

Young children and families in crisis and displacement

# Early Childhood Matters



**Cover:** Young children in a refugee camp in Lebanon.  
**Photo:** Jon Spaul

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## Young children and families in crisis and displacement

This is a collection of articles specifically dedicated to young children and families affected by crisis and displacement. The contributions have been carefully selected from earlier publications of *Early Childhood Matters* (guest edited by Joan Lombardi) by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, together with the *Moving Minds Alliance*. It includes seven articles on programming for young refugee children in various countries (e.g. Bangladesh, Lebanon, Jordan). An estimated 22 million children under 5 years old are living the most critical developmental period in human life away from home, in often uncertain and stressful circumstances. As these articles show, very promising work is underway.

We hope they can serve as an inspiration for others who aim to scale much needed solutions in support of this group of babies, toddlers and the people who care for them.

**The Moving Minds Alliance** is a funders collaborative and network that works to scale up coverage, quality, and financing of support for young children and families affected by crisis and displacement. Drawing from on-the-ground experience and shared learning, Moving Minds seeks to catalyze a new way of responding to crises that addresses the inter-sectoral needs of the youngest refugees and their families. Given the scale and urgency of the need globally, Moving Minds recognizes the added value of collaboration and strategic alignment, enabling members and partners to achieve more than any one organization could on its own. Current members are: Comic Relief, Lego Foundation, McArthur Foundation, Open Society Foundation, Porticus, Vitol Foundation, and Bernard van Leer Foundation.

For more information, please see  
[www.movingmindsalliance.org](http://www.movingmindsalliance.org)

# From little ripples to big waves: comprehensive early childhood programming for young refugee children

- ▷ Adaptable programme for young children in emergencies or forgotten crises.
- ▷ Little Ripples curriculum incorporates play-based learning and mindfulness.
- ▷ Assessments show improved learning outcomes and social-emotional development.

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**Levels of displacement are the highest on record: as of February 2019, 68.5 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced, of whom 25.4 million hold refugee status – over half of them under the age of 18 (UNHCR, online). An estimated 87 million children under age 7 have spent their entire lives in conflict zones (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2018). Yet humanitarian funding for education – and, especially, early childhood programming – remains alarmingly low. iACT developed the Little Ripples programme to address the needs of young children affected by humanitarian emergencies and forgotten crises.**

The history of Little Ripples begins with iACT's work in eastern Chad to support Darfuri refugees, documenting life in the refugee camps to help spur global action. The iACT team asked the Darfuri refugee communities what services they needed and wanted most – the answer was services for young children. As a result, over the next three years, iACT worked with experts and practitioners in the areas of child development, early learning, trauma recovery and mindfulness to develop the Little Ripples curriculum.

To pilot the Little Ripples curriculum, iACT partnered with Jesuit Refugee Service, which provides primary education to Darfuri refugees in Chad. In 2013, iACT identified and trained 14 Darfuri refugee women, and worked with refugee families to set up spaces in their homes to save on the cost of constructing new centres. These in-home centres came to be known as 'ponds'. One pond hosts 45 children living in nearby homes and is supported by two teachers. iACT provided teaching and learning materials and helped to set up a meals programme to provide participating children with nutritional support.

One year after launching the Little Ripples pilot in eastern Chad, iACT conducted an impact assessment developed with the University of Wisconsin Survey Center. Child and caregiver questions were designed to measure the children's learning outcomes and social-emotional development. It was found that children made strong improvements in educational milestones (such as naming colours, counting, identifying animals and reciting the alphabet); children were reported to be less violent with their peers and adults (for example, decrease in kicking, biting and hitting); they exhibited more positive

emotional behaviours (being happier and calmer); and were more likely to wash hands before and after meals. Caregivers also reported that, at home, their child was singing, talking about their activities at the Little Ripples programme and showing an eagerness to return each day.

Based on these findings, iACT was able to refine and strengthen the Little Ripples curriculum and seek funding to continue and expand the programme.

## An adaptable, play-based and mindful approach

The Little Ripples curriculum is intentionally designed for use in challenging and resource-poor contexts with children, aged 3 to 5, affected by trauma, displacement and other complex issues. It guides early childhood teachers and caregivers – at any level of education and experience – to deliver play-based learning activities that foster social-emotional development, while using positive behaviour management techniques. It is designed to be integrated with any existing academic or pre-primary curricula and adapted to any context; teachers are encouraged to deliver the curriculum using activities, stories, music and games that are relevant to their culture, language and context.

[‘The Little Ripples curriculum guides early childhood teachers and caregivers to deliver play-based learning activities.’](#)

Play-based learning is key, as growing evidence shows a relationship between play and development in areas including: language, executive functions, mathematics, spatial skills, scientific thinking and social and emotional development (Hassinger-Das *et al.*, 2017). In many cultures, play-based learning is not regarded as an acceptable form of pedagogy. However, Little Ripples teacher training aims to improve understanding of the positive impact it can have on child development and future learning.

The curriculum incorporates mindfulness – a state of mind that can be developed through practices such as: meditation, slow breathing, intentional movement or body scans to support young refugees to:

- 1 find stability and comfort amid the chaos of displacement
- 2 nurture internal peace as a coping mechanism and form of resilience
- 3 build executive functioning and self-regulation skills, and
- 4 learn practices that they can carry with them into adolescence and adulthood.

In a Little Ripples classroom, mindfulness is not practised as a standalone activity; rather, mindfulness exercises are an integral part of daily activities. Teachers guide their students in practising mindfulness techniques in daily ‘welcome’ and ‘goodbye’ circles and lead ‘mindful moments’ throughout the day if they feel their students may benefit from a calming exercise.

## Positive impact

In late 2018, iACT’s implementing partner in Tanzania, Plan International, conducted an impact evaluation including individual student learning assessments, surveys and focus group discussions with students, parents and



teachers. After participating for four months, approximately 90% of Little Ripples students passed their academic assessment. Parents and teachers reported positive changes in student behaviour, attitudes and cognitive skills, inside and outside the classroom. Students reported feeling safe in their classrooms and happy to participate in lessons. They particularly enjoyed the mindfulness activities, which teachers reported to be helpful for classroom management.

Impacts from assessments in eastern Chad over the last two years have produced similar results, with a clear positive impact on the Darfuri refugee teachers and students. Most caregivers reported an increase in their child's ability to be independent, share toys and get along with others. One teacher observed:

*The new method we were trained on to deal with children in a positive way has changed the students. It is something we had not learned before. [Before,] they [students] did not say my name; they did not like me or listen to me. From training we learned to speak with children and be at their level and speak with them peacefully. Now, they see me outside of school and excitedly call me by name; they listen to me and are more excited each day for school.*



## Looking forward

Over the last five years, Little Ripples has expanded into four refugee camps in eastern Chad, reaching 3000 Darfuri refugee children and training 97 refugee teachers. Little Ripples has been adapted and implemented with Central African refugees in Cameroon and Burundian refugees in Tanzania – training 51 teachers and reaching more than 7000 children. In 2019, iACT is launching Little Ripples in Greece and, moving forward, iACT will explore new partnerships in other crisis contexts.

iACT will continue to work with experts in early learning to ensure the Little Ripples curriculum incorporates the most up-to-date approaches, and will continue documenting its positive impact to demonstrate to donors, humanitarian agencies and field practitioners the need to support, test and document further innovative early learning initiatives with young children in emergency and protracted refugee contexts.

➔ Find this article online at [earlychildhoodmatters.online/2019-19](http://earlychildhoodmatters.online/2019-19)

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# BRAC Humanitarian Play Lab: when playing becomes healing

- ▷ Many young children from Myanmar's Rohingya community are displaced in Bangladesh.
- ▷ BRAC's Humanitarian Play Lab model promotes healing through culturally rooted play.
- ▷ The Humanitarian Play Lab model could be scaled in other humanitarian contexts.

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**In August 2017, members of the Rohingya community in Myanmar began to take refuge in the neighbouring country of Bangladesh, fleeing unrest and uncertainty. UNHCR now estimates that 906,572 refugees are in the Bangladeshi town of Cox's Bazar, just over the border from Myanmar, and around 55% are under the age of 18 – including accompanied and unaccompanied children, and many young pregnant women. Severely marginalised, then displaced from their home country, many among this population have faced distress, violence, trauma and sexual abuse.**

Immediate reaction to this large-scale humanitarian crisis has been to provide emergency support to meet basic physical needs: food and water, hygiene and sanitation. But the children of this community also face serious issues related to psychological distress, vulnerability and trauma. It is critical to protect their fundamental rights. Child-friendly spaces were created within the camps, where children could feel protected and activities incorporating elements of play and healing could be implemented.

## Fostering healing through play

Within these spaces, BRAC has implemented its Humanitarian Play Lab (HPL) model. BRAC has been collaborating with the LEGO Foundation since 2015 to promote play as a learning tool in Bangladesh through the development of this model. Play is integral to children meeting their key developmental milestones in their early years. The BRAC Play Lab model incorporates play-based learning in all aspects of its curriculum and is implemented in more than 300 play spaces across the capital city of Dhaka.

The BRAC HPL model is a contextualised adaptation of the BRAC Play Lab model, designed to ensure that vulnerable children aged 2–6 years are provided with a safe platform for healing through play. Play therapy is a curative tool to address children's behavioural and psychological issues. Play is the way children learn, develop and understand the world around them. It is therapeutic because it helps children express their feelings. Play is instrumental in keeping children engaged, providing stimulation for cognitive and social-emotional development, developing self-regulation and building resilience.



This is especially important for children in fragile settings, where they are exposed to violence and poverty. Play helps such children better manage possible trauma caused by their experiences. By adapting the model to the highly contextualised settings in the Rohingya community, BRAC seeks to provide healing through play for Rohingya children, in a way that improves on traditional approaches to early childhood development, child protection and psychosocial well-being in humanitarian settings. The HPL model is designed to:

- build resilience in children in fragile settings through a focus on early childhood stimulus and the development of self-regulation
- nurture spontaneity through engagement in a culturally relevant play-based curriculum that encourages language, cognitive, motor, and socio-emotional development
- foster a sense of community among displaced peoples by creating a supportive environment for mothers and children, using traditional games, rhymes and activities.



In addition to the HPL model, BRAC has been testing out a home-based early stimulation model for pregnant women and mothers with children aged up to 2 years. Mothers are counselled on various issues related to childcare, maternal mental health, play, and parent–child relationships.

## The HPL integrates culture with play

Initial surveys and focus group discussions within the camps revealed that traditions and cultural norms played a strong role in the everyday lives of Rohingya community members. These conversations became a journey of cultural discoveries. Through extensive research, it was discovered that the community believed in collectivism, with practices, stories and rhymes being intergenerational. Three major cultural aspects were identified that could play a great part in healing:

- Folk rhymes (*Kabbiya*) of the Rohingya people play an essential role in children's lives. Community members feel that the words tap into the primal core of the children, and they respond enthusiastically to the rhythm.
- Traditional games and physical play activities brought out the element of spontaneity and joyfulness within the children. These games are usually very detailed, each with its own set of rules and regulations.
- Arts and crafts brought an element of nostalgia for the old home. Culturally significant artwork, floral patterns and motifs gave these displaced children the feeling that home is never far away.

'The model incorporates play-based learning in all aspects of its curriculum.'

As retaining their identity is a crucial aspect of healing for the Rohingya community, it was essential to integrate cultural and traditional practices in the HPL model through tailored activities and spaces.

The BRAC Humanitarian Play Lab Model is an iterative process, and steps are currently being taken to mould the model further according to community and societal needs. A core BRAC HPL team has been created to oversee all aspects of the project. The curriculum team identifies and incorporates cultural elements that address the key components of healing and play. The research and monitoring group focuses on conducting evaluative research and monitoring in order to assess the impact of the model on displaced children of the Rohingya community.

The research team has validated and implemented evaluative tools to test psychological distress (CORE 10), as well as a Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-12). With regard to CYRM-12, the tool has completed its evaluation of adolescents, and evaluative studies will soon be conducted on children. As for socio-emotional development, the project is using the Ages and Stages Questionnaires ASQ-3 and ASQ: SE on an ongoing basis. A playfulness scale is also being used to assess the playfulness level of children, and the Fidelity Tool (a Play Lab observation checklist) is being used to assess the quality of the outreach workers.

Currently, the research and monitoring team is taking steps to validate and implement the WIPPSI (Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence), KAP (Knowledge, Attitude and Practices) and Bayley tools for impact evaluation on beneficiaries. It is clear, from initial positive results with the children involved in the HPL model, as well as from the increasing focus on the model by large-scale donor organisations, that the model has the potential to be contextualised and scaled in different humanitarian contexts.

➔ Find this article online at [earlychildhoodmatters.online/2019-20](https://earlychildhoodmatters.online/2019-20)

# Changing the humanitarian system for young children living in conflict and crisis

- ▶ The humanitarian community increasingly recognises early childhood development as a priority.
- ▶ More research and a stronger body of evidence is needed on impact and cost-effectiveness.
- ▶ Philanthropy should lead by example, driving governmental and multilateral investment.

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**Radical changes to the humanitarian system are needed to address the urgent, unmet needs of millions of young children living in conflict and crisis. First, early childhood development must be recognised as a ‘life-saving’ priority in every humanitarian response. Second, humanitarian organisations must generate meaningful evidence on what works as well as why, for whom and at what cost programmes are most effective. Third, philanthropic organisations must continue to raise the profile of and invest in early childhood development, ensuring it receives the attention and support needed for lasting change.**

Around the world, 86.7 million children under the age of 7 have lived their entire lives amid war and chaos (UNICEF, 2016). From Syria to Bangladesh, South Sudan to Niger, these children have witnessed or experienced horrific violence, disaster and loss. Many have been forced to leave their homes, schools and communities to find shelter in temporary settlements, abandoned buildings

or camps. A growing body of research points to the likely trajectory for these children. Compounding adversities inherent in conditions of war, disaster and displacement threaten healthy development and can permanently alter brain architecture, epigenetic processes and core physiological systems (Black *et al.*, 2017). The consequences include poor learning outcomes, reduced economic earnings, increased morbidity and early mortality, which in turn affect not only the lives of individual children, but the prosperity, well-being and stability of future generations and societies at large.

The science is clear: without nurturing care, including consistent, responsive adult relationships and opportunities to learn and explore, the future for children living in conflict and crisis is bleak. The 2016 *Lancet Series on Early Childhood Development* highlights cost-effective, evidence-based interventions that can significantly improve the life course of disadvantaged children in a range of complex, low-resource settings (Britto *et al.*, 2017). Perhaps most importantly, the Series presents a firm call for action to address the urgent, unmet needs of young children in adversity, drawing from the extraordinary

advances that the science of early childhood development has achieved through decades of rigorous research.

In the past few years, the international humanitarian community has responded to this call to action, signalling the need for early childhood development interventions to break the cycle of poverty, inequality and disadvantage. As World Bank President Jim Yong Kim said, 'It is clear that we can't achieve our goals of ending extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity unless we help every child reach his or her full potential' (Kim, 2017: 16). Key partnerships and global networks, such as the Early Childhood Development Action Network, Scaling Up Nutrition, the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children and the World Health Organization's work to develop the Nurturing Care Framework all play important roles. Yet, despite the increased attention to the importance of early childhood development in disadvantaged settings, the needs of young children living in the most severe conditions of crisis and conflict continue to be neglected.

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's recent decision to award Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee USD 100 million to create in the Middle East the largest early childhood development initiative in the history of humanitarian response serves as a monumental shift. This landmark investment builds upon the early financing provided by the Bernard van Leer and Open Society Foundations and will reach 9.4 million children over five years in Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon with engaging, multimedia content designed to reflect the realities of young children throughout the region. The programme will reach 1.5 million of the most vulnerable children through direct services aligned with the recommendations of the 2016 *Lancet* Series on Early Childhood Development, including support for caregivers delivered through home visiting, group sessions and mobile devices to help them provide the nurturing care and stimulation to mitigate the impacts of stress, violence and displacement in the first 1000 days of the child's life; and the establishment of early learning centres within formal and informal settings to provide high-quality, play-based learning for the second 1000 days. With this extraordinary investment, our partnership will transform the language, early reading, math, and social-emotional skills of a generation of children affected by the Syrian war.

But to achieve lasting impact for young children living in crisis settings around the world, the MacArthur Foundation's investment must be matched by radical changes to the humanitarian system. First, early childhood development must be recognised as a life-saving priority for any humanitarian response. Second, programmes must be required and funded to generate meaningful evidence on what works, why, how, in which contexts and at what cost. And third, philanthropy must continue to lead by example to drive large-scale investment from governmental and multilateral institutions.

'Radical changes to the humanitarian system are needed to address the urgent, unmet needs of millions of young children living in conflict and crisis.'



## Early childhood development as a life-saving intervention

The United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) defines life-saving and core humanitarian programmes as ‘those actions that within a short time span remedy, mitigate or avert direct loss of life, physical and psychological harm or threats to a population or major portion thereof and/or protect their dignity’ (UN CERF, 2010). The scientific community has proven time and again that the brain is most sensitive to adversity in the first years of life; that this adversity threatens immediate and long-term health, academic achievement and economic well-being; and that evidence-based services for young children can reduce the effects of adversity. These life-saving actions can be taken to protect, mitigate and avert physical and psychological harm to young children. Nonetheless, the humanitarian system does not prioritise early childhood programming in humanitarian response. One indication is funding: of the total humanitarian funding received in 2016, less than 2% was allocated to education, of which only a small fraction was dedicated to early childhood (UNOCHA Financial Tracking Service, 2018b).





The ongoing crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh serves as a vivid example of this. Since August 2017, approximately 670,000 Rohingya refugees, 60% of whom are children, have fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar (Inter Sector Coordination Group, 2018). Massive displacement, violence, disease and destruction have wreaked havoc on the lives of these children. The humanitarian response plan includes commitments to shelter, food and basic health services – essential services to ensure the short-term survival of these children. It also includes commitments and strategies for emergency telecommunications, coordination and logistics. Yet, despite what we know about the life-threatening effects of neglecting young children, the humanitarian response plan makes no explicit commitment to early childhood development. As of February 2018, the education sector had received less than 6% of the funding it requested (UNOCHA Financial Tracking Service, 2018a). A staggering 332,650 children – nearly 75% of all children in need – are not being reached by education services (Inter Sector Coordination Group, 2018). Early childhood development is life-saving and delivers long-term benefits and yet the story of the Rohingya children proves that the humanitarian community and its donors view early childhood development and education services as low priority programmes in a humanitarian response. This can and must change.

**‘The goal is simple: early childhood development as a core pillar of every response strategy in conflict and crisis settings.’**

## Evidence for early childhood development in emergencies

Boosting investment in early childhood development in the acute stages of an emergency requires a much stronger body of evidence in these contexts, giving proof such programmes are indeed possible and effective. A recent review of evaluation studies conducted within the past 17 years identified only four studies of early childhood impact evaluations and a complete absence of implementation research in humanitarian contexts (Murphy *et al.*, in press). This highlights the vast disparity between investments in research in stable contexts compared to research of early childhood programmes in crisis settings. Despite significant complexities in crisis-affected places like Bangladesh, Niger, South Sudan and the Middle East, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) has proven that rigorous research of this kind is both essential and feasible.

The IRC currently has 28 rigorous studies of our programmes, and we carried out the world’s first randomised controlled trials of parenting programmes and social-emotional learning programmes in post-conflict and refugee settings (Sim *et al.*, 2014; Aber *et al.*, 2017). Through this experience we have learned that for research to be useful for programmes and policymakers it must answer questions about impact – did the programme work – as well as how programmes are effective, for whom they are effective and what it costs to have an impact. Research must start before a project begins, to assess the needs and resources of children and families and rapidly test and adjust existing strategies so they are practical and feasible within a specific humanitarian setting. Once programme models and content have been adapted and refined,

implementation research will capture whether the programme is being delivered with high quality and at what cost. Rigorous impact evaluations can then determine whether programmes have indeed been effective. For early childhood development in crisis settings – a sector so lacking in actionable, policy-relevant evidence – this combination of rapid testing, rigorous implementation and cost analysis and impact evaluation is essential.

## The role of philanthropy

Philanthropists have a unique opportunity to be leaders both in early childhood development investment and advocacy and in reshaping the humanitarian response. The goal is simple: early childhood development as a core pillar of every response strategy in conflict and crisis settings. The MacArthur Foundation has shown that philanthropy can provide massive investment and reach, surpassing the scale of any single existing early childhood programme in a humanitarian response. This investment will not only reach an unprecedented number of children, it will catalyse public institutions to prioritise and take action themselves. At the same time, philanthropic organisations must build upon current momentum and identify practical strategies that will lead to systemic change. Important steps to achieving this goal include the convening of global leaders and experts in early childhood development and humanitarian programming; advocating for and investing in research on early childhood development in crisis and conflict settings; disseminating research and translating evidence for policymakers and practitioners; and pushing for replication and scaling of early childhood development in emergency and humanitarian settings around the world.

‘For early childhood development in crisis settings, this combination of rapid testing, rigorous implementation and cost analysis and impact evaluation is essential.’

## Conclusion

The MacArthur Foundation has done something remarkable. In five years, Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee will have delivered transformational services for 1.5 million children affected by the Syrian crisis and 9.4 million children and caregivers will experience world-class multimedia educational programming. Together with New York University’s Global TIES for Children Center, we will generate actionable evidence on early childhood development programming in conflict and crisis; and we will use this evidence to inform the adaptation and replication of programmes for crisis and conflict settings throughout the world. This must be just the beginning. Success will be when early childhood development programming is included in the first days of an emergency response; when cost-effective programme models are implemented across a range of crisis, conflict, post-conflict and fragile settings; when programmes are longer than 18 months; and when investment in programme research results in the establishment of a robust and continually growing evidence base on how to change the trajectory for millions of young children living in conflict and crisis around the world. Success will be when every young child affected by conflict or crisis has access to the early childhood services they need to survive and thrive.

➔ Find this article online at <https://bit.ly/2NDsOhS>

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# Supporting refugee, internally displaced and marginalised host community parents in the Arab region

- ▶ The Health, Early learning and Protection Parenting Programme (HEPPP) was piloted successfully.
- ▶ HEPPP is innovative in the Arab region: holistic and integrated, it engages fathers and mothers.
- ▶ Sessions for refugee parents cover issues including well-being, depression, grief and violence.

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**Recent upheavals in the Arab region, particularly the war in Syria, have led to millions of people taking refuge in neighbouring countries or being displaced within their own countries. The humanitarian approach prioritises urgent needs such as shelter, food and medical services; beyond these, families typically have no sustained support to provide appropriate care for their young children. To address this gap, the Health, Early learning and Protection Parenting Programme (HEPPP) is to be scaled up following an evaluation of a recent pilot in Lebanon and Jordan.**

The history of HEPPP's development starts with years of work by the Arab Resource Collective (ARC)<sup>1</sup> on the concepts and principles of early childhood development, and good practices such as inclusion and the role of play in learning. Over the three decades since it was founded, ARC has succeeded in assimilating into the Arabic discourse a holistic and integrated approach to early childhood. ARC now hosts the Arab Network for Early Child Development (ANECD), with members including government ministerial officials, academics, NGOs, experts and practitioners from across the region.

1 The Arab Resource Collective (ARC) is a regional non-governmental organisation registered legally in Lebanon for better childhood, health for all, and community development. The Bernard van Leer Foundation and Save The Children (UK) were especially important in funding its early work on child development. Further information is available online at: <http://www.mawared.org/>.

2 *Adults and Children Learning: A holistic and integrated approach to early childhood care and development* (Sfeir et al., 2002), a working manual in three volumes: Volume 1: Concepts and Principles, Volume 2: Activities and Exercises, Volume 3: Readings. It was published by ARC and Save the Children Fund (UK) with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation and The Community Fund – the National Lottery Charities Board.

'Holistic' means considering the child as a unified entity, and 'integrated' means addressing children's needs in a coherent way. ARC's holistic and integrated approach is based on principles of child ecology, developmental psychology and children's rights, including that the child's physical, emotional, cognitive, social and other capacities develop as an interrelated whole; that childhood is a complete phase of development by itself; and that development takes place in a well-known sequence, though its pace varies from one child to another.

The holistic and integrated approach was distilled in *Adults and Children Learning*<sup>2</sup>, a manual published in Arabic in 2002. In the following years, ARC's early childhood development programme moved on to develop further training resources in Arabic for parents and early childhood workers, either translated and adapted or produced by local teams of professionals, involving pilots through direct implementation in capacity-building projects with the targeted beneficiaries.

## HEPPP: approaching fathers and mothers together

Developed by a team of early childhood experts, academics and practitioners from Egypt, Palestine and Lebanon, HEPPP was first piloted in community centres in Lebanon and Egypt between 2012 and 2014. Fathers and mothers followed the training together, as a family unit with their children. Participating parents were divided in two groups according to the age of their children, one group for pregnancy to age 3 and the other for age 4–6.

The pilot consisted of a structured set of 15 weekly interactive training sessions, lasting two to three hours each, on the subjects of pregnancy; breastfeeding; balanced nutrition; nutritional problems and indicators; personal hygiene, including toilet training; safety and accidents; immunisations, infections and disease; equity and inclusion; communication between parents; communication with peers; reinforcing positive behaviour; 'every child has intelligence – what is your child's?'; play; critical thinking, learning and inquiry-based skills; and nursery, kindergarten and school readiness.

Together, these sessions provide a framework of concepts, skills and exercises to enhance parents' knowledge about the importance of the early years; nurture a holistic and inclusive approach towards raising children; encourage respect for children's diverse potential, skills and pace of development; develop good practice in health, nutrition, early learning and risk management; promote positive caregiving practices, minimise stress and avoid violence; improve the community's impact on children's health, education and safety; and build parents' capacity to become role models and support other parents.

'ARC has succeeded in assimilating into the Arabic discourse a holistic and integrated approach to early childhood.'

HEPPP is innovative in the Arab region because:

- it adopts a holistic, integrated and inclusive approach covering health, nutrition, early learning, social welfare and physical protection in a coherent and interactive way
- it addresses the continuum of the child's age from before birth to 6 years
- it deals with the challenges of engaging fathers and mothers as couples together as the primary caregivers and educators
- it integrates the strategic objectives of early detection, early intervention and early stimulation.

Part of the plan is to scale-up the implementation with a parent-to-parent approach by engaging selected graduate couples (to be called *sanad*<sup>3</sup>) into paid work, after providing them with additional training on facilitation, thus giving them a sense of worth as well as a modest income. In this way the numbers of beneficiaries will increase and the unit cost will decrease exponentially after several rounds of implementation.

Lessons learned from weekly experiences and discussions with parents participating in the pilot were complemented by a study which evaluated HEPPP's effectiveness using pre- and post-implementation questionnaires,

<sup>3</sup> *Sanad* is an Arabic term that translates as 'sustainer'.

focus groups with parents, and reports submitted by the trainers. The evaluation found a clear impact on participants' knowledge, practices and attitudes in most topics, and identified various ways to improve the programme. These included in each session an initial group discussion with all parents before dividing them into two working groups according to their children's age, and making sure each group had one male and one female trainer, to model gender equity to the couples participating.

## Adaptation for working with refugee families

In the meantime, the developing refugee crisis in the region made clear the need to adapt HEPPP also for parents who are refugees, internally displaced or vulnerable people in host communities. In collaboration with partners<sup>4</sup>, ARC added five more sessions to integrate an element of psychosocial care and support for the caregivers, covering mental health and well-being; depression; grief; psychosomatic disorders; and violence.

Another change to reflect operating in the refugee context was opening the programme to single parents and extended family members acting as caregivers. When both fathers and mothers were available, engaging them equally as couples was a challenge given the dominant culture, yet it is proving to be feasible and to enhance positive patterns in responsive parenting as well as gender equity practices.

The first round of implementation with refugee families was carried out between 2016 and 2018 in Lebanon (working with two NGOs, the Women Programs Association and Baraeem (Buds) Association) and Jordan (with Plan International). It involved Syrian and Palestinian refugees from Syria and parents

<sup>4</sup> These include the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the Open Society Foundation and Plan International.





from underprivileged Lebanese and Jordanian host communities, who are being made increasingly vulnerable by the influx of refugees.

In total, 110 parents were trained during the first phase of the programme: 70 across four groups in two centres in Lebanon, and 40 in Jordan across two groups in one centre. Of these, 12 graduate parents were then selected to become sanads – eight in Lebanon and four in Jordan – and were given training on basic facilitation skills. In a second phase, they trained 120 new participants using a parent-to-parent approach.

An evaluation of both phases has been carried out, consisting of three parts. First, a questionnaire with parents to gather quantitative data on four variables: parents' recent mental health state (as measured by the World Health Organization's WHO-5 Wellbeing Index); their levels of stress (using the PSI – Parental Stress Index); the disciplinary style they adopt with their child (DSQ – Disciplinary Style Questionnaire); and the child's emotional and behavioural conduct (SDQ – Socio-Emotional Status: Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire). Second, two focus group discussions (pre-implementation and post-implementation) were conducted with parents to obtain more in-depth qualitative data about changes in their knowledge and practice.

Finally, to control for potential differences in variables across groups, a 'fidelity rating' explored whether the same key messages of the project were being given to all the trainees in the same way. Overall, the evaluation tests the effectiveness of the HEPPP approach by measuring the impact on different aspects of participating parents' knowledge, attitudes and practices. At the time of writing, the data are being compiled and prepared for analysis.

## Future plans

According to the results of the evaluation, ARC's team will re-visit HEPPP to identify areas for improvement in terms of programme content, methodology and methods of delivery. ARC will also consider how to refine research tools – for example, to enable separate quantitative evaluation of mothers and fathers, more quantitative evaluation of child development using ASQs, and evaluation of retention rate.

Nonetheless, the value of the programme is already sufficiently clear that more donor agencies have stepped forward to support ARC to implement HEPPP on a larger scale. ANECD will serve as a perfect vehicle to promote scaling-up among more Arab countries, reaching refugees in new sites and developing a critical mass of families engaged with the HEPPP approach.

➔ Find this article online at <https://bit.ly/2K90Et6>

'To adapt the Health, Early learning and Protection Parenting Programme for parents who are refugees, we added sessions to integrate psychosocial care and support for caregivers.'

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# Early learning and nurturing care for children displaced by conflict and persecution

- ▷ There is a need for bold, feasible and scalable approaches to early childhood in refugee situations.
- ▷ Sesame Workshop and the IRC adapted Sesame Street for children in the Syria response region.
- ▷ With inspiring Muppet role models, the shows emphasise mutual respect and understanding.

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**Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) are embarking on a multi-year intervention to bring early learning and nurturing care to children and families affected by the civil war in Syria, with the aim of developing a framework that can be used in other humanitarian situations. The six-year-long conflict in Syria has caused massive displacement, exposing children to violence and preventing early learning opportunities that are critical to their well-being.**

Across the globe, the scale of today's refugee crisis is staggering – right now, 65 million people are displaced, and over half of all refugees are aged under 18 (UNHCR, online). The daily effects of violence and neglect put these children at high risk of experiencing 'toxic stress', a disruption of the normal neurological and biological processes critical to brain development that can lead to lifelong impairments including poor physical and mental health and cognitive deficits leading to reduced economic earnings (Britto et al., 2016). Given the number of children affected, the ultimate impacts on society will be large.

Children are remarkably resilient – the damage they have suffered can be reversed, if we reach them early (Britto et al., 2016). Despite the robust evidence pointing to the need to safeguard early childhood development in crisis contexts, however, the humanitarian system often maintains a narrow focus on survival, focusing on basic needs such as food and shelter and neglecting other critical areas: on average, for example, less than 2% of humanitarian response funding goes to education and just a small fraction of that is dedicated to early childhood interventions (UNESCO, 2015). Many children spend their entire school careers in refugee settings – refugees today are displaced for an average of 17 years, or 23 years for those internally displaced. Starting early, with interventions that promote school readiness, is critical to their chances of getting a good education.

There is therefore a great need for a bold new approach to early childhood development in refugee situations – one that is operationally feasible with existing systems, is long-term, durable, and has the potential to scale and replicate. This partnership between the non-profit Sesame Workshop and the

IRC brings together the power of the former's proven educational content and the latter's expertise in working with children and families in conflict settings. With over 80 years' experience of responding to the world's worst humanitarian crises, the IRC has made a difference to 23 million people across 40 countries.

Sesame, meanwhile, has almost 50 years' experience, across 150 countries, of creating research-based educational content tailored to children's specific needs, with *Sesame Street*'s Muppets imparting both simple and difficult lessons, always from a child's perspective. Content created through Sesame Workshop's international initiatives has been shown to have a positive impact on children's cognitive skills, learning about the world, and social reasoning and attitudes, while children's exposure to Sesame Workshop content is correlated with knowing more about topics covered in the show (Mares et al., 2015).

## Programming and multimedia content

Working together, Sesame Workshop and the IRC aim to deliver a life-changing experience for millions of Syrian, Jordanian, Iraqi, and Lebanese children, from birth to age 8, that will transform their language, early reading, maths, and social-emotional skills. The intervention will address the specific needs of these children through programming and multimedia content:

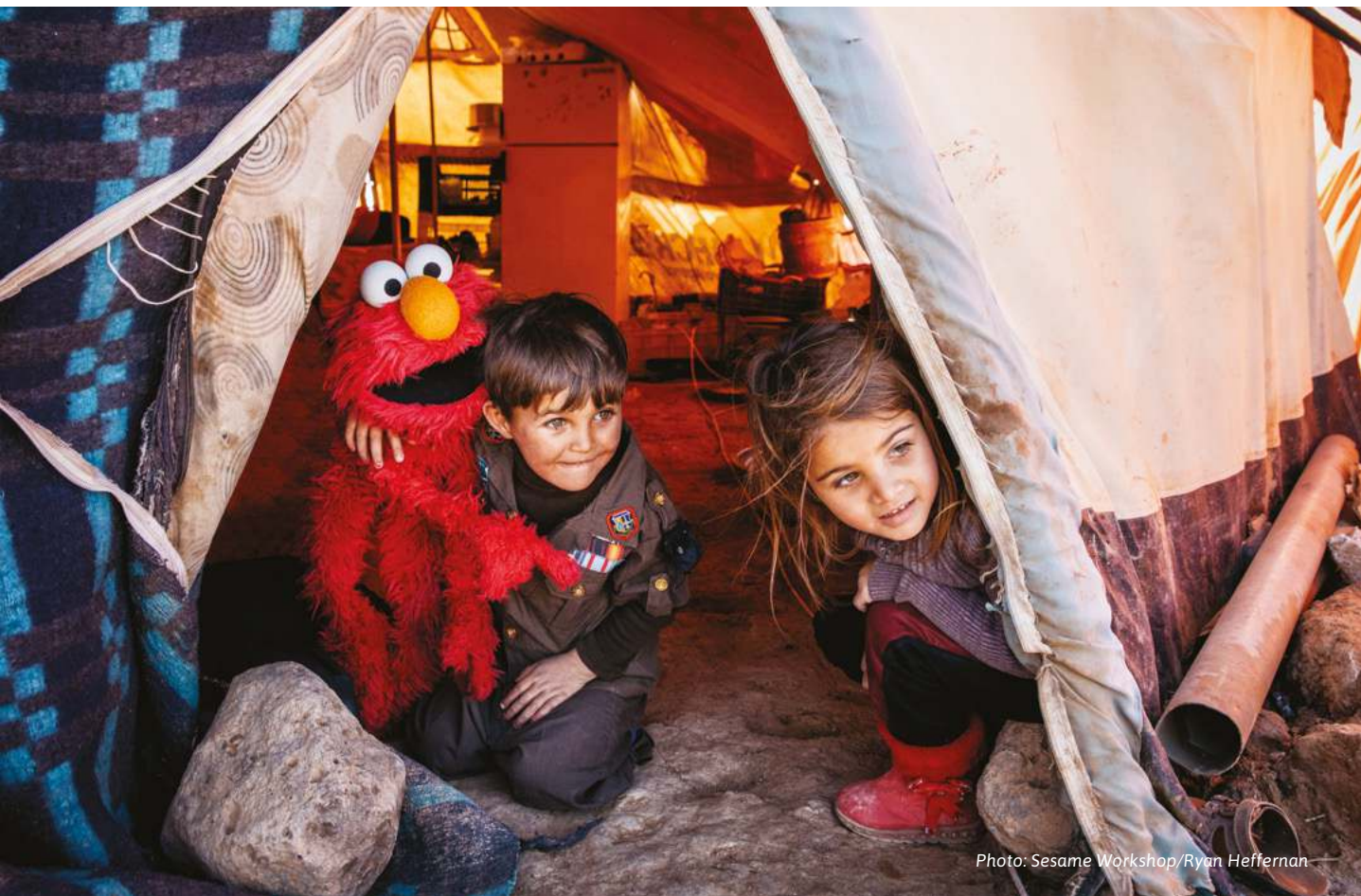


Photo: Sesame Workshop/Ryan Heffernan

‘Children are remarkably resilient – the damage they have suffered can be reversed, if we reach them early.’

- new broadcast television shows with inspiring Muppet role models, tailored to reflect the unique experiences of refugee children with an emphasis on early learning and mutual respect and understanding within displaced communities, and between displaced and host communities
- materials that support parents and caregivers in promoting nurturing care, healthy development and deepening learning experiences materials to promote early learning in formal and non-formal education and childcare centres
- training resources for service providers working with young children and their caregivers.

The intervention aims to be intense enough to be life-changing, but cost-effective enough to be scalable. It will create an evergreen library of global content to be disseminated through the IRC’s existing partner networks, including schools, community centres, social protection programmes and health centres. It will disseminate content widely via mobile, broadcast, and print media, and leverage the wider network of service providers supporting refugee communities in the Syrian response region. It will reach families where they are, with content that addresses children’s immediate needs and builds a strong foundation for their future well-being. Once the model has been tested, it would be open for others to implement in order to scale beyond IRC’s current working areas.

Formative research and initial testing of existing Arabic-language Sesame content, working with the IRC team in Jordan, has been funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation and the Open Society Foundation. The initiative is also one of eight semi-finalists for the MacArthur Foundation’s ‘100&Change’ grant (MacArthur Foundation, online). The pilot phase will allow us in the IRC and the Sesame Workshop to create an educational framework that focuses on the needs of young children and caregivers affected by displacement and will also help to inform a broader regional initiative as we move forward. Beyond the pilot phase, our approach and the research we generate as part of the larger initiative will inform and reshape services being offered in the wider humanitarian system.

Research topics will include, for example, how young children and families respond to and engage with the content and materials, which delivery platforms are most effective, and how behaviour change and learning outcomes are impacted by multimedia materials in these settings. We will invest heavily in impact evaluation by integrating a randomised controlled trial in the implementation phase. This trial will assess the intervention’s impact on physical development, literacy and numeracy knowledge, and social-emotional skills. The research we gather will help inform a blueprint for working in future humanitarian crises – creating a framework that can be replicated in other contexts, for generations to come.

#### **Further details**

More information is available at: [sesameworkshop.org/refugees](https://sesameworkshop.org/refugees)

➔ Find this article online at <https://bit.ly/2NAcC0N>

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# Providing education opportunities for Syria's youngest refugees

- ▷ UNESCO is promoting early childhood education as part of its response to the Syrian crisis.
- ▷ Young children in refugee settings need flexible, innovative and stimulating interventions.
- ▷ Host country governments should recognise non-formal education in refugee contexts.

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**Hundreds of thousands of young children have had their education interrupted by the ongoing civil war in Syria. UNESCO Beirut sees quality early childhood education as a force for reconstruction, peace building and giving a sense of hope to young refugee children and their families. This article explains the importance of a flexible approach, being willing to deliver education in various settings and using various personnel, and the need to integrate non-formal education for refugees with formal education systems in host countries.**

War and conflict have been described as 'development in reverse' (Collier, 2007), with their impact on countries and people getting worse as crises are prolonged. As the conflict in Syria enters its sixth year, a significant proportion of young children already live in conflict-affected zones – and, with no resolution in sight, their numbers are likely to increase. The crisis has forced around 4.8 million people to leave Syria in search of a safe haven in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and Iraq. More than half of the refugee population is under 18 years of age, including an estimated 880,000 children under 5 years old (data retrieved in May 2016 from UNHCR sources).

The consequences of conflict for refugees are well documented and the negative impacts on young children are known to be numerous, affecting all dimensions of their development. These include losing or being separated from their parents or caregivers, social and emotional neglect, physical injury, loss of the home environment and disruption of daily routines, hunger, lack of hygiene and healthcare, and a high risk of missing out on educational opportunities. In Syria, a whole generation is at risk of falling behind and losing hope; education has been always highly valued by Syrian families, and it is painful for parents to see their children missing out on this opportunity.

Failing to ensure access to quality education opportunities has an immensely negative impact on the future and well-being of young refugees. Education can save and sustain the lives of young children and their families, offering physical, cognitive and psychosocial protection when delivered in safe, neutral spaces. Education restores children's routine and gives them hope for the future; it can also serve as a channel both for meeting other basic humanitarian needs and communicating vital messages that promote safety and well-being.



As the United Nations' lead agency for education, UNESCO through its Beirut office is playing an active role in promoting early childhood education as a part of its response to the Syrian crisis. Advocacy efforts, policy formulation, strengthening the resilience of systems, and capacity building to support caregivers and education personnel are among the top priorities for UNESCO's intervention.

## Flexibility, innovation and stimulation

What kind of education programmes do young children need in refugee settings? The key words here are flexibility, innovation and stimulation. While early childhood programmes for refugees should meet the minimum standards for quality set out in the International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)'s document *Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, response, recovery* (INEE, 2010), they can do this through a variety of settings. They can be implemented in formal education settings, temporary classrooms, mobile



schools, community centres, in a tent, under a tree, at a health clinic, in a social development centre, or in a child's home. In times of crisis, education services can be delivered by teachers, community workers, social assistance, volunteers, or any trained personnel.

During the early stages of a conflict, it may not be practical to implement early childhood education programmes in a standalone approach. Instead, they can be integrated through larger programmes to provide young children with a comprehensive package that responds to their holistic needs.

UNESCO advocates for early childhood programmes to be implemented by various actors, whether governmental, non-governmental or local organisations. UNESCO Beirut is working with a group of NGOs in Lebanon to enhance their delivery mechanisms and build their capacity to offer quality education in the most difficult circumstances – training teachers and education personnel on innovative solutions that ensure the right to quality early education and relevant learning in a manner that is inclusive and respectful to the needs of learners.

‘What kind of education programmes do young children need in refugee settings? The key words here are flexibility, innovation and stimulation.’

We encourage early childhood education and care programmes to be designed to fit the context and environment of the Syrian child and his or her family. They should be implemented in a safe and friendly space and must include activities that stimulate the child's cognitive, social-emotional and language development. In addition to providing literacy and numeracy activities, there should be recreational opportunities for learning, including play, art, music, drama and sport. It is of the utmost importance to deliver programmes, as far as possible, in the mother-tongue language of the child.

## Non-formal education

To integrate refugee children who are unable to attend formal education in host countries, NGOs have made efforts to offer non-formal education (NFE). NFE schools have been established next to refugee camps and a large number of refugee children are now enrolled in non-formal programmes. Unfortunately, host country governments still do not encourage, recognise or accredit this kind of learning – although the issue is coming onto their agenda.

UNESCO Beirut has initiated dialogue with several governments in the region to advance an ambitious initiative for developing regional and national policy frameworks to regularise and recognise NFE. We are making policymakers aware that learning outcomes acquired in non-formal settings represent a rich source of human capital: international experience shows that the complementary nature of NFE – especially for young children – adds strength to the education and training system.

The formal education sector needs to value the things refugees learn outside of formal settings; NFE, especially for young children, can be used as a stepping

stone, a preparatory platform or an entry door to formal education. NFE can also include alternative enabling programmes that integrate several sources of support for young children, including parenting education, psychosocial support and counselling. It is hoped that our work will contribute to create greater awareness, consensus and acceptance among key actors to design formal and non-formal education and training based on a better understanding of the needs of the refugees.

➔ Find this article online at <https://bit.ly/32IC2Ok>

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# Parenting in times of war: supporting caregivers and children in crisis

- ▷ *The IRC runs culturally adapted parenting programmes in eight war-affected countries.*
- ▷ *In Syria, Families Make the Difference works with caregivers of children aged 0 to 8.*
- ▷ *While impact assessments are positive, more research is needed on effectiveness.*

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**Humanitarian interventions to support and guide parents and caregivers in times of war can mitigate the negative effects of violence and chaos on children and promote their resilience and development. This article highlights recent findings from the International Rescue Committee's parenting programmes in Syria, underscoring the importance of such programmes not only in strengthening caregiving practices but also in addressing the psychological needs of parents.**

Harrowing accounts of the multidimensional effects of war on children point to the long-term impact of violence, displacement and terror, and the threat it poses to the future peace, prosperity and well-being of global society. In December 2014, an estimated 230 million children, or one in ten, were living in a country affected by armed conflict (UNICEF, 2014). At the start of the fifth brutal year of the Syrian conflict, an estimated 14 million children living in the region have been affected by conflicts in Syria and Iraq (UNICEF, 2015). Global analyses of the geopolitical climate provide a pessimistic outlook for the years to come, as the World Economic Forum's Global Risks 2015 report ranked 'interstate conflict with regional consequences' as the most likely global risk for the period of 2015–2025 (World Economic Forum, 2015). Considering the scope and severity of global conflicts, there is an urgent need for evidence-based strategies to protect children and families from the traumatic impact of war and to reduce the intergenerational transmission of violence.

Children are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of war, as exposure to violence, political instability, degraded infrastructure, displacement and fractured social systems are associated with high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety disorders (Barbarin et al., 2001; Attanayake et al., 2009). Young children are also highly sensitive to ambient violence, and the trauma they endure when learning of a family member's violent experience or witnessing violence is analogous to the trauma of directly being victims (Barbarin et al., 2001). Evidence indicates that parents and caregivers can help build children's resilience and support children's health and development through nurturing, responsive and consistent care (Shonkoff et al., 2012; Masten and Monn, 2015). Yet for adults living in times of war, their ability to provide nurturing care is often hampered by their own experiences of trauma and adversity, which can result in an increased incidence of children's

exposure to interfamilial conflict, violence or emotional neglect (Osofsky, 1999; Barbarin *et al.*, 2001; Galovski and Lyons, 2004; Betancourt, 2015).

## War's effects on parents and children

The psychological and emotional well-being of caregivers serves as an important predictor for the physical, social and emotional health of war-affected children (Dybdahl, 2001). Beginning *in utero*, maternal stress and depression can affect the child's growth and development, and are associated with childhood undernutrition, stunting, and negative impacts on children's cognitive, physical and socio-emotional development (Thabet *et al.*, 2009; Feldman *et al.*, 2013). While the precise mechanisms that link maternal distress and depression with children's developmental outcomes are the subject of ongoing investigation, evidence suggests that the cross-placental transmission of stress hormones causes a disruption in the development of the fetal prefrontal cortex and stress response system (Van den Bergh *et al.*, 2005). The mechanisms for the postnatal transmission of stress from caregiver to child are potentially linked to the manifestation of maladaptive caregiving practices, as high levels of anxiety, stress and depression are associated with unresponsive, neglectful or abusive caregiving practices, and can result in low levels of parent-child attachment (McMahon *et al.*, 2006; Field, 2010). In turn, the absence of consistent, nurturing care can have negative impacts on the child's epigenetic processes and neurological development with long-term implications for intellectual, physical and socio-emotional well-being (Belsky and de Haan, 2011; Shonkoff *et al.*, 2012).

'The psychological and emotional well-being of caregivers serves as an important predictor for the physical, social and emotional health of war-affected children.'

Exposure to violence can have multiple deleterious effects on parenting, as it is associated with increased incidence of marital tensions, domestic violence, stress, depression, harsh discipline and punitive parenting styles (Dybdahl, 2001; Galovski and Lyons, 2004; Betancourt, 2015). A caregiver's response to violence is also associated with young children's behavioural adjustment. For instance, in South African families exposed to community violence, the mother's level of distress was significantly associated with 6-year-old children's symptoms of attention deficits, aggression, anxiety and depression (Barbarin *et al.*, 2001). Identifying strategies to mitigate the negative effects of war on parenting has the potential to improve children's well-being and to strengthen children's resilience (Betancourt and Khan, 2008). A growing body of evidence of effective parenting interventions in low-resource contexts identifies key programme elements that are associated with increases in positive parenting practices, parental knowledge, parent-child attachment, and decreases in harsh physical and psychological discipline. These include:

- the use of adult learning strategies that draw on Bandura's Social Learning Theory and employ active demonstrations, collaborative discussions, positive reinforcement, and home visits that engage caregivers and children in interactive activities
- comprehensive training of staff and para-professionals, using an evidenced-based curriculum



- programme content that recognises and builds on existing positive parenting practices
  - community support systems to strengthen social cohesion
- (Engle et al., 2011; Mejia et al., 2012; Aboud et al., 2013; Yousafzai et al., 2014).

For caregivers living in conflict and post-conflict settings, key programme elements also include trauma-focused psychosocial support for parents and caregivers, along with specific content that addresses daily stressors experienced by caregivers (Miller and Rasmussen, 2010; Betancourt, 2015), and content that aims to strengthen caregivers' responses to children's trauma, to aid recovery and healing.





Building on the insights generated through past decades of early childhood development and parenting research, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) has been working to reduce violence against children in the home and improve the developmental outcomes of children in crisis through parenting programmes since 2009. The IRC's parenting programmes have expanded across eight countries and include workforce-strengthening initiatives in Tanzania designed to support a new cadre of trained social workers to facilitate parenting programmes at scale. The programmes typically include ten two-hour sessions for small groups of caregivers led by a pair of trained facilitators. The curriculum draws on evidence-based parenting programmes and is grounded in social learning theory, using demonstrations, positive reinforcement and coaching to develop and strengthen positive parenting practices. Randomised impact evaluations conducted with research partners from Duke University and the Harvard School of Public Health have demonstrated that the IRC's parenting programmes confer significant benefits on the lives of post-conflict and displaced families in Burundi, Liberia and on the Thai-Burmese border. For example, among the 270 families with children aged 3–7 years that participated in the Parents Make the Difference programme in Liberia, caregivers reported an average decrease of 56% in the use of harsh physical punishment and a 29% decrease in psychological punishment (Sim et al., 2014). Significant improvements among participants were also detected in the quality of caregiver–child interactions and the use of positive behaviour management practices.

‘Caregivers reported an average decrease of 56% in the use of harsh physical punishment and a 29% decrease in psychological punishment.’

Guided by past experiences, and learning from the implementation and research of parenting programmes in post-conflict settings, the IRC has dedicated time and resources to the development of culturally adapted parenting programmes to respond to the needs of caregivers that have endured the trauma of war. Focusing on examples of the IRC's parenting programmes in conflict settings, the following section provides a brief overview of key lessons from these programmes in the Syrian response region. While the preliminary findings that have emerged are not part of randomised controlled trials, they provide insights into the process of adapting and implementing family interventions in crisis contexts that may be used to inform future implementations of wartime parenting programmes.

## Parenting programmes in Syria

During the IRC's initial rapid assessment of protection needs in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Northern Syria in 2013, parents and caregivers reported high levels of stress. Focus group discussions with parents in northern Syria revealed that the parents felt that their heightened levels of stress led them to lose patience with their children, which resulted in a higher frequency of parents practising abusive and neglectful behaviours toward their children. As one parent shared, ‘because we are in a state of psychological distress, we beat our children. Before we didn't, but now we do.’ Family visits conducted by the IRC child protection team underscored the high levels of stress experienced by children, not only resulting from the experience of crisis (loss of homes,

friends, education, etc.), but also due to the lack of parental support. These observations were confirmed in Lebanon by the results of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire conducted with 226 randomly sampled children aged 3 to 17 from three of the Lebanese Governorates where the IRC operates that had enrolled in psychosocial support services; these results found 50% of the children to be at risk of developing mental health disorders, with significant long-term implications for children who do not receive treatment (IRC, 2015a).

Responding to the urgent need for psycho-social support services for caregivers and children, the IRC began implementing the Families Make the Difference parenting programme in the Syrian response region in 2014. The programme includes 10 culturally adapted sessions based on cognitive, developmental and behavioural theory that aim to strengthen caregivers' resilience and psycho-social well-being, and to encourage positive caregiving practices. The group-based programme targets caregivers of children aged 0 to 8 years and was adapted from the Parents Make the Difference programme, implemented in Liberia, to fit the cultural context of the Middle East. Additional sessions were developed to respond to caregivers' stress and to strengthen children's resilience in the midst of conflict and displacement.

Assessments were conducted before and after participation in the Families Make the Difference programme with a convenience sample of 74 female caregivers across three regions in Lebanon and 66 in two camps in northern Syria. These found that the majority of parents showed an improvement in caregiving practices. After participating in the ten sessions, caregivers reported significant increases in the use of positive coping strategies, such as setting aside time with children, processing feelings by writing or talking to other adults, or using coping strategies such as writing, exercising or deep breathing (an average increase of 55% in Lebanon and of 72% in Syria<sup>1</sup>) (IRC, 2015a, 2015b). Using the child discipline module of UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), significant decreases were also detected in the self-reported use of violent discipline, which is a sub-scale that includes psychological punishment, physical punishment and severe physical punishment (a 37% decrease in Lebanon and a 72% decrease in Syria<sup>2</sup>). The programmes also found significant decreases in the prevalence of negative feelings, and increases in caregiver resilience. At the same time, the limitations of the study design, such as the lack of control groups and the use of self-report rather than more objective measures, restrict the ability to draw causal inferences regarding the effects of the programme; nonetheless, these preliminary findings point to the potential role of programmes that address parent's well-being by fostering positive support networks and strengthening caregiver skills.

While the parenting modules show promise as an effective strategy for strengthening caregiver skills and coping mechanisms, the results from the pre- and post-programme assessments on caregivers' psychological well-being and sense of parenting competence indicate that further efforts are needed to restore caregivers' sense of hopefulness and feelings of empowerment

1 On average, the reported use of the three types of coping strategies at baseline was 51% in Lebanon and 53% in Syria. After participation in the programme, the average use of the three types of coping strategies was 79% in Lebanon and 92% in Syria.

2 In Lebanon, the combined total of self-reported violent disciplinary techniques used by caregivers in the month before beginning the programme was 241, which dropped to 152 after the programme. In Syria, the combined total of violent disciplinary techniques used by caregivers in the month prior to participation was 239, and dropped to 67 after the programme. In both surveys, caregivers were permitted to identify more than one type of disciplinary technique used.

in providing for their children. As an example of one response to these observations, field staff offered doll-making workshops to teach caregivers techniques for creating dolls and toys using locally available resources. Such workshops offer additional opportunities for caregivers to build social cohesion and to help rekindle their feelings of personal agency in being able to provide their child with basic play materials.

## Conclusion

As highlighted by decades of research from the fields of developmental psychology, epigenetics and neurology, nurturing, consistent and responsive care during early childhood is an essential human need that has significant implications for society's future health and well-being. Ensuring that young children receive sufficient care should therefore be an essential component of any humanitarian response. The work of the IRC and other organisations involved in parenting programmes has shown that parents and caregivers living in adversity are often struggling to provide support for their children, that they are interested in participating in group-based and home visiting programmes, and that parenting programmes can offer a promising strategy towards improving caregiving practices. At the same time, practical experiences from programme implementation point to the important links between caregivers' psychological well-being, caregiving practices, and children's developmental outcomes in humanitarian settings, which are often not addressed in existing parenting programmes. While existing research on these associations provides a theoretical foundation for developing responsive programming to address the needs of parents and children in wartime, there is a dearth of rigorous studies from conflict settings to shed light on effective intervention strategies.

'Further efforts are needed to restore caregivers' sense of hopefulness and feelings of empowerment in providing for their children.'

Focused investigations of the impact of violence and war-related stress on parenting behaviours and the implications for children's developmental outcomes could help shape humanitarian interventions seeking to tailor programmes to the needs of war-affected populations. Additionally, research on the effectiveness of contextually adapted behaviour change techniques, used in parenting interventions to increase responsive caregiving practices, reduce violence and promote children's resilience, would provide further guidance for the development of wartime parenting interventions. By increasing support for and attention to the issue of parenting in contexts of war, researchers, practitioners, donors, policymakers, communities, caregivers and children can work together to change the developmental trajectory of millions of children at risk of poor outcomes and improve the future health and well-being of war-torn communities.

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