

Making the Case for Early Childhood Development in Crisis Contexts

The importance of early childhood development

(ECD): For the youngest children, experiences with 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.



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.



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.



A crucial window for action: Three ways to support children affected by crises

1. Understand and amplify the unique needs of young children and caregivers affected by crises

From appropriate nutrition to early learning opportunities to engagement with a caring adult, young children have unique needs, which means that they and their families are impacted by crises differently than other groups. Properly meeting those needs means first understanding them, especially by including early childhood-specific questions in needs assessment processes, and then reflecting assessed needs in funding and programming decisions.

2. Reach children and families with better coordinated resources and programming

Meeting the multifaceted needs of children requires a holistic and coordinated response. This means both building child-centered responses into traditional sectors and providing cross-sectoral programming such as parenting support. Coordination also requires intentional investment in structures and individuals who work across all these topics at a crisis level.

3. Invest in the evidence—and use that evidence to drive more investment over time

Formal research on the best ways to support young children and caregivers has lagged behind most other topics in humanitarian response. Substantial investments in research on ECD in crisis settings are now beginning to deliver results—including in two major Sesame Workshop initiatives in the Middle East and Bangladesh—but that funding must be sustained as technology, responses, and the crises themselves change. Most importantly, what we learn from this research should be used to make the case for further investment and to inform evidence-based programming.

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.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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

www.sesameworkshop.org/what-we-do/crisis-response