordination, and evidence generation. This pledge was signed by five major humanitarian clusters and 22 organizations in Colombia.



## LOCAL IMPACT



### BANGLADESH:

In collaboration with the Education Sector and the ECD Working Group in Cox's Bazar, the coordinator helped emphasize the importance of ECD to the Government of Bangladesh. As a result of this work, the Government is now supporting an expansion of ECD activities, including to a wider age group and to new populations, such as families living in host communities.

## GLOBAL IMPACT



### INFLUENCING OTHER DECISION-MAKERS:

Based on our results from the ECDiE Coordination Cohort, the Global Education Cluster has significantly expanded its focus on early learning for 2024, inviting Play to Learn members to shape their annual work plan and lead working groups on ECE.

### BUILDING A RESOURCE BASE FOR FUTURE ECD PROGRAMMING:

The combined insights and experiences of the coordinators have been documented and shared with the global ECDiE community, making it easier for coordinators in new crises to rapidly start up and facilitate more effective early childhood opportunities as soon as possible.

# Sharing new evidence on play-based ECD for crisis-affected children

The research being undertaken as part of Play to Learn is set to transform our understanding of what sorts of play-based programs work best for children affected by crisis. Together, we have helped grow the evidence base on ECD in crisis contexts to help inform policy and practice globally.

## Transforming how we measure the impact of early childhood interventions

As Play to Learn’s independent evaluator, NYU Global TIES for Children researchers adapted and piloted quality measures for data collectors to use while observing the programs in action, whether that’s in a classroom or during a home visit. These include checklists that data collectors use to rate various aspects of the program. Along with creating new, Rohingya-specific measures and adapting existing measures to be culturally and linguistically appropriate, this effort is expanding the pool of global goods available to researchers studying early childhood services in crisis contexts. It is also shining a spotlight on the importance of understanding the implementation quality needed to deliver impact for children and families. Overall, studying quality provides a better understanding of how a program works, what needs to be further refined, and how to refine it to maximize impact.

## Pushing research boundaries on the benefits of play

A signature component of NYU Global TIES for Children’s research agenda is a groundbreaking longitudinal study. This study is being conducted in the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh and is the first large-scale prenatal birth cohort study to focus on a forcibly displaced population in a humanitarian context characterized by extraordinary levels of exposure to stress. February 2023 marked the launch of large-scale data collection, focusing on three key research questions: 1) how being gestated, born, and raised amid war and displacement affects child development; 2) how these experiences are biologically embedded and reflected in the child’s neurobiology; and 3) how play and other sources of resilience can buffer from this risk. Findings from this research can improve the design and implementation of programs aimed at supporting healthy child development.

Together, these features of our research agenda are pushing forward the science and practice of play-based ECD in crisis contexts, helping scholars and practitioners understand how implementation quality matters for program success and expanding our knowledge on all the ways in which play can benefit children coping with trauma and stress.



### Examples of Culturally-Adapted Tools

In measuring impact, NYU ensures that assessment tools are culturally and linguistically relevant, such as replacing images with items that are more familiar to Rohingya children (left), or adapting illustrations to represent Rohingya children (below).



## Reshaping the policy and funding landscape through strategic advocacy

To establish play-based ECD as an essential component of humanitarian responses, Play to Learn has engaged with decision-makers at the local, national, and global levels to change how they prioritize and invest in supporting children living through conflict and crisis. It also means generating and sharing evidence of what works to ensure that early childhood interventions are high quality, evidence based, and delivered in the most efficient and effective ways.

### Getting ECDiE on the agenda

Our advocacy is increasing financing and political support for young children and their families by bringing their needs directly to the people and places where decisions are made. Sometimes this means creating our own opportunities to engage decision-makers by hosting meetings or events; other times it means elevating the issue within existing spaces, such as the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the UN Climate Change Conference, and the Global Refugee Forum (GRF). During the UNGA, Sesame Workshop's Sherrie Westin joined a high-level session at the UN Secretariat calling on world leaders to invest in ECD as a pathway to sustainable peace. At the GRF, Play to Learn participated in several side events to elevate the profile of ECD to an audience of government ministers, high-level UN officials, heads of INGOs, and refugee advocates from around the world.

### Encouraging investment in ECD for all children

Play to Learn is also urging donors and refugee-hosting governments to invest what is needed to make high-quality, play-based ECD available to all children. With the US Government, the largest contributor to humanitarian aid worldwide, we've been working to prevent cuts in key foreign assistance accounts as the political climate has shifted toward spending cuts. In the process, we've cultivated congressional champions who publicly advocate with their colleagues for the importance of play-based ECD and its proper financing. An important success has been consistent budget increases for the US Government office responsible for implementing the Global Child Thrive Act, allowing them to expand whole-of-government investments in ECD. Play to Learn also successfully influenced key US Government policy documents, including the pre-primary education framework, to expand their focus on children in crisis contexts.



PHOTO: SHEIKH SHANANUZZAMAN ANGKAN | BRAC IED

As leaders of the Moving Minds Alliance working group focusing on donors, Play to Learn is influencing the governments of France and Canada by collaborating with local civil society organizations to build advocacy capacity at the national level. A key success of this work was Moving Minds Alliance France's participation in the French Humanitarian Conference, including opening remarks from the IRC's David Miliband, and the release of the French Humanitarian Strategy, which calls for increasing funding for inclusive and quality education in emergency situations—a priority for which we advocated. Our advocacy capacity building work in Canada has also generated several wins, including holding a Global Cooperation Caucus with Save the Children Canada to map out opportunities for Canada to be a champion for play-based ECDiE and hosting a parliamentary reception for members of Parliament and senators on Parliament Hill to hear from youth advocates with lived experience of displacement.

**Our advocacy is increasing financing and political support for young children and their families.**

## Improving the delivery of ECD services

While increasing financing and political support, Play to Learn is also improving the environment for delivery of services by strengthening coordination, translating evidence to action, and influencing key policy and planning documents. With our ECDiE Coordinator Learning Cohort, we generated new insights into how to strengthen coordination to deliver play-based ECD interventions in the most efficient and effective ways, and we laid the groundwork for partners like Education Cannot Wait and the Global Education Cluster to secure sustainable financing for future ECDiE coordinators. In partnership with NYU Global TIES for Children, we are also taking evidence generated by Play to Learn programming and translating it into practical [insights](#) for program designers, implementers, and funders to put into action. With other influential partners like USAID, the World Bank, and more, we are embedding our learnings into policy and practice, including the US Global Child Thrive Act implementation guidance to integrate ECD across US foreign assistance for children and families.

All this work has been possible because of the LEGO Foundation's direct investment in strategic advocacy and their own influence as a champion for playful learning worldwide. Looking ahead to Year 6, Play to Learn will continue to deepen our impact on policy and practice to expand access to high-quality early childhood services for all children. Along the way, we will also continue to find novel ways to deliver playful learning to the hardest-to-reach places, advocate for sustainable policy and financing solutions, and cultivate new champions to join the growing movement to create a world where every child can play, learn, and thrive.



PHOTO: ABEHA MONIR & MOHAMMAD RAKIBUL HASAN | SESAME WORKSHOP

## KEY EVENTS IN 2024

- USAID Education Conference** (April 15-19) **APR** **Their World** (April 17)
- Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on ECD** (May 27-30) **MAY**
- Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action Annual Meeting** (June 4-6) **JUN**
- Play to Learn Learning Exchange - Bangladesh** **JUL**
- Commemoration of the Rohingya displacement into Bangladesh** **AUG**
- UN General Assembly Donor Roundtable** **SEPT**
- Moving Minds Alliance Annual Meeting** **OCT**

# Looking to the future

As Play to Learn enters its sixth and final year, we are focusing on maximizing the impact of the project, telling our story, and maintaining the momentum created over the past five years by the LEGO Foundation's bold 100-million-dollar investment to support funding and prioritization of ECD—making sure that impactful, play-based ECD programming is an essential component at the heart of every humanitarian response.



## MAXIMIZE THE IMPACT

### Objectives

- Openly share our resources and rigorous evidence about the possibility and power of play-based ECD in crises with other practitioners
- Complete and share final findings from NYU Global TIES for Children's longitudinal study, Sesame Workshop's play-based measurement development, and the IRC's impact evaluation of the Integrated Health, Nutrition, & ECD model
- Increase and improve investments in ECD in crisis contexts

### Year 6 Highlights

- Launch of the consortium's curated technical resources across program implementation, research, and advocacy
- Creating 50 products for use in dissemination
- Create and disseminate key policy asks to advocacy audiences



## TELL THE STORY

### Objectives

- Increase awareness of Play to Learn and its achievements by key audiences
- Broaden base of champions for the play-based ECD movement
- Increase awareness of and commitments to addressing the vast needs of young children and families affected by crises

### Year 6 Highlights

- Highlight Play to Learn in key convenings and fora
- Use of social media around major moments and global days to increase attention to key Play to Learn themes
- Dissemination of synthesized learnings and the story of Play to Learn to advocacy audiences



## MAINTAIN THE MOMENTUM

### Objectives

- Identify follow-on commitments to continue consortium activities
- Use Play to Learn program experience to solidify PTL partners' thought leadership and improve future programming
- Continue Play to Learn-initiated advocacy work in support of making ECD a priority in every humanitarian response
- Members of the consortium secure follow-on funding to continue work after 2024

### Year 6 Highlights

- Dissemination of research and technical assets to targeted global and local stakeholders
- Agenda shaping and thought leadership activities for Play to Learn partners based on the experience of and learnings from Play to Learn
- Donor roundtable to catalyze new investments in ECDIE
- Pursue follow-on funding by consortium members to continue activities beyond 2024.



PHOTO: RYAN HEFFERNAN | SESAME WORKSHOP

## Endnotes

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## SESAME WORKSHOP™

**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** 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.



**NYU** | Global TIES  
for Children

**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 the resources needed to support them.

## The LEGO Foundation

**The LEGO Foundation** aims to inspire and develop the builders of tomorrow; a mission that it shares with the LEGO Group. The LEGO Foundation is dedicated to building a future where learning through play empowers children to become creative, engaged, lifelong learners. Its work is about re-defining play and re-imagining learning. In collaboration with thought leaders, influencers, educators, and parents, the LEGO Foundation aims to equip, inspire, and activate champions for play.

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