

CASE STUDY

Remote ECD Services

Welcome Sesame Ukraine



March 2024

Context

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 radically changed young children's lives, exposing them to violence and loss, displacement, uncertainty, and fear. Caregivers and families grappling with the crisis found themselves navigating the daunting task of shielding their children from harsh conditions, while striving to preserve some normalcy amidst chaos and uncertainty.

Services for children, including education and educational resources, were interrupted during this time, with both students and teachers displaced. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (MoES) worked hard to provide online learning opportunities to mitigate the disruption; however, most of the resources targeted older students. Content for children aged 3-8 remained especially limited (SW and DAI, 2023).



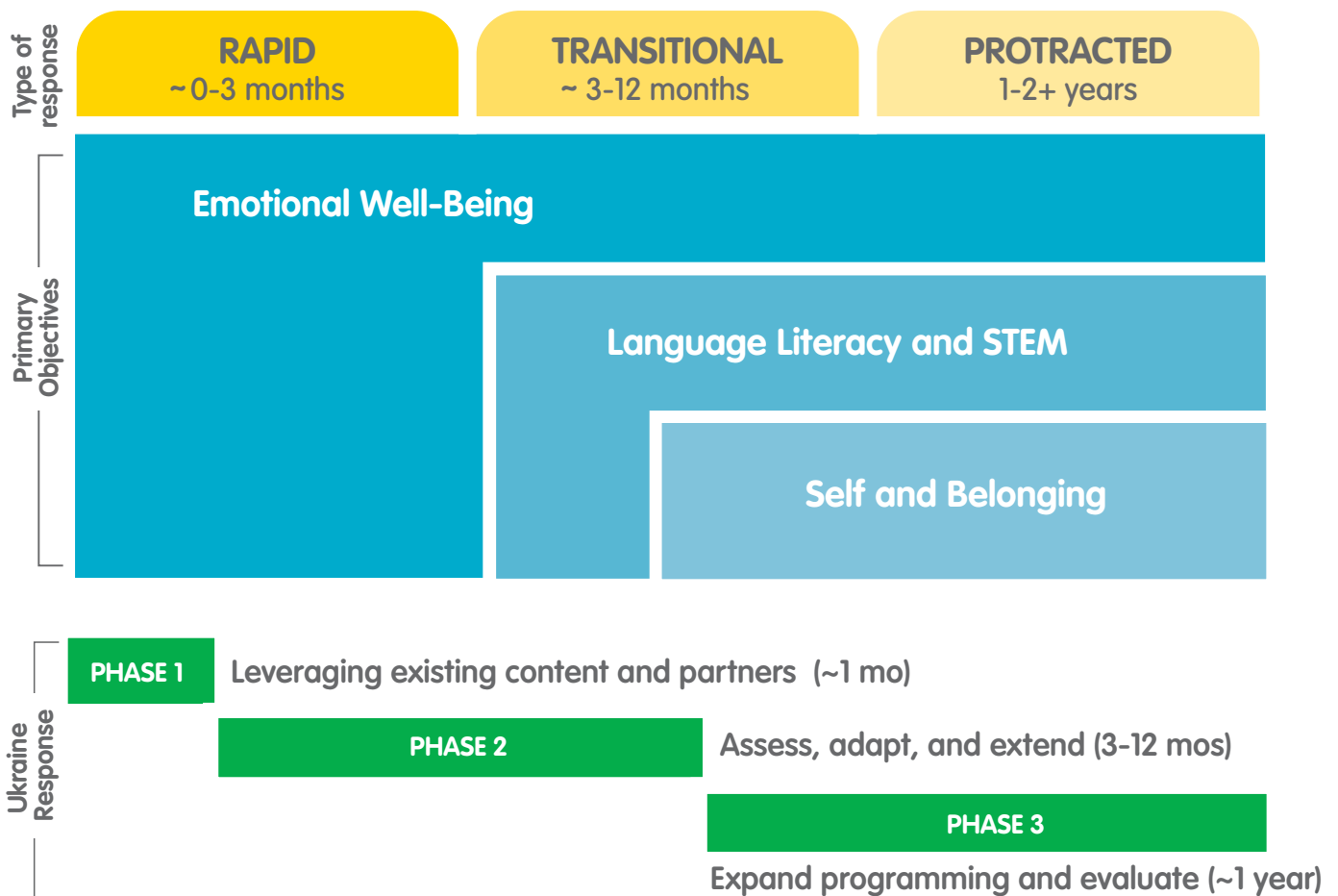


Remote programming

Sesame Workshop (SW) got involved in the crisis response immediately and adapted their approach over time to meet the needs of children and families. Overall, the remote programming used the following platforms, which families accessed using their cell phones or televisions, and teachers accessed using tablets:

- Internet platforms like SesameWorkshop.org, YouTube and Facebook with videos and resources
- Broadcast television
- Messaging apps like Telegram for parenting sessions (forthcoming)

SW typically uses a phased approach in their crisis response that moves from immediate response to ongoing support (SW and DAI, 2023). The bottom section represents how SW approached each response in Ukraine.



PHASE 1:

Leveraging existing content and partners (~1 mo)

Type of Response Rapid (~0-3 months)

Focus Supporting emotional well-being; Providing comfort and support

Rationale

- Services were lacking for young children
- Mothers were using cell phones to seek comforting resources for their children and activities to keep them distracted and entertained, as we have [seen in other crises, too](#).
- Use of existing content allowed Sesame to respond rapidly

Activities

- Created Ukrainian YouTube Playlist which included existing video segments and dubbed Sesame Street videos
- Created Family Trauma Guide¹, a printed resource with information for caregivers and activities for kids
- Used digital distribution and content sharing agreements for dissemination (e.g. UNICEF, Save the Children, IFRC, etc.)

During its initial response, SW focused on leveraging existing partnerships and content that was already available in the local language or could quickly be translated. SW first considered providing support at major outflow points where internally displaced people (IDPs) were crossing the border from Ukraine to the surrounding regions, but they found a digital approach to be more useful, especially where people were trapped and sheltering in place.

PHASE 2:

Assess, adapt, and extend (3–12 mos)

Type of Response Transitional (~3–12 months)

Focus Emotional well-being; Self and belonging; Foundational Skills (Math, Science, SEL, Health)

Rationale Key findings from digital landscape analysis and a needs assessment:²

- Limited content for young children: For example, in March 2022, only 2 out of 50 remote learning resources that the MoES provided were aimed at preschoolers.
- Caregivers wanted content for young children: They wanted content that supported children’s cognitive development and socio-emotional learning, afforded opportunities to process trauma and be playful, and content that promoted a sense of national identity, drawing on Ukrainian songs, dance, and music.
- High access to digital platforms: Caregivers used a variety of digital tools, and platforms, including Facebook, Telegram, Viber, and Instagram.
- Desire for trust and digital guidance: Caregivers stressed that they needed to trust the source of information for their children and wanted support to discern what material was useful to their kids and what could be harmful
- Clear preferences on apps and channels and value of using multiple channels: YouTube was seen as the most important app for accessing educational content, followed by Facebook; Telegram and Viber were the most popular messaging apps for educational content. Users found it most valuable to have resources available across multiple channels and platforms.

Activities

- Shared new content on Sesame’s [YouTube](#) channel to help families cope with the trauma of forced displacement, communicate and process experiences, and develop sense of belonging in new places.
- Developed a [new series of five live-action short films](#) about positive self-identity created with Ukrainian educational advisors and a local Ukrainian production team.³
- Dubbed [“Watch, Play, Learn” video series](#)⁴ into Ukrainian, which have been broadcast on Ukraine’s PLUSPLUS free television channel⁵ and used in Ukrainian public kindergartens with children ages 5–6.
- Hosted free trainings for teachers via Zoom covering curriculum content.

PHASE 3:

Expand programming and evaluate (~1 year)

Type of Response	Protracted (1-2+ years)
Focus	Emotional well-being; Self and belonging; Foundational Skills (Math, Science, SEL, Health)
Rationale⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Caregivers were struggling to help their children through grief and needed support; many did not know where to start without frightening their children. Only 15% of parents said they talked to their child about grief openly and half did not share serious problems with their child.• Adults wanted mental health resources for themselves as well as resources about children’s mental health.• The biggest priority for caregivers was receiving support on how to communicate with their children.
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expanding programming to better support children and caregivers still affected by the war, as well as improving on assessment.• Introducing a hybrid parenting program with caregiver-facing videos on self-care, psychosocial support, early learning, social cohesion.⁷• Setting up “Caregiver Corners” in cultural centers in Ukraine where families can access printed and digitally distributed content.• Expanding access to the <i>Watch, Play, Learn</i> videos to more Ukrainian kindergartens,⁸ including integrating into programs provided by partners (e.g., Ukraine Ministry of Education and Science’s e-learning platform NUMO, Save the Children, IFRC, UNICEF Learning Passport)

Wide access to content

Overall, there was great success in building on families' and teachers' existing digital connectivity and interests. Using platforms and channels that potential users were already employing made it easy for them to access content and use it regularly.

Engaging material

According to feedback from teachers, implementing partners, and caregivers, the content that SW provided, especially during Phase 2 (*Watch, Play, Learn* videos in Ukrainian and short films) were engaging to children and they were excited to watch.

Reported improved child outcomes

Although there was no evaluation to assess impacts on children's outcomes, implementing partners and teachers shared that they noticed improvements in socio-emotional skills, with children being better able to name their emotions.

One implementer said: "I've heard from several kindergartens that kids adore the social emotional part of content because they look at each other's emotions...they try to show different emotions. And that's not something that our national program is focused on." Teachers also reported that children were learning shapes, colors, and other important curricular concepts well from the videos.

Inclusion

Some teachers reported that using the *Watch, Play, Learn* videos in their classrooms helped engage and educate their students with special needs. This was especially true in situations where there were no resources to have an aide in the classroom to help these students.

One implementer said: "Basically, this was like a miracle, because this program works well for them [children with disabilities]. We have got a not very nice situation with tutors, or caregivers, because if there are some children with disabilities in the group, there should be an extra caregiver for this child, but we don't have enough financial support from government for this. Teachers notice that [these children] are watching videos, they are more involved in the process, they also become more focused and try some new things."





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- Welcome Sesame Ukraine implementor

Challenges

Limited information on utilization

Basic web analytics provided some information available about numbers of clicks and how long users stay on a page, but nothing on usage patterns or utilization by sub-populations. There was anecdotal evidence from implementing partners about teachers and caregivers accessing the materials, but again, no systematic findings.

Access to internet

Rolling blackouts and electricity shortages affected both participants and implementing teams. Although this did not seem to be a huge barrier, it likely affected the most vulnerable (people on the move or near the front-line, those with fewest resources, etc.) disproportionately. Implementers recommended addressing this with content that could be downloaded and accessed offline.

Connectivity to participants

Given the remote delivery mechanisms used and the lack of an interactive social media presence, there was no way to keep in touch with participants and see how they were doing, what other services they wanted, etc.





Lessons learned

Capacity building takes time and repetition

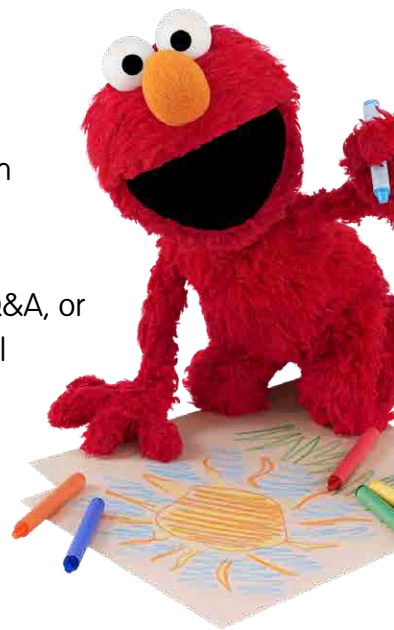
Digital access \neq digital expertise

More is not always better

Need to balance speed and quality

There's a bigger context to navigate





Capacity building takes time and repetition

During the immediate response (phase 1), training was only provided via two Zoom webinars. These sessions covered the basics, walking people through where to find the videos and lesson plans and providing ideas about how to use them in an educational way. But there was no opportunity for hands-on, in-person practice, Q&A, or coaching. Both managers and implementers noted that it would have been helpful to model how to use the digital resources for teachers and caregivers and give them the chance to practice and ask questions. Given some of the challenges that teachers faced with the logistics of using their devices (projectors, tablets, etc.), it would also be helpful to have ongoing technical support.

Digital access ≠ digital expertise

Just because caregivers and teachers have access to devices, does not mean they always know how to use them or how to best utilize the Sesame content. Implementers suggested having more training that focused on the nuts and bolts of using devices to access content. One said, “Maybe it would be good to have many more videos about devices or some worksheets about how to use them and what can you do actually do and what you cannot do.” Others suggested having a dedicated app that both children and caregivers could easily use to access content, rather than needing to go into YouTube or other platforms.

More is not always better

Early in the response, there was a sense that quantity of resources was the metric. SW should get out as much relevant content to families as possible. However, they learned that a huge amount of content can be overwhelming to people. In fact, some caregivers stopped accessing resources because it was too much to navigate. SW found that often a smaller amount of content, distributed intentionally, can have much more impact. In the future they want to better tailor their outreach to provide people with resources that are the most useful. This could mean tailoring content by geography, child age, language, etc.

Need to balance speed and quality

Implementing quickly can be at odds with doing so with high-quality. SW’s phased approach helped strike a balance by leveraging existing materials initially, while developing more specific resources and iterating on them throughout.

There’s a bigger context to navigate

One hitch that SW faced in the beginning when they were posting resources online was not being able to share links directly with entities in the EU due to compliance issues with a policy aimed at protecting digital users online. Having a more global strategy that looks at legal, cultural, and other issues across borders could benefit future programming.

Going forward

SW will continue its hybrid response in Ukraine. Moving forward it aims to refine its outreach strategy, focusing more on social media, because that can be more directly targeted, and doing a more consistent rollout of content on YouTube channels. A new caregiver program (Care and Connect) will begin in spring 2024. SW is also hoping to implement a teacher professional development program focused on enhancing teachers' knowledge of socioemotional learning, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and play-based learning.

Beyond the Ukraine response, SW is applying lessons learned to adapt its response to other crises. Its Phase 1 will be focused on providing fewer assets with more user-friendly technical guidance and activities. SW has identified some universal needs for caregivers and children in crisis and created a series of resources that focus on them. SW has also created a website that will serve as a central repository for the free-for-use phase 1 materials so that they are easy to access and is setting up a system to gather more data on website visits and generate leads for future partnerships.



References

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Endnotes

- 1 The "Guide for Ukrainian Families Coping with Crisis and Displacement" was a short user-friendly guide focused on emotional wellbeing, coping with big changes, and belonging in a new place. It offered articles for caregivers, printable activities for children, and ~17 paired videos.
- 2 SW commissioned a digital landscape analysis and a needs assessment to better understand digital access and connectivity challenges that caregivers and children faced and children's and caregivers' interests and preferences.
- 3 Featuring a diverse group of children and families, these videos celebrate contemporary Ukrainian identity and heritage through dance, music, arts and crafts, language, and food. Additional resources in [Ukrainian](#) were also available for children, caregivers, and teachers.
- 4 These 140 animated 5-minute video segments are designed to bring playful early learning to children, with particular attention to the unique needs and experiences of those affected by crises. These videos promote math, science, and social-emotional skills, as well as health and safety lessons — all tailored for children ages 3-8.
- 5 The WPL videos will also be available for streaming on demand on the [Kyivstar TV](#) platform, which allows viewers to watch on smartphones, tablets and laptops, Smart TV, Apple TV, and set-top boxes.
- 6 Ukraine Needs Assessment Report, March 2023.
- 7 The hybrid program will involve two sessions in person, and then three sessions over Telegram.
- 8 Based on their positive experiences, some implementing partners have started an advocacy campaign to integrate these videos into the national kindergarten curriculum.

Welcome Sesame

As young children are increasingly impacted by crises around the globe, Sesame Workshop is committed to meeting their needs. Welcome Sesame is our global initiative to deliver comfort and learning to young children and their caregivers affected by crisis and conflict, reaching them during the narrow window of their early development. Anchored by two large-scale initiatives created to respond to the needs of children impacted by the Syrian and Rohingya refugee crises, Welcome Sesame is now reaching children across five continents, from East Africa to Latin America and beyond through a combination of mass media and direct services, as well as research and advocacy.

For more information about Welcome Sesame, please visit our website: m.sesame.org/CrisisResponse

Watch **PLAY** Learn

Sesame Workshop developed *Watch, Play, Learn* early learning videos, a library of globally tested educational media content aimed at bringing playful early learning to children worldwide, with a particular focus on crisis contexts. Created as part of the Play to Learn project funded by the LEGO Foundation, these videos feature beloved Sesame characters like Elmo and Cookie Monster and cover various subjects such as math, science, social-emotional skills, health, and safety. With 140 five-minute animated segments designed for children ages 3 to 8, these videos offer flexible use, whether as standalone resources or integrated into existing mental health, education, or child protection programs, suitable for both direct service provision and broadcast.

For more information visit our [WPL Early Learning Videos](#) webpage or [contact Lesley Bourns](#).

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