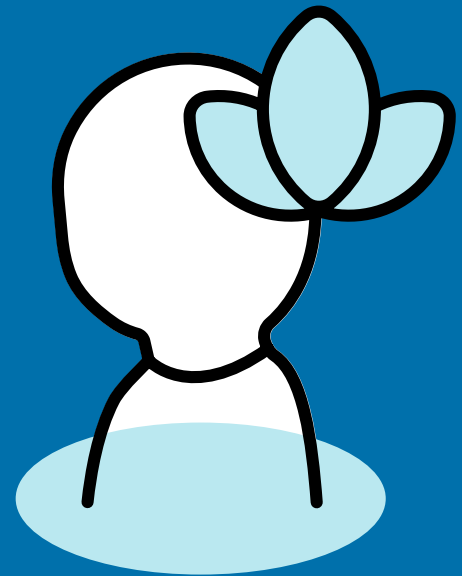


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# Mental Health and Well-Being Strategies for Families:

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Real World Examples from  
Play to Learn Programs



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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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Supporting the mental health and overall well-being of children and families affected by conflict and crisis is essential for encouraging young children’s learning and holistic development. Caregivers who are able to manage their emotions and stress are more available to support, interact with, and play with their children. This resource summarizes some of the strategies Play to Learn used to support and strengthen the mental health and well-being of children and their caregivers in the varied contexts in which we work.

#### STRATEGY 1:

### Use multimedia content and technology to provide child-centered trauma-informed resources at home when in-person services are disrupted

Multimedia content and technology, such as the *Ahlan Simsim* television show, *Watch, Play, Learn: Early Learning Videos*, automated telephone calls and messaging services, Interactive Voice Response (IVR) systems, social media platforms, and virtual group sessions, offer information and strategies that support social-emotional learning that can be used by caregivers with children. Integrating media and technology is also particularly beneficial when in-person support is not readily available, and services must be delivered remotely.

[Semillas de Apego](#), a psychosocial support program in Colombia, integrated the [Watch, Play, Learn](#) videos focused on social-emotional learning into their existing programming. Caregivers first watched the videos during adults-only in-person sessions, and then, as the videos were uploaded to a private Facebook group, they were able to watch them at home on their mobile phones with their children. As one staff member said, “The video content is a more tangible tool to use with children and to bring into use in their homes.”

Caregivers reported that watching the videos facilitated child-centered social-emotional development. For example, children would share skills they had learned from watching the videos (e.g., how to take three deep breaths or how to name an emotion) with other children. Moreover, caregivers watched the videos with children, which strengthened caregiver-child bonds and promoted greater emotional co-regulation. Since both groups received content from the videos on how to manage stress and emotionally regulate, a positive feedback loop was created—caregivers helped children to regulate, and children also reminded caregivers of emotional regulation strategies.

[Ahlan Simsim Families](#), a program implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) with support from Sesame Workshop, integrated *Ahlan Simsim* videos in their sessions for children and caregivers to watch together. The videos covered topics such as [ways for children to take care of their mental health](#) and how to help children manage challenging behaviors.

Media’s visual and audio capabilities make it a valuable mechanism for sharing content and messaging with caregivers with lower literacy levels. The use of characters, sounds, and images also enhances children’s engagement; making them more inclined to listen, learn, connect with stories and characters, and practice regulatory techniques. Media can also be quickly disseminated to support people’s psychosocial health. For example, during the response to the 2023 earthquake in northern Syria and Türkiye, *Ahlan Simsim* added topics to assist children in addressing issues negatively affecting their well-being, such as acute fears, nightmares, and disordered eating. This led to an expansion of trauma-informed video content from *Ahlan Simsim*, which was subsequently used with children and caregivers throughout the region.

## STRATEGY 2:

### Secure and maintain safe, accessible, and inclusive environments for learning and play

Evidence shows that creating environments where children feel a sense of safety and security—allowing them to play, learn, and express themselves—improves the psychosocial and mental health and the overall well-being of both children and caregivers. Play to Learn prioritized the establishment of safe areas for learning and play and ensured these spaces could be established within the humanitarian context, whether on-site or remotely in homes.

In Bangladesh, BRAC's para-counselors established women caregivers' support groups that met regularly, allowing women to interact and support one another. These groups met in either a Humanitarian Play Lab space (before or after children's sessions) or in women's homes. In doing so, they ensured that the physical space was safe and private, and that the social-emotional space was respectful, unbiased, and non-judgmental. The support groups enabled women to share their grievances and discuss family and personal issues, fostering empowerment, self-esteem, and a sense of community, which in turn improved their mental health and well-being.

Soon the men in the community saw the benefits of these safe spaces for women to meet and discuss challenging subjects and trauma, so they asked for fathers' groups to be formed. Developing these spaces helped fathers to tap into deep-rooted trauma that was often left untreated due to patriarchal social structures, allowing the men to express and cope with their experiences. Over time, there were indirect impacts from these spaces for both men and women, such as a decrease in domestic violence incidents and corporal punishment to children. The availability of these spaces improved the mental health and well-being of these women, as one mother reflected, "It changed my life and my family's. I am happier and my child is learning more than before. My husband is surely more involved in our effort for raising our child. Our domestic conflict has reduced, we are more at peace."

The [Humanitarian Play Labs](#) in Bangladesh worked with community members and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to set up spaces for children to play, learn through dancing, singing, and music, and interact with other similarly-aged children. Practitioners spent significant amounts of time and effort to make the spaces feel safe for children who needed to process difficult emotions. This was achieved by decorating them with culturally relevant, engaging, happy, and peaceful images. The presence of other caregivers and volunteers trained in providing trauma-informed support and committed to child safeguarding and protection also reinforced that these spaces are safe places to heal and grow socially and emotionally. The care and thought that was used in developing the physical space reinforced that play is vital for children's holistic growth and development.



PLAY LEADER FACILITATING A SESSION IN A HUMANITARIAN PLAY LAB IN COX'S BAZAR, BANGLADESH. SOURCE: BRAC IED.

### STRATEGY 3:

## Strengthen the quality and frequency of caregiver-child interactions

Caregivers' well-being directly impacts children's well-being. When caregivers are given opportunities to improve their own well-being, such as practicing self-care, they are more attentive to their children. To support the well-being of both caregivers and children, programs that strengthen their interactions are key. Play to Learn worked to enhance caregiver-child interactions with mothers and caregivers of all ages, from pregnant and breastfeeding women to caregivers guiding adolescents.

In Bangladesh, various initiatives, such as the Humanitarian Play Labs, the Fathers' Engagement Model, the Mother-Child Dyad Model, Gindegi Goron, and Pashe Achhi, provided consistent opportunities for caregivers to interact with their children. For example, children and parents would create toys and play materials together and parents could learn from learning facilitators, para-counselors, and volunteers how to play with their children to promote learning. Reminding caregivers that they are their children's first teachers was empowering and strengthened the relationships between caregivers and their children. Building caregivers' capacities to actively listen, show empathy, and engage in play with their children led to both caregivers and children expressing increased happiness, better social-emotional behaviors, and solidarity in their new setting in the camps. As one daughter said of her increased interactions with her parents, "I love reading and playing with my mother and father. My father made me toys and we played together. My father and mother love me, and I love them a lot."

With both [Pashe Achhi](#) and [Gindegi Goron](#), the text and automated messages sent to expectant mothers and caregivers encouraged greater interaction with their children and emphasized the importance of self-care and stress reduction for both their well-being and that of their children. These helped to promote a growth mindset for caregivers regarding their involvement in their children's well-being and holistic development.

In the IRC's Remote Early Learning Program, trained teachers taught caregivers how to deliver learning and play activities to their children. Caregivers received learning kits with materials to help engage their children in art, reading, and written activities focused on social-emotional learning and school readiness. They met virtually with teachers to review information and learn new techniques to support their children's learning, with teachers reinforcing that caregivers are their children's first teacher. This approach led to significant increases in caregivers' abilities to support their children's literacy, numeracy, emotional regulation skills, and self-awareness, and increased the frequency of child-caregiver interactions. Consequently, caregivers and children felt a greater sense of self-efficacy, which improved their well-being and confidence to successfully learn together. The child-caregiver interactions created a positive cascading effect on well-being. To learn more about how the increase in child-caregiver interactions led to improvements in mental health symptoms, read the report [here](#).





**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PLAY TO LEARN,  
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