



JOURNAL ON EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

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Source: *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (December 2021), pp. 289-310

Published by: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2451/63543>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33682/hxrv-2g8g>

REFERENCES:

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Kohn, Shanna, Kim Foulds, Charlotte Cole, Mackenzie Matthews, and Laila Hussein. 2021. "Using a Participatory Approach to Create SEL Programming: The Case of *Ahlan Simsim*." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 7 (2): 289-310. <https://doi.org/10.33682/hxrv-2g8g>.

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USING A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO CREATE SEL PROGRAMMING: THE CASE OF *AHLAN SIMSIM*

SHANNA KOHN, KIM FOULDS, CHARLOTTE COLE,
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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the use of a participatory, trauma-informed approach in the creation of Ahlan Simsim, a Sesame Street television program for the Middle East, and asserts the importance of using a participatory approach to designing culturally relevant social and emotional learning (SEL) content. Ahlan Simsim is a component of a larger initiative of the same name, which was created by Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee and funded by the MacArthur and LEGO foundations. This program brings early learning and nurturing care to children and families affected by the Syrian crisis through a combination of mass media and direct service programming. In this article, we present a review of the research and consultations Sesame Workshop conducted with local communities and local child-development experts in Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon from August to November 2018. Sesame Workshop's aim was to identify and refine the television program's focus area and to create locally relevant, trauma-informed content that draws from SEL strategies that resonate most and have the greatest impact with audiences in the Syrian response region. We argue that, for SEL programming to achieve maximum impact, it is critical that program designers develop social-emotional frameworks for children from the ground up by working with local caregivers and practitioners.

Received October 17, 2019; revised March 17, 2020, June 29, 2020, and August 3, 2020; accepted November 2, 2020; electronically published December 2021.

Journal on Education in Emergencies, Vol. 7, No. 2
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ISSN 2518-6833

INTRODUCTION

The value of social and emotional learning (SEL) programming cannot be overstated. Research shows that SEL programs help children build skills that are critical to resilience, healing, and coping with long-term exposure to trauma (Umiltà et al. 2013) and can enhance children's academic outcomes by providing them with tools that help them focus, regulate their emotions, and cope with stress (Durlak et al. 2011). The importance of SEL interventions for children who have experienced violent conflict is particularly pronounced. Research on children in war zones has shown that exposure to traumatic events is strongly associated with physical and mental health outcomes, and that experiencing five or more traumatic events triples the risk of having psychiatric disorders and posttraumatic stress (Panter-Brick et al. 2009; Shonkoff et al. 2012). These effects are particularly acute in the first years of a child's life, when the brain is undergoing its most rapid development, making it extremely sensitive to environmental influence.

In order for SEL programming to resonate most fully with its beneficiaries and have the greatest impact, it is critical to take a participatory approach to the development of such programs (Cornwall 2002; Tufte and Mefalopulos 2009). The INEE Minimum Standards for Education dictate that community members should participate "actively, transparently and without discrimination" (INEE 2010, 22) in the design and analysis of education responses. The Nurturing Care Framework, an accepted approach to ECD in the humanitarian community, advises that, "when families feel valued, and when they are involved in [a] programme's design and delivery, they are likely to be more successful and to sustain their efforts" (World Health Organization, UNICEF, and World Bank 2018, 38).

Equally important to program design is acknowledging the effects of trauma. Studies show that the persistent stress common in humanitarian settings can affect children's outcomes later in life (Jabbar and Zaza 2014; Britto et al. 2016; Bouchane et al. 2018). Sesame Workshop employs what the US Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014) refers to as a trauma-informed approach that is aware of the widespread effects trauma has on children, recognizes the signs and symptoms, and responds by integrating knowledge of trauma into its program content and practices and actively resists retraumatization.

Despite evidence of the importance of SEL programming for young children affected by conflict and displacement, as well as recommendations for using a participatory, trauma-informed approach to program design and delivery, few programs for early childhood development (ECD) in emergencies focus on SEL, and even fewer engage local communities meaningfully in their content development (Measham et al. 2014). Short project timeframes (typically six months to one year), insufficient funds, and the emergency nature of the work contribute to this lack. However, while project timelines may be short, the impact of displacement is far from short term; refugees today are displaced on average for 10 to 26 years (World Bank 2016). Therefore, it is critical that funders of education in emergencies programs and the organizations delivering such programs recognize the detrimental effects conflict and displacement have on children’s mental health and direct their resources toward culturally relevant SEL programming that resonates with its intended audience.

Using research conducted with local communities and experts to inform curriculum design and the production of educational television programs is key to Sesame Workshop’s international coproduction model, as is seeking advice on program content from local child-development experts (Cole 2016). The founders of Sesame Workshop developed and led this approach, now known as the Sesame Workshop Model (Cooney 1966; Lesser 1974). In this article, we outline Sesame Workshop’s process for adapting a participatory approach to creating television and digital programming in the context of the Syrian response. We illustrate how taking a participatory approach helped us identify SEL as a critical focus for *Ahlan Simsim* and helped us to create a culturally relevant, trauma-informed television program. We also highlight the importance of program developers checking their assumptions and developing SEL programs from the ground up in order to have the maximum impact.

OVERVIEW OF THE AHLAN SIMSIM PROGRAM

Nearly 71 million people are currently displaced worldwide, and nearly half of them are children. Some four million Syrian children in the Syrian response region—one-half of all Syrian children—have been born since the war began (UNICEF 2018). The healthy cognitive, social, and emotional development of displaced children living in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria is particularly at risk, due to the lack of access to early childhood care and education. These effects are not limited to children who have been displaced; children living in host communities, particularly in low-income areas and those with limited access

to ECD services, are also missing important opportunities. Children who have adverse experiences are at severe risk for impairments that will follow them throughout their lives, including poor physical and mental health, cognitive deficits, and reduced earnings (Felitti et al. 1998; Lahiri, van Ommeren, and Roberts 2017; Measham et al. 2014; Forman-Hoffman et al. 2013; Cook et al. 2017).

In response to this crisis, in December 2017, the MacArthur Foundation awarded Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) a 100&Change grant to bring early childhood care and education to millions of children living in the Syrian response region. This initiative, Ahlan Simsim, offers direct ECD services through classrooms, community centers, social-protection programs, health clinics, and other spaces frequented by children and families. These services are complemented by culturally relevant video content offered on broadcast and digital platforms. The program, which uses the Nurturing Care Framework, highlights two key pillars: offering children opportunities for early learning, and providing responsive caregiving (World Health Organization, UNICEF, and World Bank 2018). Ahlan Simsim also integrates the three other aspects of the Nurturing Care Framework—good health, adequate nutrition, and security and safety—into the IRC’s existing early childhood health and child-protection programs.

At the moment, less than 3 percent of the global humanitarian budget goes to education, and only a fraction of that goes to early childhood programming (UNESCO 2017). This means that there is insufficient support for the youngest children living in emergency contexts. Television programming, when carefully crafted to ensure its cultural relevance, has the ability to make up for this lack by presenting characters and scenarios that reflect these children’s lived experiences. This in turn helps to shift the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of children and families at a fraction of the cost of many humanitarian response models (Mares and Pan 2013). The IRC’s direct services programming, which takes a research-based approach to providing children and caregivers with facilitated instruction, has the ability to provide children and the adults who care for them with engaging, play-based programming that meets their specific needs. This combined approach to providing ECD services—using the reach and resonance of culturally relevant and trauma-informed mass media and the deep impact of direct service programming—holds great promise. Through the production of evidence-based, participatory models for ECD programming that combine the power of television and direct services and are operationally successful at scale, Ahlan Simsim offers a new model for ECD programming in humanitarian response settings.

SUPPORTING POSITIVE CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TELEVISION

A foundational element of Ahlan Simsim's work is the creation of *Ahlan Simsim*, an Arabic-language version of *Sesame Street* for children ages three to eight who are living in Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and the broader Middle East. Broadcast and digital platforms are formidable ways to deliver quality content at scale in the region, as household television access exceeds 90 percent in all four countries (Melki et al. 2012; Sweis and Baslan 2013; MICT 2014; Wagner, Glioti, and Hussein 2021).¹ One survey of Syrians living in their home country and Syrian refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey found that satellite television is almost ubiquitous—even in the refugee camps (MICT 2014). Mobile phone access is also high, exceeding 70 percent in Lebanon, 50 percent in Syria, 60 percent in Iraq, and nearly 70 percent in Jordan (GSMA 2019).

There are several factors beyond the benefits of scale and cost efficiency that make television programs, particularly Sesame Workshop programs, a unique platform for promoting children's positive outcomes. The first is their ability to promote representation. Because Sesame Workshop's model includes community-based research and the participation of local stakeholders, our programs introduce children to characters, scenes, and stories that reflect their own lives and experiences. Meaningful representation has been shown to have a powerful impact on children's self-esteem (Martins and Harrison 2012). Because of this connection, the program characters garner children's affection and empathy, which promotes recall of the educational messaging they promote. Second, television programs have the ability to influence behavior. In keeping with social learning theory (Bandura 1962) and the theoretical underpinning of entertainment education (Singhal and Rogers 1999), the program can support not just imitation but the application of much-needed skills. Finally, television has the ability to affect the multiple levels of influence in a child's life. Drawing from social and behavioral change communication concepts and grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecological model, Sesame Workshop's programs target individual children and also address the greater influences (e.g., family and peer networks, community, and social and cultural structures) that affect a child's growth and development. Media too are a part of a child's broader cultural ecosystem, and one strength of the Sesame Workshop model is its appeal to and ability to encourage the

1 While these citations refer to penetration rates before the conflict in Syria began, smaller-scale media landscape studies conducted by Sesame Workshop suggest that the rates remain similar.

adults in children's lives to adopt a model of responsive care. Since its inception, *Sesame Street's* creators have intentionally included celebrities, music, and humor to engage adults as well as children because they believed, accurately, that a child would learn more if an adult was engaged with them.

USE OF A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH IN THE CREATION OF *AHLAN SIMSIM*

As with all Sesame Workshop coproductions, the development of *Ahlan Simsim* began with research and consultation on the ground. Recognizing the important role caregivers and cultural context play in a child's early development (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Lagercrantz 2016), Sesame Workshop deliberately turned to caregivers, practitioners, and children living in the region to inform the curriculum design for season one. This participatory approach helped Sesame Workshop identify critical focus areas for *Ahlan Simsim* and helped us create a culturally appropriate and locally resonant product.

Below we report on our development process for *Ahlan Simsim*, and on key findings from each arm of the participatory approach: a needs assessment, consultation with expert advisors, work with online research communities, and a formative study of children's emotional literacy (see Appendix).² We used these studies to ensure that we included the voices of relevant communities in the program development and design.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT FINDINGS: THE NEED FOR SUPPORT WITH SEL SKILLS

Sesame Workshop begins the development of any new television production with a needs assessment to evaluate the existing gaps for young children in a given context, as articulated by their caregivers and practitioners (Foulds et al. 2021) We conducted the *Ahlan Simsim* needs assessment in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria in August 2018 to help us understand the joys and challenges of being a parent of a child three to eight years old in that region, to identify parents' trusted advisors, and to determine which issues they sought advice for. We also

² Our online research communities were a group of displaced Syrians and host community families living in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon, whom we invited to participate in quarterly 30-minute research panels covering a range of topics, such as various aspects of brand awareness, feedback on delivery mechanisms, and reactions to preliminary concepts under development for the television show. All participating families had consistent access to a smartphone and could participate in as many of the research panels as they liked. They received an honorarium for their participation to cover their mobile data usage and time. The Appendix includes an overview of the needs assessment, online research communities, and formative research we conducted. While a consultation with expert advisors was part of this participatory approach, we have limited our definition of research in this article to our engagement with *Ahlan Simsim's* direct users.

asked caregivers' and practitioners' opinion on potential focus topics for a new television show for children.³

In response to questions on parenthood and parenting challenges, caregivers reported that the best parts of being a parent were the feeling of parenthood, being responsible for children's wants and needs, giving and receiving love and compassion from their kids, and watching their children grow. The caregivers reported that the most difficult elements of being a parent were being unable to fulfill their children's needs because of financial issues, securing safe living conditions in current circumstances and/or an uncertain security situation, responsibility, single parenthood, and dealing with siblings' different personalities.

The caregivers most commonly reported seeking parenting guidance on children's health issues, discipline and managing children's behavior, parenting methods and childrearing, and schooling issues.

The caregivers were excited about the prospect of a new children's television show and expressed the need for a program that would reflect cultural values and teach children a range of skills, attitudes, and information. When asked what topics they would like a new television show for children to focus on, caregivers in the region said they wanted literacy and numeracy in Arabic and English, and a range of other skills. They emphasized the need for a particular focus on social-emotional skills, including respecting others, good manners, teamwork and cooperation, sharing and helping, expressing feelings and emotions, self-confidence, forgiveness, dealing with differences, honesty, and communication skills. Caregivers' articulation of the specific need for help in teaching social-emotional skills was likely connected to the increased stress of living in environments of conflict and crisis.

Practitioners' ideas about topics for a new children's television show echoed many of the caregivers' recommendations, although the practitioners prioritized social-emotional skills over academic skills. They recommended that the series focus on principles and values, health and hygiene, environmental conservation, critical thinking and decisionmaking, communication skills and expressing feelings and emotions, the importance of attending and staying in school, technology skills, social skills (e.g., mutual respect and understanding, self-confidence, self-regulation, and making friends), self-protection from sexual harassment, rejecting violence, and literacy, numeracy, and language arts (Arabic and English).

³ We use "parent" and "caregiver" interchangeably throughout this paper to refer to a child's primary caregiver.

The *Ahlan Simsim* needs assessment with caregivers and practitioners yielded this most important takeaway: children in the Syrian response region need SEL above all else. The needs assessment also highlighted the importance of considering the sensitivities of children who have experienced trauma when we created the content. With this in mind, we proceeded with the next stage of our development process—the educational content seminar—with a commitment to a trauma-informed approach and a sharper focus on SEL as the critical focus of our show.

FEEDBACK FROM EXPERT ADVISORS

In September 2018, following our decision to focus the *Ahlan Simsim* content on SEL, we refined our curricular approach by meeting with education advisors, including academics, practitioners, psychologists, and trauma, risk, and resilience specialists. These meetings, which took place in Amman, Jordan, and Beirut, Lebanon, included advisors from Syria and Iraq. They stated that identifying and regulating emotions was a skill gap among children three to eight years old who were living in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq—in particular among children who had experienced trauma.

We heard repeatedly from advisors that the emotional vocabularies of children in the region are often limited to two to three words to describe the broad range of human emotion. Beyond what we know from the research on exposure to traumatic events and the strong association with physical and mental health outcomes (Panter-Brick et al. 2009; Shonkoff et al. 2012), it is worth noting that limited engagement with the terminology of emotions may be a behavior learned from caregivers who experienced trauma during their own development.⁴ Children learn by observing and interacting with those around them, beginning at a very early age; consequently, their own ability to process and express emotions may be affected. We also heard that expressing emotion is typically limited to two behaviors: a deadpan or flat affect, and a physical, sometimes violent reaction, particularly among children who have experienced trauma (Cole et al. 2018).

The trauma, risk, and resilience specialists speaking at the workshops articulated specific considerations for children who have experienced certain adverse experiences, such as violence and displacement. For example, when we introduced one of the common strategies we use with populations in the United States who

4 The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the conflict in Iraq (2003-present), and various conflicts involving Jordan over the last several decades have affected the lives of parents with children in our target age group, including the way they understand, respond to, and cope with feelings. Disassociation from intense emotions, particularly during periods of severe stress and trauma, is itself a coping strategy.

have experienced trauma—“Imagine a safe space”—the advisors pointed out that imagining a safe space could be retraumatizing for displaced children if the place they imagine is the home they have lost. They also explained that imagining a safe space requires a level of abstract thinking that is too advanced for children who have experienced developmental delays due to trauma. The advisors noted that trauma affects people of any age at a basic and sensory level and can also impact speech. They encouraged us to model nonverbal and sensory modes of expression, such as using music, colors, and shapes to portray various feelings. Finally, the specialists advised us not to underestimate the importance of giving the children a fun and entertaining respite from lives that for many of them are very stressful. Children need to play to learn, yet many children living in emergency contexts have limited opportunity to do so. They advised that a Sesame Street experience that gives children permission to be playful, joyful, and hopeful would do much to support their positive development.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTIFYING AND REGULATING EMOTIONS

After receiving the advisors’ guidance, we returned to the caregivers to gain a better understanding of their ideas about the importance of identifying and regulating emotions. We also asked the caregivers to identify which terms for emotions were the easiest and most challenging for their children to comprehend, and which emotions children express most often.

The caregivers put a high priority on their children’s ability to understand and regulate their emotions. A large number of the caregivers reported that they believe in the power of television shows to support their children’s development because they said their children often imitate what they see on television. The caregivers also felt that an educational television show could give their children an opportunity to learn while also having fun.

When presented with a set of basic emotions (based on Shaver et al. 2001) and asked about the highest and lowest priority emotions for the show to address, the caregivers reported that

- the top three emotions their children were already familiar with, in descending order, were happiness, anger, and caring;
- the top two emotions that would be unfamiliar to their children, in descending order, were jealousy and awe; and

- the five emotions they wish their children had more knowledge about were anger, self-confidence, sadness, love for helping others, and courage.

Out of these findings, we formulated a curriculum for the first season of *Ahlan Simsim* that focused on defining and exploring nine primary emotions that were both familiar and unfamiliar to children, and which were specifically tied to the caregivers' requests (see Table 1). These findings helped us craft a curriculum that we believed would be meaningful and responsive to our audience's articulated needs.

FORMATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS: HOW CHILDREN COMMUNICATE ABOUT THEIR FEELINGS

Simultaneous to the online research described in a footnote above and in the Appendix, we conducted individual interviews with caregiver-child dyads in Jordan and Lebanon to understand the terms children use to communicate their feelings. During the interviews, the researchers read Arabic-language children's storybooks aloud and stopped at certain points to ask the children questions related to the emotions displayed in that moment in the story. We found that their responses supported the caregivers', practitioners', and advisors' assertions that children struggle to find the emotional vocabulary needed to identify and regulate complicated feelings, such as anxiety, frustration, guilt, or jealousy. The children's articulated emotional range was limited, and they often resorted to phrases or actions to describe a feeling (see Kohn et al. 2020 for a full summary of the study results). The results of these interviews corroborated what we heard from expert advisors and from the online research surveys—that the children needed support to build a vocabulary of emotions in order to help them identify and regulate their emotions.

APPLICATION OF OUR FINDINGS: A NEW SEL-FOCUSED ARABIC-LANGUAGE SESAME STREET

The findings from our educational content seminar and the follow-up research studies corroborated the practitioners' and caregivers' assertions during the needs assessment—that is, that SEL is important for young children in the Syrian response context. Based on input from caregivers, educators, child-protection officers, social workers, and others who expressed the immense importance of this topic area, we focused *Ahlan Simsim* on SEL; season one focused specifically on identifying and regulating emotions. We focused on nine carefully selected emotions during the 26-episode season. Our selection was based

on recommendations from the caregivers about which emotional terms would be least familiar to their children and most important for them to learn (see Table 1). In response to the caregivers' call for help in equipping their children to handle or cope with their emotions, we also selected and introduced six coping strategies that we repeated throughout the season (see Table 2). We selected the strategies based on the advisors' recommendations for coping strategies that were culturally relevant, developmentally appropriate for early childhood, trauma informed, and relevant to the region. We presented the strategies through short, catchy songs that the children and caregivers could readily remember, and they were delivered by characters they connected with and cared about.

Table 1: Nine Emotions Presented in Season 1

-
1. **Anger:** غضب *Ghadab*
 2. **Caring:** مامتة! *Ihtimam*
 3. **Fear:** فوخ *Khowf*
 4. **Frustration:** طابح! *Ihbat*
 5. **Nervousness:** رتوت *Tawator*
 6. **Hope/Determination:** ميمصت لمأ *Amal/Tasmeem*
 7. **Jealousy:** غيرة *Gheerah*
 8. **Loneliness:** ودح *Wihdah*
 9. **Sadness:** نوح *Hozon*
-

Table 2: Season 1 Strategy Bank

1. **Belly Breathe:** Put your hands on your belly and say “stop.” Take a deep, slow breath in through your nose while expanding your belly, then let it out through your mouth while letting your belly deflate.
 2. **Count to 5:** Take a deep breath and slowly count from one to five.
 3. **Move It Out:** Let your feelings out through physical movement: shake your hands, stomp your feet, and dance around to express how you feel.
 4. **Draw It Out:** Draw a picture of how you feel. Think about the color, shape, and texture of your feeling.
 5. **Ask for Help:** Talk to a trusted adult about how you feel. Ask for help and support.
 6. **Make a Plan:** First identify your goal. Next, identify the steps you need to take to get to your goal.
-

Arising from our research with local communities and the advice of local child-development experts on program content, the theory of change that supports our approach to the *Ahlan Simsim* show is based on the idea that learning to identify and constructively express emotions is a fundamental aspect of healthy development, resilience, and effective coping. Research shows that being better able to identify, express, and regulate emotions (important components of emotional and social competence) helps to reduce children’s internalizing and externalizing of behaviors and ultimately provides a foundation for their later ability to function across peer and school contexts (Izard et al. 2001). As is true of the acquisition of any skill, children need to learn the basics before they can master complexities. By focusing on labeling, identifying, and appropriately expressing a limited number of core emotions, *Ahlan Simsim* provides a tool for mastering a foundational element of broader SEL skills, such as perspective-taking and conflict resolution.

To support this approach, the structure, set, characters, and language of the show are also informed by research and guidance from local advisors, who emphasized that reflecting the rich diversity of the Middle East would be important to engaging children. The show's set—a middle-class home and garden that is a composite of typical homes found in Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon—aims to reflect an environment that is realistic and relatable to a large cross-section of our viewers, which includes families of all income levels across the Middle East. Our choice of languages was also intentional. The show is produced primarily in Levantine Arabic and features characters who speak Syrian, Jordanian, Iraqi, and Lebanese dialects. We take special care to use words and phrases that have the broadest comprehension and shared meaning among people living in the four target countries, thereby creating, as closely as possible, what our language advisors refer to as a neutral dialect. To identify and express key curricular concepts, the characters use vocabulary in modern standard Arabic, which is familiar to and spoken by people throughout the region and is the language most children use in school. The variety show portion of *Ahlan Simsim* features adult and child guests from the broader Middle East, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and beyond, who speak in their native dialects. Feedback from language experts and local advisors assured us that featuring characters from our four target countries and the broader Middle East would reflect the reality of diaspora and help to promote exposure to and appreciation for the rich variety of cultures, countries, and dialects across the region, which will ultimately increase resonance and children's engagement.

The participatory approach we took in developing *Ahlan Simsim* revealed that children struggle to find the vocabulary to express their complex emotions and often resort to action terms, such as "I'm done." For this reason, we intentionally built definitions of emotion terms into the episodes. The focus emotions are defined at the open and close of every episode, and the program characters describe the physical manifestations of emotions throughout the programs. To enhance children's comprehension, we also incorporated visual supports associated with each emotion, such as using a frown to indicate sadness.

We learned that caregivers seek guidance on how to show empathy and responsiveness to their children's emotions. The show features two adult human characters, Teta Noor and Hadi, who are the caregivers for Basma and Jad, *Ahlan Simsim*'s two central characters. We heard repeatedly from the advisors that adults in the region also needed support in developing social-emotional skills, so we intentionally included caregivers in the show as a way to model healthy emotional expression and empathy for the caregivers in the region who view *Ahlan Simsim* with their children. We built in frameworks to guide caregivers in responding to

difficult emotional scenarios. For example, Teta Noor and Hadi modeled simple steps in how to respond to emotions, such as helping a child identify a feeling using facial expressions and physiological signs, helping them identify the reasons they are feeling as they do, validating their feelings, and helping them find an appropriate coping strategy.

Equally important was portraying child characters in a manner that gave them agency in identifying and coping with their emotions. For example, the episodes model children going to the adult characters and asking for assistance. This choice responded to our finding that children often do not know how to express or cope with their emotions in a healthy manner.

Finally, taking into consideration the findings from our needs assessment and the advisors' recommendations, we took several steps to ensure that the program's content was trauma informed. First, the coping strategies we selected as the focus of the first season avoided imagination exercises that required children to think of abstract, potentially retraumatizing concepts of safety. Our strategies focused instead on concrete concepts, such as counting to five, taking deep breaths, and moving one's body to work through an emotion. Second, we intentionally used nonverbal communication strategies to model expression. For example, main character Jad uses a paintbrush to express his feelings when he can't find the words for his ideas. Lastly, we took a play-based and humorous approach to the storylines, which gave children and their caregivers an opportunity to engage with the content in a joyful and positive manner.

Once rough cuts of the *Ahlan Simsim* episodes were complete, the researchers showed them to viewer focus groups that they had explicitly created to gain feedback from minority groups and the caregivers of children with disabilities about the coping strategies used, and on the storylines in general. IRC field staff in Iraq and Jordan conducted six focus groups. The sample of 37 female and male caregivers included Iraqis, Syrians, and Jordanians from host communities and camp settings; seven of them cared for children with disabilities. Our protocols focused on appeal, comprehension, and recommendations to improve the show, and the team incorporated their findings into ongoing revisions of the content as it was being finalized. This included tweaking the language to improve clarity, adding graphic elements to make the key emotion vocabulary words "pop," and adding a music score and sound effects throughout each episode to increase viewers' engagement.

CONCLUSION

Despite mounting evidence of the importance of SEL programming for young children affected by conflict and crisis, and the best practices espoused by the humanitarian aid community around using a participatory approach, few existing ECD programs in emergency settings focus on SEL, and even fewer use a participatory approach to content development. The development process for the *Ahlan Simsim* television production provides a case study in how to create contextually relevant, trauma-informed SEL content employing a participatory approach. Employing an approach that is foundational to the Sesame Workshop model (Cooney 1966; Lesser 1974), Sesame Workshop embarked on the development of *Ahlan Simsim* with the core objective of creating a program that was responsive to the articulated needs of children and families affected by conflict and displacement. Our needs assessment yielded the clear result that families needed help with their SEL skills, and that the program's content must be sensitive to the effects of persistent stress and trauma. Feedback from expert advisors during our educational content seminar helped us further narrow our focus on identifying and regulating emotions and trauma-informed content design. Additional findings from our online research communities and formative research helped us craft our educational framework—that is, the core emotions and self-regulation strategies that we repeated throughout the season. The final product is a culturally relevant SEL program specifically tailored to the needs of children and families in the target region.

Without meaningful feedback from caregivers, practitioners, expert advisors, and the children themselves in the creation of *Ahlan Simsim*, we might have created a program that both overreached and failed to meet the children's explicit need for foundational SEL skills, and that did not reflect children's and parents' existing knowledge of these skills. Even worse, without carefully integrating knowledge about the effects of trauma into our content and practices, we risked retraumatizing some children. The implications of these lessons for the education in emergencies community are serious, particularly given how critically important participatory research and community buy-in are to designing responsive, sustainable, effective ECD in emergencies programming (Foulds et al. 2021). Our hope is that the process and approach that we undertook in developing the *Ahlan Simsim* show can be adapted across emergency contexts and various types of SEL interventions, thereby creating a new standard for community-centered, innovative educational programming for children around the world.

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APPENDIX

Table A1: Study Methodologies and Sampling⁵

Study	Research Methodology	Purpose/Research Question	Number of Participants	Countries
Study 1: Needs assessment	Individual in-depth interviews with caregivers and practitioners	Learn about children’s academic and social-emotional needs Understand caregivers’ parenting needs Identify and compare caregivers’ and practitioners’ educational priorities for young children Learn more about the professional needs and challenges of people working directly with young children and their families	265 respondents: 195 caregivers of children ages 3-8 70 practitioners who work with young children (e.g., teachers, teaching assistants, facilitators, social workers, health-care workers, and protection officers)	Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria

⁵ While the Ahlan Simsim program covers Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, not all countries were included in all the formative studies, due to budget constraints, access, and security concerns for the research team and respondents. Given the nature of our methodologies and data-collection processes, sampling presents a limitation. While Sesame Workshop has sought feedback through a variety of methods with diverse populations, our samples were not nationally or regionally representative. Selection bias in sampling for the above-mentioned studies restricts our ability to generalize to the population at large, given that some studies over-indexed on displaced populations while others required respondents to have access to a smartphone and the internet, and in some cases, it was not possible to enter certain parts of the region.

Study	Research Methodology	Purpose/Research Question	Number of Participants	Countries
Study 2: Online research communities	Online surveys, accessible by computer, tablet, or smartphone	The online research communities were used to give constant and ongoing feedback to the Sesame Workshop team as they were developing different pieces of the production, strategy, marketing, and education and research frameworks	11 studies. ⁶ Sample sizes per online study ranged from 75-110 caregivers of children ages 3-6: 20-30 respondents from the host community in each country 15-20 displaced respondents per instance of reaching out in each country	Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon
Study 3: Formative study on children's emotional literacy	Individual interviews conducted with caregiver-child dyads: During the interview, researchers read <i>First Day of School</i> , stopping at certain points to ask the child questions related to the emotional spectrum depicted in the story at that moment. The process was repeated with <i>The Hare and the Tortoise</i> . After both storybooks were read, the researcher interviewed the caregiver while the child colored.	Identify terms children use to communicate their feelings Understand how children express their feelings using those terms Understand from parents and caregivers how children express their emotions	60 caregiver-child dyads: 50% displaced Syrians 50% host community 50% children ages 5-6 50% children ages 7-8	Jordan, Lebanon

⁶ Each study was distinct and framed by relevant research questions specific to the content being tested.