Bringing Hope and Opportunity to Children Affected by Conflict and Crisis Around the World

Sesame Workshop and partners are leading the largest coordinated early childhood intervention in the history of humanitarian response.

The scale of the global refugee crisis is staggering. Today, more than 70 million people are displaced worldwide — and half are children. The most formative years of their lives have been marked by upheaval, chaos, and violence, all with lasting effects on their development and wellbeing. Millions of young children are spending their childhoods without early childhood development (ECD) opportunities that can help them recover from adverse experiences and prepare them to thrive.

In the face of this urgent humanitarian crisis, Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), with support from the MacArthur Foundation, partnered to create Ahlan Simsim (“Welcome Sesame” in Arabic), a program that delivers early learning and nurturing care to children and caregivers affected by conflict and displacement in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

Building on our ambitious efforts in the Syrian response region, Sesame Workshop has teamed up with the LEGO Foundation, BRAC, and the IRC to support hundreds of thousands of children and caregivers affected by both the Syrian crisis in Jordan and Lebanon and the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh, by ensuring access to play-based learning opportunities that are vital to their development.

Together with other stakeholders, we have the potential to transform humanitarian response, benefitting children affected by conflict and crisis around the world.
Ahlan Simsim: Delivering vital early learning to children in the Syrian response region

The ongoing conflict in Syria has displaced over 12 million people. Displaced children across the region — and millions more in host communities — have lost access to critical early learning opportunities that can help set them on a path to a better future.

Through a brand-new, locally produced Arabic-language version of Sesame Street for children ages 3 to 8, Ahlan Simsim reaches displaced and host community families wherever they are — from classrooms and health clinics to TV and mobile devices — with engaging educational content, play-based learning opportunities, and caregiving support.

Mass Media
Creating meaningful video content that supports the social-emotional needs of children while remaining fun and joyful is a central component of the Sesame approach. Ahlan Simsim is a brand-new, locally produced Arabic-language version of Sesame Street for children ages 3 to 8. The show introduces children to characters who reflect their lives, languages, and experiences — including Jad, a creative young boy Muppet who’s new to the neighborhood, and Basma, an adventurous girl Muppet who welcomes Jad with open arms. Together, they explore their world alongside humans, animated characters, and other Sesame Muppet characters, learning and growing along the way. Season one of Ahlan Simsim focuses on coping with big feelings using concrete strategies, such as belly breathing and artistic expression. The ability to understand and manage emotions provides a proven foundation for children’s success into adulthood. Harnessing the power of the Sesame Muppets, Ahlan Simsim will reach millions of children and caregivers across the Middle East with fun, laughter, and learning.

Direct Services
Ahlan Simsim implements a range of direct service models through the IRC’s network of centers and home visit programs. By scaling Ahlan Simsim with NGO and government partners, we will reach over one million children throughout the region. At IRC center-based programs, children join trained ECD facilitators for educational group activities, including Sesame video content screenings, storybook readings, and playful learning opportunities. All of these activities are based on an inclusive “whole child” curriculum, which includes brain building, positive social skills, and cross-cutting themes such as gender equity and inclusion.

Through Ahlan Simsim, we are delivering vital early learning opportunities and advancing a broader goal of mobilizing additional support for children affected by conflict and displacement around the world.
Global Media Content

Play to Learn features joyful, educational videos focused on play, which we will share through direct service providers and family-friendly mobile and pop-up viewings in refugee and host communities. Through our project with the LEGO Foundation, we will create new content and adapt existing global Sesame content—including from Sisimpur, the Bangladeshi version of Sesame Street, and from Ahlan Simsim in the Syrian response region—to meet the unique needs of refugee and host community children in Bangladesh. New content will be developed with the advice of international experts and will use animated and nonverbal formats, so that we can tailor the content to address the needs of displaced children no matter where they live or what language they speak.

Direct Services

In August 2017, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya families fled unspeakable violence and persecution in Myanmar, arriving in southern Bangladesh. By July 2019, around 910,000 Rohingya had settled in the Cox's Bazar District, where they are living in precarious conditions and children are unable to access formal education opportunities. We are working in the region with BRAC, the largest international NGO in the world and longtime LEGO Foundation partner, to launch Play to Learn. Together, we will invest in child-facing, caregiver-facing, and community-facing direct service models to provide children with safe spaces for guided play. Fun and engaging storybooks, games, puzzles, and video content will foster engagement between children and their caregivers and address the developmental needs of children ages 0 to 6 from Rohingya refugee and Bangladeshi host populations.

In the Syrian response region, we will deepen the play-based learning aspects of the Ahlan Simsim program, enhancing the critical early education we’re providing to children and their families.

Learning through Play

Around the world, in all cultures and contexts, play is a key part of childhood—and yet many children affected by war and displacement have very limited opportunities to play. For refugee children, playful learning can be especially transformative. Play fosters a child’s natural curiosity to learn through engaging interactions with grownups, and research shows that this same adult-child engagement—“nurturing care”—is what children who have experienced trauma need most. In fact, leading experts in child development believe that play holds the potential to help displaced children and their parents and caregivers cope with instability.

Play to Learn will provide children affected by crisis with the essential building blocks of play-based early childhood development—and in doing so, help them become the builders of tomorrow.
Advocacy and Research

Research shows that a focus on ECD has immediate and long-term benefits for children and their communities. But despite the evidence, less than 3% of all humanitarian aid goes to education in crisis contexts — and just a fraction of that goes to the youngest children. Together with our partners, we will advocate with a range of stakeholders to make young children and their unique needs visible in crises, and to increase financial and programmatic investment in meeting those needs. By showcasing Ahlan Simsim and Play to Learn in global and national events, cultivating diverse partnerships, and increasing media engagement, we will promote scalable, proven ECD models that integrate learning through play.

While the importance of ECD is well established, there is limited research about which interventions work best and can be most easily deployed in crisis settings. These two programs set out to fill those gaps in evidence and create actionable program models that demonstrate impact for children and caregivers. For this reason, we have engaged NYU’s Global TIES for Children Center to independently evaluate our programs and generate evidence on what ECD interventions best support the healthy development of young children living in emergency settings. By sharing our findings, we will empower others to scale, adapt, and build upon the lessons we learn to address ECD needs of children in humanitarian contexts around the globe.

This is just the beginning. Together with our partners, we have the potential to transform how the world responds to children in crisis, wherever they may be.

Sesame Workshop is the nonprofit educational organization behind Sesame Street, the pioneering television show that has been reaching and teaching children since 1969. Today, Sesame Workshop is an innovative force for change, with a mission to help kids everywhere grow smarter, stronger, and kinder. We’re active in more than 150 countries, serving vulnerable children through a wide range of media, formal education, and philanthropically-funded social impact programs, each grounded in rigorous research. For more information, please visit sesameworkshop.org.

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