

Media Matters

Lessons on the use and impact of media for early childhood development in humanitarian settings



In 1969, Sesame Workshop began with a question: could we use television to reach children in the United States who did not have access to early childhood education? Decades of experience and research have since confirmed that early childhood is a critical window of opportunity—and that educational media has the power to support learning during this time, featuring relevant storylines, familiar settings, and lovable characters.

Sesame Workshop's reach has expanded over the years to new contexts around the world. Most recently, this work has included a focus on responding to the needs of children and families in crisis- and conflict-affected settings. Media can be an important tool in these settings, as it can reach families through broadcast, digital, and print channels and can be integrated into other types of programming across sectors. **Through this work, we have gained insight into why and how media can be a particularly powerful tool to reach and support families during crises.**

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE MEDIA

Sesame Workshop adheres to several core principles to create high-quality media experiences for children in crisis-affected contexts. Our media resources are:

- Child centered
- Crisis sensitive
- Play based
- Joyful, featuring heartfelt storytelling
- Aligned with international education standards

Key lessons learned on the impact of media in humanitarian settings

1 Media can help families overcome barriers to accessing early learning resources.

Access to high-quality early childhood development services is a crucial first step in ensuring that young children have opportunities to thrive. Mass media, delivered through broadcast television, social media, or smartphones, is uniquely suited to reach families affected by conflict or crisis when they are on the move or spread across a large area. For example, *Ahlan Simsim*, a locally produced Arabic-language version of *Sesame Street*, has reached more than 27 million children across the Middle East and North Africa region.

To reach Venezuelan families on the move, Sesame Workshop has partnered with local organizations **in Brazil, Colombia, and Peru** to place small digital devices in shelters, child protection spaces, food distribution points, and early learning centers. Any family within range of the device can download educational content for free.

In Colombia and Peru, Sesame Workshop created the Sésamo Chatbot to enable families to access educational content through an automated assistant on WhatsApp. Refined through extensive research and testing, the Chatbot connects families to videos, educational games, and fun activities that are free and accessible on demand. New materials focused on social-emotional learning are regularly added to meet the unique needs of families affected by crisis.

Leveraging social media can increase access in rapid onset emergencies. For example, **in Ukraine**, Sesame Workshop mounted a rapid response to the 2022 Russian invasion and unfolding displacement, immediately making available all existing Ukrainian and Russian language videos on YouTube. As the crisis continued, Sesame Workshop built partnerships in the region and dubbed additional content to provide more resources for broadcast and digital distribution through government ministries and humanitarian agencies. Facebook and Instagram ad campaigns promoted content available on YouTube and other platforms, garnering 38+ million impressions.

2 Media can support learning outcomes.

Building on decades of research on the educational benefits of early childhood television¹, New York University Global TIES for Children, Sesame Workshop, and the International Rescue Committee collaborated on several impact evaluations illustrating that media can support children's learning in places affected by crisis and conflict.

In Jordan, children watched an episode a day of the *Ahlan Simsim* television show in their kindergarten classroom. Watching the show improved children's ability to correctly state a pictured emotion, identify others' emotions in specific social scenarios, and mention breathing strategies to manage strong emotions.²

In Colombia, caregivers received two 10-minute videos per week via WhatsApp and were asked to show the videos at home to their four-year-old child. Participants included Venezuelan refugee and Colombian families. Watching the videos increased children's ability to identify expressed emotions with precise vocabulary and their recognition of what others were feeling.

In Lebanon, caregivers and children participated in a multi-media, remote early learning program developed by the International Rescue Committee and Sesame Workshop. Participating families were mostly Syrian refugee families. The program had significant positive impacts: gains in literacy and numeracy from the 11-week remote preschool program were comparable to those seen from a year of in-person preschool.³

Together, these studies demonstrate that high-quality educational media can encourage young children's foundational learning, at home and in school, in person and remotely—a particularly important lesson for crisis-affected communities that may not have access to safe, consistent, in-person education.

3 Media can help strengthen relationships between caregivers and children.

The nurturing relationships that parents and caregivers form with young children are crucial to a child's development, laying the foundation for long-term wellbeing. These bonds are especially important for helping children in crisis-affected settings build resilience in the face of adversity. Media can play an important role in encouraging these relationships, offering an opportunity to bring children and caregivers together in a joyful way while also supporting caregivers' parenting skills.

Sesame Street and its co-productions were developed with the explicit intention of inviting caregivers to watch the show alongside children to support their engagement around the themes addressed in each episode. This practice, called "co-viewing," has consistently shown positive impacts on children and adults. For example, a study of families who watched *Ahlan Simsim* found that families who regularly watched the show together reported improved emotional vocabulary and increased emotion regulation among both children and parents.⁴

In Colombia, Sesame Workshop partnered with the Universidad de los Andes' Semillas de Apego program, which focuses on promoting healthy attachment between caregivers and children who have been affected by violence. The program integrated Sesame Workshop videos for caregivers and children to watch together at home in between in-person program sessions. Caregivers reported that the videos reinforced what they learned in class and gave them a natural way to talk with their children about managing emotions.

4 Media can help overcome barriers to equity.

Media can help overcome barriers to equity when it comes to both access and impact.

For example, the remote early learning program **in Lebanon** reached children who did not have access to in-person preschool, and the size of the impacts were comparable to those seen in evaluations of in-person preschool from around the world. This was an important demonstration of the power of media-integrated remote programming to support children unable to access in-person schooling in the short- or long-term, whether it is because of a disability, ongoing conflict, a public health emergency, or any other barrier to access.

In addition to access, media can facilitate equity in impact by providing a consistent high-quality experience regardless of other inequities present. The benefits of

the program **in Lebanon** did not differ by caregivers' educational background or literacy level—parents of all educational backgrounds were equally successful at teaching their children. And **in Colombia**, although watching Sesame Workshop's *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. In some cases, media-based early childhood development programming may have a stronger impact on families who have fewer resources or are facing more adversity, helping to bridge gaps and support equity.

BEST PRACTICES FOR DIRECT SERVICE MEDIA INTEGRATION

- **Assess the media landscape.** Identify what technology is available, how much it costs to use the internet or mobile data, and what kinds of applications or devices families are already using. See Sesame Workshop's [Technology Decision Roadmap](#) for more guidance.
- **Identify content that supports the program and culture.** Curate existing content in light of the program goal. If gaps remain, the program may need to budget for adapting or dubbing other existing content or producing new content.
- **Plan for repetition and reinforcement.** Repetition (watching the same episode several times) and reinforcement (showing different episodes that cover the same concept or skill) improve learning outcomes. See Sesame Workshop's Dosage Guidance Note for more.
- **Train and coach facilitators to use media.** Even experienced teachers or facilitators will need training and coaching to use media to support learning.



CREATING CHARACTERS FOR CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

The power of familiar, relatable characters is a key ingredient in what makes educational media effective in helping young children learn. Research shows that children form relationships with characters on screen, supporting engagement and comprehension⁵.

Sesame Street characters have global resonance that spans generations, and new characters are created to reflect new cultures. For example, twins Noor and Aziz are Rohingya characters who live in a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Sesame Workshop conducted research to root the characters in the rich Rohingya culture, testing character designs and personality traits with families. For instance, caregivers like that Noor is curious about the world and emphasizes the importance of education, and they appreciate how Aziz likes to tell stories, which is an important part of Rohingya culture.

CITATIONS

- ¹ Mares, M.-L., & Pan, Z. (2013). Effects of Sesame Street: A meta-analysis of children's learning in 15 countries. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 34(3), 140–151. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2013.01.001>. Borzekowski, D., Singpurwalla, D., Mehrotra, D., & Howard, D. (2019). The impact of Galli Galli Sim Sim on Indian preschoolers. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 64(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2019.101054>. The Sesame Effect: The Global Impact of the Longest Street in the World. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315751399>.
- ² Global TIES for Children. (2023). Lessons and Impacts of Ahlan Simsim TV Program in Pre-Primary Classrooms in Jordan on Children's Emotional Development: A Randomized Controlled Trial. New York: New York University. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22770929.v1>
- ³ Schwartz, K., Michael, D., Torossian, L., Hajal, D., Yoshikawa, H., Abdulrazzak, S., ... Behrman, J. (2024). Leveraging Caregivers to Provide Remote Early Childhood Education in Hard-to-Access Settings in Lebanon: Impacts From a Randomized Controlled Trial. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2024.2334841>
- ⁴ Foulds, K. (2023). Co-Viewing Mass Media to Support Children and Parents' Emotional ABCs: An Evaluation of Ahlan Simsim. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 51, 1479–1488. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01408-0>
- ⁵ Brunick, K., Putnam, M., McGarry, L., Richards, M., & Calvert, S. (2016). Children's future parasocial relationships with media characters: the age of intelligent characters. *Journal of Children and Media*, 10(2), 181–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2015.1127839>



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