play to learn
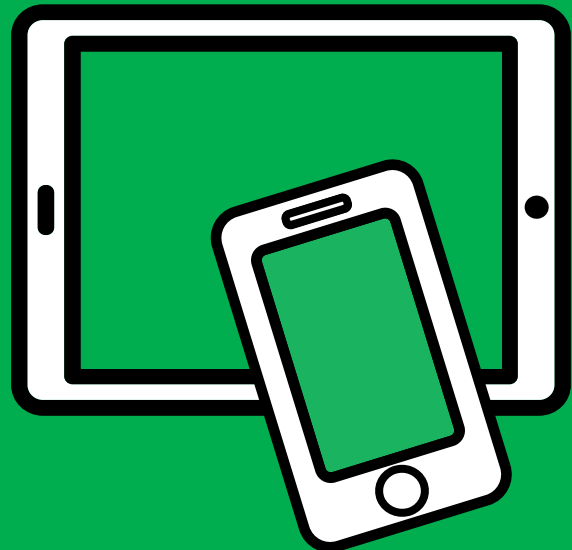
Using Media and Technology in Early Childhood Development Programs:

Insights from Play to Learn Practitioners

play to learn

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/).

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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

The **LEGO** Foundation

Media and technology can improve the reach, quality, and engagement of early childhood development (ECD) programs serving children and families affected by conflict and crisis. Play to Learn used media to enhance all ECD programs, and significantly expanded the use of technology, telecommunications, and digital platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether it was phone calls to support parents during COVID-19, short videos on tablets in classrooms, or multimedia delivered through WhatsApp and other phone-based preschool lessons, media and technology were an integral part of Play to Learn's success.

We asked practitioners from Play to Learn some of the most frequently asked questions about the use of media and technology in their programs. Their answers, paraphrased below, can guide both new and experienced practitioners alike in understanding the potential, successes, and challenges of using media and technology in ECD programs for children and families affected by conflict and crisis.

ABOUT THE PRACTITIONERS

- **MARGI** is a Program Manager at Sesame Workshop managing projects that integrated *Watch, Play, Learn: Early Learning Videos* content.

- **AMAL*** is a Digital Technology Lead at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) overseeing the FamilyCornerIRC and the Ahlan Simsim Automated Messaging Service, a chatbot digital parenting support program.

- **RAHMAN*** is a Manager at Sesame Workshop Bangladesh working on Play to Learn programs.

- **DORA*** is a Field Coordinator in Kenya implementing *Watch, Play, Learn* videos at her international non-governmental organization (INGO).

* Pseudonyms used for privacy

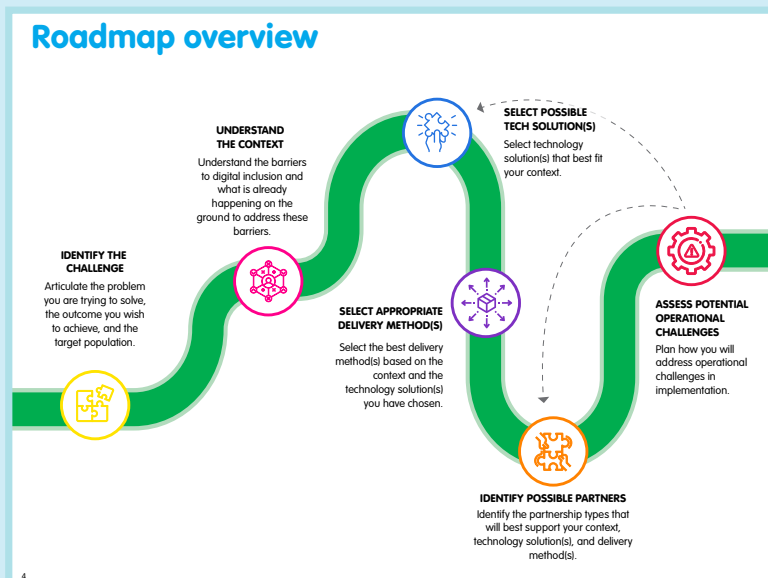SETTING UP TO VIEW *WATCH, PLAY, LEARN* IN COX'S BAZAR, JANUARY 2024.

Q1

Under what conditions should a practitioner consider using media or digital technology in their early childhood development in emergencies (ECDiE) program?

A **MARGI:** Media can provide an opportunity to enhance existing programming, to increase or deepen the learning in a particular area, or to reach a new target group. For example, Sesame Workshop collaborated with Universidad de los Andes to integrate *Watch, Play, Learn* social-emotional learning videos into their existing caregiver-facing group therapy program called Semillas de Apego. Caregivers watched the videos with their children at home, which resulted in an increase in emotional recognition and understanding of their own and their children's emotions, which ultimately led to caregivers having an increased understanding of their children's behavior and needs. The videos gave caregivers a kind of reference point— external to themselves or each other—for starting conversations with their kids about feelings and other difficult topics and provided them memorable coping strategies, like belly breathing. So it doesn't always have to be using media as a novel or stand-alone intervention. In this case, integrating media into an existing program resulted in enhanced outcomes of the ongoing Semillas de Apego intervention.

A **RAHMAN:** Big factors are cost and operations. When you are choosing to use a Pico projector, for example, maybe you purchase one per ECD center. But then you need to train the teachers or facilitators on how to use it, or maybe after a few years it breaks so you need to fix it. Maybe you don't have electricity or internet at that ECD center, so you have to take it somewhere else to charge it. Considering these factors from the beginning can help you plan better!

Roadmap overview

IDENTIFY THE CHALLENGE
Articulate the problem you are trying to solve, the outcome you wish to achieve, and the target population.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT
Understand the barriers to digital inclusion and what is already happening on the ground to address these barriers.

SELECT APPROPRIATE DELIVERY METHOD(S)
Select the best delivery method(s) based on the context and the technology solution(s) you have chosen.

SELECT POSSIBLE TECH SOLUTION(S)
Select technology solution(s) that best fit your context.

ASSESS POTENTIAL OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES
Plan how you will address operational challenges in implementation.

IDENTIFY POSSIBLE PARTNERS
Identify the partnership types that will best support your context, technology solution(s), and delivery method(s).

THINKING ABOUT USING MEDIA TECHNOLOGY IN YOUR OWN PROGRAM?

Check out the Technology Decision Roadmap which guides you through a process to identify the most appropriate technology solutions and partnerships for distributing videos to children in communities with low-connectivity or affected by crisis.

Q2

What challenges are a practitioner most likely to encounter when using media and digital technology in their ECDiE programming for the first time?

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DORA: We encountered several unexpected challenges using the *Watch, Play, Learn* videos in classrooms in the Dadaab refugee camp. It was our first time trying to introduce media and technology into the classroom, so the first challenge we faced was the capacity of teachers and access to the internet. We had to provide training to teachers to help them understand how to use tablets in the classroom and how to access the Moodle app where we stored the videos, but limited internet access made it challenging for teachers to access the videos during lesson planning outside of teaching hours. The use of tablets in the classroom (up to 45 tablets per classroom given the class size) also generated a lot of noise, and monitoring data couldn't be uploaded unless the tablet was connected to the internet.

A

AMAL: It depends on if the use of technology is within an existing program or if it's a new program. For us, our challenge was transferring existing successful content to digital-friendly formats for social media. Digital-friendly content is not just content you can see on a screen, it has to be designed for digital use: colorful, engaging, something that can catch the user's eye. Through the FamilyCornerIRC, we are directly reaching the client without a facilitator, so we need to share messages in simple, accessible ways that create interest for the audience to continue to engage. It took us time to work out what was the most engaging on social media.

FamilyCornerIRC

FamilyCornerIRC Social Media is a platform launched on Facebook and Instagram 2022. It is designed to be a safe, supportive, and trustworthy space for caregivers of children ages 0 to 8 years old. It offers a range of content from ECD experts on caregiver/child activities, developmental milestones, social and emotional learning, and practical wellbeing and lifestyle tips to support their child's healthy growth and development.

"Digital-friendly content is not just content you can see on a screen, it has to be designed for digital use: colorful, engaging, something that can catch the user's eye. Through the FamilyCornerIRC, we are directly reaching the client without a facilitator, so we need to share messages in simple, accessible ways that create interest for the audience to continue to engage."

– Amal, Digital Technology Lead, International Rescue Committee (IRC) Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA)

Q3 What is the biggest success you have had from using media or digital tech in your program?

A **DORA:** If I compare the challenges I mentioned to the impact, the project, in my view, was awesome. The videos were engaging, and teachers were really creative in how they used the videos to support their lessons. There was a high level of interest from children, and the use of tablets in the classroom actually helped teachers with classroom management. Finally, there was great interest from teachers outside the project to learn from the experience of the teachers in the project.

A **AMAL:** We've built an amazing community of caregivers on the FamilyCornerIRC social media pages who trust the content and who share it. We are always getting requests to respond to parenting challenges and users asking how to share content with friends. We've even extended our public social pages to a private Facebook group where caregivers are able to share their successes and build a community. To see caregivers reply to one another, answering questions by sharing our content, is really amazing. Even with our automated messaging service, it has reached over 25,000 users who have requested over 120,000 activities, showing the service is easy to use and interesting enough that keeps users coming back.

A **RAHMAN:** The chance to use media and technology in the camps has been wonderful— children enjoy it so much and it's healing. Children go home and practice what they see in the videos, and engage parents at home, even in the practices they learned from the videos in the classroom. Children simply get the opportunity to experience joy, and that is so valuable.

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– Rahman, Play to Learn Manager, Sesame Workshop Bangladesh

Q4 — What are the key skill sets or experience needed on a team who wants to implement media and digital technology?

RAHMAN: Knowledge of curriculum and content is important to ensure that any media is well-designed or well-integrated into a program. Language skills and local context knowledge are a plus as well. For implementers, technology skills, like basic digital literacy and how to use smartphones and projectors, but also some problem-solving skills because things will break or go wrong, and you need to be able to fix them!

AMAL: At the design level, a mix of skills would be needed, and it would depend on what work you are planning to outsource versus what you want to develop within your team. If you are working with products, you would need product managers who can understand and navigate between developers and the organization's goals, for example. One of our biggest struggles has been finding staff who can bridge the gap between technology and early childhood. People with tech backgrounds don't usually have ECD knowledge and vice versa. We needed time built into our plans to train someone in either area. Additionally, the contracts offered in the humanitarian sector are usually of limited duration and lower pay than the private sector, so anticipating a longer time frame to recruit staff will help to keep the work on track.

Q5 — What do you think is the next step for successful use of media and digital technology in ECDiE programs?

MARGI: Media and technology have the potential to provide an opportunity for a more tailored experience for participants in programming. We used private Facebook groups to distribute *Watch, Play, Learn* videos in our integration into the Semillas de Apego program. These groups evolved into another space for caregivers to exchange experiences and for facilitators to offer personalized responses. There were regular in-person sessions for caregivers and facilitators, yet the online component unexpectedly enriched caregiver engagement and community.

AMAL: We're currently developing a new product that targets the child and their caregiver simultaneously with the goal of creating face-to-face interactions at home. This work builds on the clear success of face-to-face interactions that are the center of in-person programming. We're also looking into how we can use artificial intelligence (AI), but with a lot of extra care and sensitivity. We are looking to use AI to uplift our existing products and services, to automate and streamline routine tasks like managing our social media pages, so that experts can focus on addressing bigger challenges that arise.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PLAY TO LEARN, PLEASE CONTACT:

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