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Working with Caregivers:

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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Parents and caregivers—children’s first teachers—are a crucial part of all of Play to Learn’s early childhood development (ECD) programming. Play to Learn engaged caregivers through in-person, remote, and hybrid services, to support their responsive caregiving and well-being, and provided them with the tools and expertise to confidently meet the early learning needs of their children.

We posed the following questions to practitioners from a selection of Play to Learn partner programs to learn more about their experiences working with caregivers in crisis or conflict-affected communities. Their stories and insightful responses, paraphrased below, can inform and inspire other practitioners seeking to support caregivers of young children through the delivery of ECD programs.

About the Practitioners

- **AMIRA** is a Manager at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) Jordan working on multiple Ahlan Simsim programs.
- **JULIO** is a Manager working on the Semillas de Apego program at Universidad de los Andes in Colombia.
- **MONIR** is a Senior Officer at IRC Bangladesh working on the Gindegi Goron program in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh.
- **ISRAT** is a Manager working on psychosocial support at BRAC Institute of Educational Development (IED) in Dhaka, Bangladesh.





Before working with caregivers, what were your main assumptions or expectations about their needs?



MONIR: If we ask caregivers about their understanding of child development or what's important for their children growing up, caregivers would say if my baby is healthy, that's enough. If a child plays, they are not studying or learning: this is the sort of thinking that is in the community. This is because 0-3 or 0-2 aged children, they are only getting services through the health or nutrition centers, but not any other ECD services. So our assumption was that caregivers needed more information about early learning, the benefits of play, as well as the holistic nature of ECD.



AMIRA: In our context, we assumed that caregivers would already be present sometimes at the early learning centers where their children attended, but we also wanted to focus on integrating our programming in health centers and protection centers, such as women's spaces. Our goal was to reach caregivers wherever they were. We know that caregivers care about themselves as well as their families, however, we cannot assume that their needs are all the same. That is why we place a lot of emphasis on community feedback in our program Ahlan Simsim Families, which started with just six core topics for parents, but over time we added elective topics to address the diverse interests caregivers expressed.



After you started working with caregivers, did you have to make any changes to the program or activities? What did you do and why?



JULIO: One exciting development in Semillas de Apego was when we started leveraging former program participants to deliver the program in new locations. We decided to do this because one day a mother came to participate in the program a second time. When the facilitator asked her why she was back, she told them she was repeating the program so that she could replicate it in her community. So after this, we realized there was a high potential to train former program participants to become facilitators, especially since our training is mostly experiential anyway, so the participants have had a lot of practice by being in the program themselves.



AMIRA: We were surprised by feedback from caregivers requesting information about healthy sexual development in children. This was unexpected because we were working with some conservative communities, but we responded by creating and testing new content, and we received a mostly positive response. After testing, however, some communities did give feedback that this topic was taboo, so this also made us think about how we need to adapt to the needs of each community, even within the same country. We expanded the program to include elective topics so that communities and facilitators can choose what's most relevant to them.

Q3

What was or is your favorite part about working with caregivers in your program?

A

ISRAT: Rohingya mothers have been resilient to have survived the many compounding traumas that they have faced during and after displacement. It is so important that those who lost their immediate families were resilient, and they were able to establish connections and belonging grounded in the community. This is my favorite part of working with caregivers; I really admire and respect them.

A

JULIO: Caregivers can creatively overcome challenges. That's been something powerful we have learned from integrating the Watch, Play, Learn videos into the Semillas de Apego program. For example, to deal with internet access issues, participants would try out new ideas such as "Sesame Hour," where they created their own groups at home with three to five children and parents from the program to watch videos together using one internet connection.



PHOTO: FEDERICO BOTTIA / SESAME WORKSHOP

“It’s amazing how once you generate trust in the communities, change happens. Semillas happens each week, at the same time. That predictability, the trust, and the confidence that happens in each session allows caregivers to open up in many ways. Not only to express how they feel... but to look at their children and how they can engage with them from a different perspective.”

- Semillas de Apego program staff

Q4

What are the top skills you think someone who wants to work with caregivers needs?

A

MONIR: In Rohingya and host communities there are some specific cultural practices, and females are not so comfortable with strangers, especially male strangers. Recruiting female local facilitators was essential to ensure they would be accepted by the caregivers; that they would be a trusted source of information. Local facilitators may not come with a high level of academic expertise or technology skills, but giving local facilitators, who are also community members, some knowledge about child development can create the opportunity for them to spread the practices and awareness among the community. This local connection to and knowledge of the community is essential for the success of our program.

A

ISRAT: Listening skills, empathy, respect for the community, and a desire to build connectedness and trust! A sense of trust helps caregivers open up a lot and makes them feel comfortable to share challenges with you and ask questions.



SKILLS NEEDED TO WORK WITH CAREGIVER NEEDS:

- Trust
- Community knowledge
- Local connection
- Listening
- Empathy
- Respect
- Gender

Q5

What is the most unexpected thing you learned from working with caregivers?

A

MONIR: During COVID-19, our program was really successful at reaching the whole family in their home with regular phone calls. However, after COVID-19, fathers left home for work with the family cell phone, and this really affected mothers' ability to answer phone calls, so we saw a gradual decrease in Gindegi Goron's reach and effectiveness. To address this, we conducted a household survey of fathers and adjusted the phone call timing to times suggested by the fathers, and we saw some improvement. The improvement did not match the level of engagement we had during COVID-19, but there was certainly an increase. In this case, the context changed for caregivers, so the delivery mode was no longer as effective. This experience taught us that it is important to not only think about the best way to reach caregivers now, but to remember that the context might change over time, and that you should be open to adapting to new ways to reach caregivers, responding to their needs.

A

AMIRA: We designed and implemented an intervention called the Remote Early Learning Program in Lebanon. It was an 11-week preschool program delivered by a facilitator over phone and messaging services to caregivers who would then engage their children. I used to be a teacher for early grades, and I never expected that caregivers would be as engaged in this program as they were. The biggest concern for us when we were developing the program was how we were going to get the caregivers to commit to engaging three times a week, but it was a huge success. Choosing the right person to communicate with the caregivers, the right platform, and the right content were all essential to the program's success. When you look at the retention rate, less than five percent of participants dropped out of the program, and no one expected those kinds of results from this program. The Remote Early Learning Program succeeded because of the right combination of ingredients—and then it has been tried in other places and it has succeeded there as well—showing the huge potential of this model and of finding the right combination of ingredients to engage caregivers and their children.





TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PLAY TO LEARN,
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