

Early Childhood Development (ECD) in Crisis Contexts: An Introduction



Early Childhood Development

Early childhood development (ECD) investments support children from birth to age 8. They cover services that promote nurturing care, including health, nutrition, safety and protection, responsive caregiving, and play-based early learning. Evidence shows that quality support in the early years for young children and their caregivers can provide tremendous returns—up to 13% per year—through improved education, health, and economic outcomes.

The importance of ECD: For the youngest children, experiences with conflict and crisis come at a particularly critical point in their lives. From birth to age 3, the brain grows faster than any other time, laying the foundation for lifelong learning, health, and productivity.¹ But millions of children experience these years in conflict or crisis situations: more than 71 million children around the world have spent their entire lifetimes in areas affected by conflict, and one in six children is living in an active conflict zone.² Substantial evidence shows that prolonged adversity during the critical early years of life can disrupt brain development, with devastating, long-term effects on health, learning, and behavior.³ This threatens to produce a lifelong cycle of instability and poverty, affecting both individual prospects as well as larger community goals of social cohesion, resilience, and equity.



Investment in ECD is more than a quick fix: ECD support requires a multi-sectoral approach and provides long-lasting economic, educational, and health benefits in return. Quality support for young children and their caregivers can provide significant returns, including higher wages earned as an adult, greater educational attainment, improved cognitive abilities, reduced violence, and fewer depressive symptoms.⁴

The need for increased investment: Despite progress made in recent years, ECD remains under-prioritized in humanitarian programming. Globally, ECD accounts for just over 2% of humanitarian assistance funding.⁵ The limited funding that does exist is thinly spread and poorly coordinated, limiting its accessibility and efficacy.



Case study: The International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Jordan

The Ahlan Simsim project, a partnership between the IRC and Sesame Workshop, has designed ECD interventions spanning across sectors. For example, in Jordan, the IRC has worked with the Ministry of Health to co-design ECD programming integrated into government-run primary health care to address gaps in knowledge on healthy child development and increase availability of resources for caregivers. The program integrates ECD tools, messages, and materials into regular “well-child check-ups” for children ages 0-5. Through this program set to roll out in June 2022, midwives and nurses share key ECD messages with parents during appointments, and children play in interactive learning areas, or “edutainment corners,” supporting their development while in waiting areas.



Case study: BRAC in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh

BRAC’s Humanitarian Play Lab (HPL) model is a play-based program for children living in emergency settings that has been adapted to meet the needs of the Rohingya refugee community in Cox’s Bazar. The aim of the HPL model is to promote positive developmental outcomes for children in crisis settings and to help them build resilience to overcome trauma they have experienced. The HPL model integrates playful learning with child protection, psychosocial support, and links to critical services. It incorporates relevant cultural traditions and engages with both the Rohingya and the host communities. Since December 2018, BRAC has been working in partnership with Sesame Workshop, the IRC, NYU Global TIES for Children, and the LEGO Foundation as part of the Play to Learn project to implement the model and co-create additional playful learning resources, videos, and materials tailored to the context.

1. Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, “InBrief: The Science of Early Childhood Development,” 2007.
2. Peace Research Institute Oslo, “Children Affected by Armed Conflict, 1990-2019,” 2020.
3. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, “The Science of Early Childhood Development: Closing the Gap Between What We Know and What We Do,” 2007.
4. Nores and Barnett, “Benefits of early childhood interventions across the world: (Under) Investing in the very young,” 2010. Gertler, et al., “Labor market returns to an early childhood stimulation intervention in Jamaica,” 2014. Black, et al., “Early childhood development coming of age: science through the life course,” 2016. Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), “Encouraging early childhood stimulation from parents and caregivers to improve child development,” 2020. Walker, et al., “Cognitive, psychosocial, and behaviour gains at age 31 years from the Jamaica early childhood stimulation trial,” 2021.
5. Moving Minds Alliance, “Analysis of international aid levels for early childhood services in crisis contexts,” 2020.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, CONTACT:

Emily Garin
Senior Director of Advocacy, International Social Impact,
Sesame Workshop
Emily.Garin@sesame.org

Kirsten Gelsdorf
Professor of Practice & Director of Global Humanitarian Policy,
University of Virginia
kg8v@virginia.edu

<https://www.sesameworkshop.org/what-we-do/crisis-response>