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Creating and Using Play Materials for Young Children:

Insights from Play to Learn Practitioners



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THE PLAY TO LEARN PROJECT

Play to Learn is an innovative humanitarian program from Sesame Workshop, BRAC, and the International Rescue Committee that harnesses the power of play to deliver critical early learning to children and caregivers affected by the Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises. Made possible with the support of the LEGO Foundation, Play to Learn reaches families in their homes, health centers, and play spaces—providing them with the tools needed to foster nurturing care and help children learn and thrive. Partnering with NYU’s Global TIES for Children as an independent evaluator, we are measuring the program’s impact on children’s development and caregivers’ mental health and well-being. By generating tested, scalable, and transportable approaches and educational content, Play to Learn is laying the foundation for transformational change—allowing us to reach generations of children affected by crisis, no matter where they are.

THIS RESOURCE

This resource was created to help curate and synthesize the expertise and insight from practitioners in early childhood development who worked with children and families affected by conflict and crisis under the Play to Learn project from 2018-2024. This resource was developed by Childhood Education International under a consulting agreement with the Play to Learn Project in consultation with Play to Learn partners. This collaborative effort underscores the power of co-creation in addressing the complex challenges of education in emergencies and advancing meaningful change.

The full collection of program resources can be found at the [Play to Learn Resource Hub \(https://sesameworkshop.org/our-work/impact-areas/play-to-learn-resource-hub/\)](https://sesameworkshop.org/our-work/impact-areas/play-to-learn-resource-hub/).

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The **LEGO** Foundation

For optimal learning and growth, young children need a variety of interactions, exercises, and relationships. Play materials are also key—they provide stimulation, aid in learning processes, and catalyze sensory and motor development. Creating and using play materials has been central to engaging children across the Play to Learn project to help them thrive.

Different materials can generate different kinds of play. For example, a doll may stimulate imaginative solo play while a ball may promote group games. Play materials also help children build a sense of attachment, understand what is valuable, learn to share, and interact with others—building prosocial behavior and understanding of emotions.

Yet, in many contexts in which we work, premade toys and games can be expensive or unavailable in the local market or not recognizable or engaging across cultures. When designing and delivering play materials for young children, it is important to consider the following issues and pose these questions:

- ⊙ **Age-appropriate and culturally-appropriate:** What would work well for infants, toddlers, and young children and are applicable and relevant to their culture and customs?
- ⊙ **Community involvement and co-design:** Who in this community can inform, create, and produce new play materials?
- ⊙ **Locally-sourced materials:** Where, and from whom, can I gather materials within the community and surrounding areas?
- ⊙ **Cost:** What materials are affordable or donated and still appropriate and safe for children?
- ⊙ **Children’s involvement:** How can children participate in helping to build toys and materials for their play?
- ⊙ **Inclusion:** Do these materials provide access to as many children as possible and allow all children to play and learn?
- ⊙ **Existing materials and adaptation:** What materials already exist at home or in other settings and can be adapted for children’s use? What materials can be brought to schools and other learning centers?



EXAMPLES OF HANDMADE TOYS



Examples of play materials that support children’s growth, learning, creativity, imagination, and fun

- ⦿ Bottles, utensils, and other household items can be collected to make musical instruments or to build sensory skills through touch and sound.
- ⦿ Clay or other molding materials can create dolls, figurines, and other shapes for children to use for play, counting numbers, and creating letters.
- ⦿ Cloth, string, and rope can be used to make costumes, rugs, or playmats.
- ⦿ Paper, molding material, rubber bands, or tape can make balls or other sports-like equipment that builds motor and kinesthetic skills.
- ⦿ Food or cooking materials can be used to teach children texture and touch and can stimulate their sense of smell and taste.
- ⦿ Leaves, tree branches, or other natural materials can be manipulated to create play materials.

Other materials may be non-tactile. Songs, poems, and other uses of voice and sounds are important audio materials that can also engage children in play. For example, in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, caregivers and practitioners incorporated *kissya* (oral storytelling) during early learning sessions with children. Some of the stories were then written and published in Burmese, Bangla, and English.

Co-creating play materials with Rohingya families

In Cox's Bazar, Rohingya community members gathered with representatives from BRAC to hold materials workshops. During these workshops, they considered what play materials and toys could be created from what they already had that met the needs and cultural norms of Rohingya children ages 0-5. They created many toys using existing materials—making rattles and planes out of plastic bottles; boats out of paper; animals out of socks, paper, and toilet rolls; and play glasses and clothes out of leaves. Culturally relevant items, such as a *dugdugi* (drum) and a *dheki* (a mortar and pestle used to separate rice grains), were also created in child-friendly shapes and sizes.



Play materials for use after acute emergencies

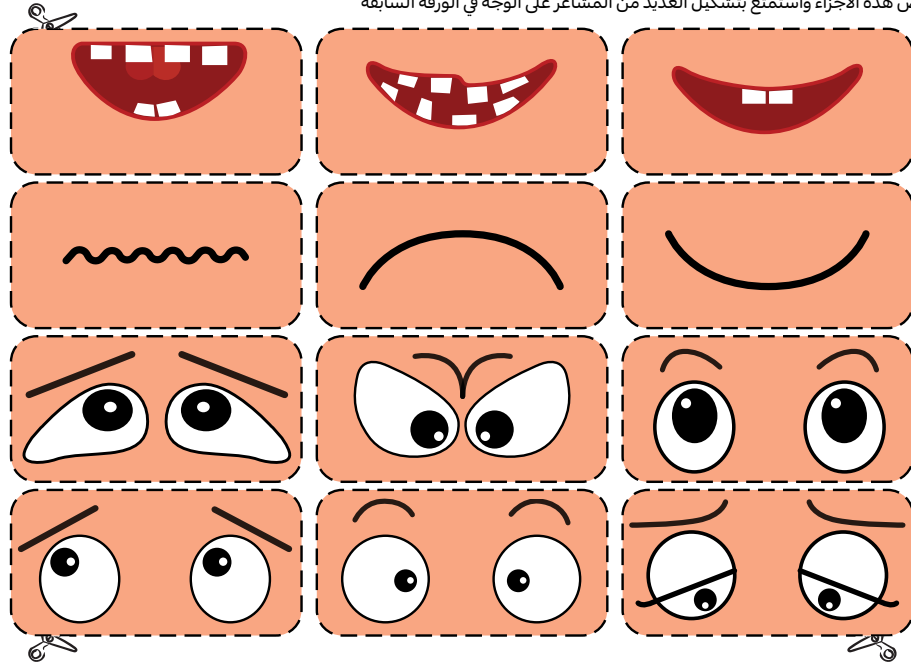
In 2023, following the blast in Lebanon and the earthquake in Syria and Türkiye, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Sesame Workshop created the Be Ready, Be Strong program. Through this program, activity booklets were developed for children, which were then distributed in centers, shelters, and homes in paper format along with scissors and markers. The booklets are filled with activities to help children process emotions, work on coping skills, and build resiliency, and use familiar Muppet characters from [Ahlan Simsim](#) to make them relatable and engaging.



MATERIALS FROM THE BE READY, BE STRONG PROGRAM IN LEBANON AND SYRIA. SOURCE: THE IRC, 2023

- تعليمات نُعْبَةِ الذَّاكِرَة**
1. فُضْ هَذِهِ الْبِطَاقَاتِ، وَضَعْهَا مَقْلُوبَةً عَلَى شَكْلِ فِرَاعِ كَبِيرٍ
 2. عَلَى كُلِّ لَاعِبٍ أَنْ يَلْبَسَ بَطَاقَتَيْنِ مَعًا فِي كُلِّ مَرَّةٍ إِذَا تَطَايَفَتِ الْبِطَاقَاتَانِ بِإِتِّكَارِهِ أَنْ يَحْفَظَ بِهِمَا
 3. إِذَا لَمْ تَطَايِقِ الْبِطَاقَتَانِ، بَضَعْهُمَا مَحْدَدًا فِي مَكَانَيْهِمَا مَقْلُوبَتَيْنِ
 4. حَافِلْ أَنْ تَنْدَجُرَ الْبِطَاقَتَيْنِ اللَّتَيْنِ رَأَيْتَهُمَا، لِنَنْجُرَ مِنْ إِحَادٍ مَا يَطَايِفُهُمَا عِنْدَمَا يَحْرُنْ دَوْرَكَ
 5. إِنَّ الشَّخْصَ الَّذِي يَحْوِزُهُ أَكْثَرُ عَدَدٍ مِنَ الْبِطَاقَاتِ، يَحْضَلُ عَلَى رَفْصَةٍ (التَّغْيِيرِ بِالْحَرَكَاتِ).
- SESAME WORKSHOP**

أَفْصُ هَذِهِ الْأَجْزَاءِ وَأَسْتَمْتَعُ بِتَشْكِيلِ الْعَدِيدِ مِنَ الْمَشَاعِرِ عَلَى الْوَجْهِ فِي الْوَرَقَةِ السَّابِقَةِ





TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PLAY TO LEARN,
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