

Early Childhood in Crisis and Conflict

A crucial window to secure a brighter future

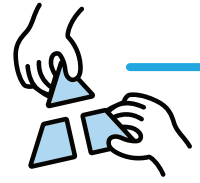
Across the globe, one in every six children lives in a conflict zone; 71 million children under the age of 5 have lived in conflict areas for their entire lifetimes.¹ Increasingly, children affected by crisis and conflict are spending their whole childhoods without access to the necessary foundations of healthy human development: education, adequate nutrition, healthcare, clean water and sanitation, physical and psychological safety, and playful learning experiences.



The Challenge

For the youngest children, experiences with crisis and conflict come at a particularly critical point in their lives. From birth to age 3, the brain develops faster than at any other time, forming up to one million new connections every second. By age 5, up to 90 percent of a child's brain has already developed.² Substantial evidence shows that prolonged adversity in this narrow window of time can negatively alter brain development. The long-term effects can be devastating, adversely impacting health, learning, and behavior for children. This, in turn, threatens a pernicious cycle of instability and poverty, affecting both individual prospects as well as larger community goals of social cohesion, resilience, and equity.

Despite evidence that early childhood interventions are both essential and effective, they remain dramatically underfunded. Globally, ECD accounts for just over 3 percent of development assistance going to crisis-affected countries, with only a sliver of that specifically allocated for nurturing care and pre-primary education; in humanitarian assistance, only 2 percent of funding is dedicated to ECD.³ The limited funding that does exist is thinly spread and poorly coordinated, limiting its accessibility and its efficacy.⁴



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.⁵

By the Numbers

1 in 6 children worldwide lives in a conflict zone

90% of a child's brain has developed by **age 5**

ECD investments can yield up to a **13%** annual rate of return



Globally, approx. **3%** of development assistance and just **2%** of humanitarian assistance is for ECD

The Opportunity

The United States government has long been a generous and influential partner in protecting the health, education, and safety of children affected by crisis and conflict. Its role in securing global gains for children is irreplaceable. Together, we can build on that legacy to ensure that children—especially young children—are not just surviving adversity, but thriving.

Congress can support this with commitments to:

Fund what works:

As a leading donor in global humanitarian response, the United States has a unique opportunity and obligation to lead the world in ECD investments. The U.S. should continue this leadership role by prioritizing funding and research for young children and caregivers in crisis settings, directing focused attention to the unique needs of these populations. Key accounts for realizing these gains include USAID's Global Health Bureau; the Bureau for Development, Democracy, and Innovation; the Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs; and the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. U.S. investments should also include support for multilateral institutions to maximize reach.

Focus on oversight:

The 2021 passage of the Global Child Thrive Act was an important step forward for U.S. investments in ECD. The Thrive Act offers a blueprint for improving the impact of U.S. foreign assistance by strengthening coordination and evaluation of ECD investments across humanitarian and development authorities. Continued oversight of the law's implementation is crucial to ensuring quick and well-coordinated rollout and implementation.

Follow the money:

Because early childhood development work crosses many traditional budget accounts, U.S. spending on ECD is not tracked comprehensively for either humanitarian or development assistance. Congressional support for improved budget tracking and incentivizing regular reporting of ECD funding is crucial to ensuring that the holistic needs of children—from health, nutrition, protection, and education to caregiving and nurturing care—are being appropriately addressed in U.S. foreign assistance.

About Us

We are working with governments around the world to ensure that the best evidence drives investment for early childhood development in crisis contexts. Current collaborations include Ahlan Simsim, which supports children affected by the Syrian crisis, and Play to Learn, which is focused on children and communities affected by the Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises in Bangladesh and the Middle East.

The partnership is based on three proven approaches for program delivery: (1) delivering early education through mass media; (2) providing services directly to children with support for facilitators, childcare workers, and teachers; and (3) offering services directly to caregivers with a focus on playful early learning and responsive caregiving. The partners are also focused on two key areas of work to support the larger field of ECD in crisis contexts: working together to advocate for increased investments and improved quality of ECD and generating new evidence on what it takes to design and implement early childhood programs in these challenging environments. Together, this work will triple the existing evidence base on early childhood in crisis contexts.

For more information,
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Sesame Workshop is the non-profit organization committed to helping kids grow smarter, stronger, and kinder. Sesame Workshop delivers high quality early childhood programming in more than 150 countries.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) helps people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover, and regain control of their future.

BRAC works to empower people and communities in situations of poverty, illiteracy, disease, and social injustice, seeking positive changes that enable individuals to meet their full potential.

LEGO Foundation, which is funding the Play to Learn project, is dedicated to re-defining play and re-imagining learning to ensure children build the broad set of skills they need to thrive and succeed. The Foundation works with the **LEGO Group** to support governments leading on behalf of children around the world.

Global TIES for Children is the independent evaluator of the Ahlan Simsim and Play to Learn projects and is an international research center which works towards a world where all children have equitable access to opportunities that allow them to thrive in an ecosystem where caregivers and teachers have the resources they need to support them.



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2. Brown, T.T., Jernigan, T.L. "Brain Development During the Preschool Years". *Neuropsychol Rev* 22 (2012).
3. Moving Minds Alliance. "Analysis of international aid levels for early childhood services in crisis contexts" (2020)

4. International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity. "Financing Early Childhood Development: An analysis of international and domestic sources in low- and middle-income countries" (2016)
5. García, J.L., Heckman, J.J., et al. "The Life-cycle Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program" *NBER working paper* (2016)