

CASE STUDY

Remote ECD Services

Semillas de Apego

Watch, Play, Learn Pilot Colombia



April 2024

Context

Over half a million children under-five in Colombia have been affected by civil conflict. Decades of violent internal conflict has resulted in the forced displacement of 8.4 million people (*Unidad de Víctimas, 2023*) and inflows from Venezuela have added to these numbers, leaving an estimated 7.7 million people, including 2.3 million children, with humanitarian needs in 2023 (UNICEF, 2023).

Exposure to violence and experiences of displacement during early childhood can harm children's mental health and social and emotional learning, and services to support displaced children in Colombia are limited. As of March 2023, Venezuelan migrants represented only 6% of children enrolled in school in Colombia and there are particularly large gaps in access and continuity in early childhood education (UNICEF, 2023).





Semillas de Apego

[Semillas de Apego](#) is a community-based psychosocial program for caregivers of young children in communities affected by conflict and forced displacement. It aims to support maternal mental health and nurturing parent-child relationships, which contribute to young children's wellbeing and healthy development.

The program consists of a total of 15 group sessions with caregivers who have at least one child under 5-years-old. The groups include approximately 12-16 caregivers. Each session lasts about two and a half hours.

The group sessions are led by two trained facilitators, who are community members and caregivers themselves. After a 6-week experiential training, facilitators recruit participants, deliver program sessions, collect and report monitoring data, and participate in reflective supervision.

In 2014, the *Universidad de los Andes* partnered with the University of California San Francisco to develop *Semillas de Apego*. After piloting in 2015, they implemented in the municipality of Tumaco in 2018 and 2019 and evaluation results showed positive impacts on both maternal and child mental health as well as parent-child interactions and early childhood development. In 2022, *Semillas de Apego* scaled up the program, reaching three new municipalities. In 2023, a collaboration with Sesame Workshop began to integrate a remote component into the existing model.



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Remote programming

Two municipalities with high rates of conflict, violence, and forced displacement (Tumaco and Jamundí) were selected for an initial pilot. An initial diagnostic assessment identified that the majority of families had access to phones, but they faced connectivity and data access issues (particularly in Tumaco), which meant it would not be feasible to share materials that required long download times. Caregivers were already using Facebook and WhatsApp so it made sense to utilize those platforms to deliver the remote content.

In 2023, *Semillas de Apego* began to integrate content from Sesame Workshop’s [“Watch, Play, Learn” video series](#). *Watch, Play, Learn* (WPL) includes 140 animated 5-minute video segments designed to bring playful early learning to children, with particular attention to the unique needs and experiences of those affected by crises. The videos promote math, science, and social-emotional skills, as well as health and safety lessons — all tailored for children ages 3-8. *Semillas de Apego* used the SEL videos that focused on identifying and regulating emotions, since that would best complement the in-person programming.

Participants watched the WPL videos during the in-person group sessions that focused on early childhood development and healthy child-parent relationships. Then, facilitators sent videos to participants via private Facebook groups during the week so they could watch these and practice behaviors with their children between in-person gatherings.

Results from a qualitative analysis by the *Universidad de los Andes* found that both municipalities faced access challenges that limited uptake and impact of the WPL videos. There were some problems related to using private Facebook as a delivery mechanism. First, while many caregivers used Facebook, they generally limited their use to the newsfeed and did not know how to use Facebook groups. Second, it was common practice for caregivers to change their names on Facebook regularly, so it was difficult for program staff to match them when they accepted their access request to the Facebook groups. Third, there were multiple steps required to join a group, which posed a barrier to participants.

Implementers modified their approach in several ways to address these obstacles. They began to shift more to WhatsApp as this was easier for participants to use and free. During the first cohort, participants would receive a message via WhatsApp with a preview (e.g., 1-min clip) of the videos to motivate them to go to Facebook to watch the videos. For the second cohort, the program team started sending the full videos through WhatsApp, while maintaining Facebook delivery.



SEMILLAS DE APEGO ARTWORK
“RESPIRA”

Successes

In addition to existing positive findings from evaluations of *Semillas de Apego*, SW and *Universidad de los Andes* have noted several additional positive outcomes from this remote and hybrid strategy. These include:

More engagement with programming overall

Implementers noted that many caregivers have engaged more with the digital content and were better able to take the lessons from *Semillas de Apego* into their homes.

Reflection and sharing among caregivers

Managers and implementers noted that the WPL content helped to facilitate reflections among caregivers. They were open and willing to reflect on their experiences and share these with other group members via private Facebook or WhatsApp groups.



PHOTO: ANDRÉS MOYA | UNIVERSIDAD DE LOS ANDES

Children and caregivers better able to identify and manage emotions

Both children and caregivers appear to be able to better identify and manage their emotions. Caregivers are able to recognize how their children express emotions, better understand their emotional state, and provide support and guidance in the emotional co-regulation process.

One community facilitator shared:

“A 4-year-old girl arrived at a group session and became scared of a dog. Her mother said, ‘remember what we do when we feel scared.’ The child put her hands on her stomach and started to breathe even while crying. Her mother checked in with her again and praised her for doing a good job.”

Another community facilitator noted a time when one *Semillas de Apego* participant’s child said to their mother: “breathe because it looks like you’re upset.”

Reported improved child outcomes

According to evidence from Jamundí, children have shown changes in behavior such as reduced aggression. Implementers and facilitators working in both Tumaco and Jamundí noted that children don’t play as violently and can manage emotions.



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- Semillas de Apego community facilitator



Challenges

Program designers and implementers also faced some challenges:

Access to internet

Mostly in Tumaco, participants faced problems with internet connection, especially during rains. The first cohort of the pilot included funding for top-ups to help participants cover the cost of a data plan to access the WPL materials; however, this was discontinued when funding ran out. After that, some participants struggled with the cost of data, but many others found alternative ways to access the content (e.g., through family members internet access, gathering with fellow participants, etc.). Some implementers suggested reinstating this support mechanism, at least for those who need it most.

Limited caregiver engagement with children

Although caregivers were told that they should watch videos with their children so they could help with emotional co-regulation, implementers noticed some children watching videos alone. Some implementers said there was not enough emphasis on the adult's role to support co-regulation.

Logistics to support delivery

Ensuring delivery and providing the necessary ongoing support required more time and effort than was originally expected. Program staff needed to register the participants in Facebook Messenger, train caregivers how to use it, show and discuss the videos during the group session, send the videos to all participants on Fridays, send reminders during the week, and respond to participant questions and comments. This required significant time on the part of the communications team and facilitators, who also had to make sure they had a plan for phone services (eliminated once they shifted to WhatsApp). Facilitators noted that their sense of burden was higher at the beginning, but once they got used to the technology and shifted to WhatsApp, which they continued to receive support from the communications manager resulting in more efficient content sharing, the WPL content started to feel like part of their job.

Conflict context

Ongoing conflict and violent rivalries among gangs and criminal organizations created challenges to implementation. It was not possible to put all participants in a single Facebook group because some were in feuding groups. This required understanding community dynamics and tailoring the groupings accordingly (e.g., using separate private Facebook groups) to maintain safety among participants.

Lessons learned

Remote services were an effective supplement to in-person sessions

Timing matters

Focus not just on the platform, but how it's used

Relevance varies by context

Prepare and be flexible, but don't overplan

Ongoing reflection and adaptation



PHOTO: FEDERICO BOTTIA | SESAME WORKSHOP

Remote services were an effective supplement to in-person sessions

The WPL videos provided material that reinforced *Semillas de Apego* in-person activities and gave participants opportunities to practice and reinforce skills they learned in the group gatherings. Children wanted to watch the videos numerous times and the repetition helped them absorb and learn. The videos provided additional opportunities for children and caregivers to interact.

Timing matters

The videos were shared with participants right after the group session. Uptake was greatest on the day of the in-person session and trailed off after that, despite facilitators sending reminders and additional videos. This suggests that it may be helpful to share the most important content at the time when most people look at it and/or explore additional ways to drive continued engagement.

Focus not just on the platform, but how it's used

An initial assessment identified an appropriate platform – Facebook – but did not adequately identify how it was used. That resulted in a delivery mechanism with significant administrative burden for implementers and difficulty in access for caregivers. It is important to not only identify the platform, but also how it's used.

Relevance varies by context

There were differences in participants' ability to relate and engage with the content based on the context where WPL was implemented. For example, in Tumaco, which has higher rates of conflict and violence, implementers observed challenges in children and caregivers being able to relate to some of the examples in the WPL videos, such as a child getting upset because their toy truck broke. One community facilitator explained that in Tumaco not only did most children not have toy trucks, but "[their] sadness, their anxiety comes directly from violence" so there was a "barrier for the children to relate with the problems that the characters faced [in the videos]." In Jamundí, which has more IDPs, but lower conflict and violence, engagement was higher and feedback about the videos more positive.

Prepare and be flexible, but don't overplan

There is no perfect delivery method. Implementers suggest thinking ahead about what could go wrong and maintaining flexibility to adapt as you go. It is impossible to know which challenges you will face until you face them.

Ongoing reflection and adaptation

One of the strengths of the *Semillas de Apego*-WPL pilot was ongoing communication and reflection on what was working. The supervision system involved weekly check-ins with both facilitators and supervisors, who came together to discuss challenges they were facing, including those related to the context, participants, implementation strategies, etc. Then they would discuss ways to adapt the delivery and support systems to address these challenges.

Going forward

The *Semillas de Apego* program is expanding to more than 9 municipalities across 7 departments in Colombia, with support from the Hilton Foundation. The integration with Watch, Play, Learn has made the *Semillas de Apego* implementation team recognize the value of digital engagement to empower participants and support them to build stronger relationships with children and other people who support caregiving. The team is committed to providing more interactive materials to complement the regular program activities. They will maintain the WPL integration for future cohorts as homework for participants, alongside regular homework activities. *Semillas de Apego* will evaluate its impact at scale in 2025, to understand if the positive impacts found during the first implementation in Tumaco hold when implementing in various places with different contexts and a much larger team to manage.



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SESAME WORKSHOP 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](#).

play to learn

Play to Learn is a trailblazing program from Sesame Workshop, BRAC, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and NYU Global TIES for Children, and the LEGO Foundation that is providing children affected by crisis opportunities to learn, grow, and thrive. Play to Learn is reaching families affected by the Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises through educational media and direct services in homes, play spaces, health centers, and more to provide the essential building blocks of playful learning and nurturing care. Ultimately, Play to Learn aims to establish play-based early childhood development as an essential component of humanitarian response for all children and caregivers affected by crisis.

For more information about Play to Learn, [contact Lesley Bourns](#)

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