# MOVING MINDS ALLIANCE

Born Learning: Expanding learning opportunities for the youngest children in crisis settings

IMAGE: Courtesty of JZA photography – Amna

Children have unlimited potential, but the most critical window of time to nurture that potential has limits. That's because the vast majority of brain growth takes place during the first five years of life (see Figure 1), offering a critical window of opportunity for intervention that is never again replicated throughout the lifecourse (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2007).

FIGURE 1: Sensitive Periods in Early Brain Development (Adapted from National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2007)
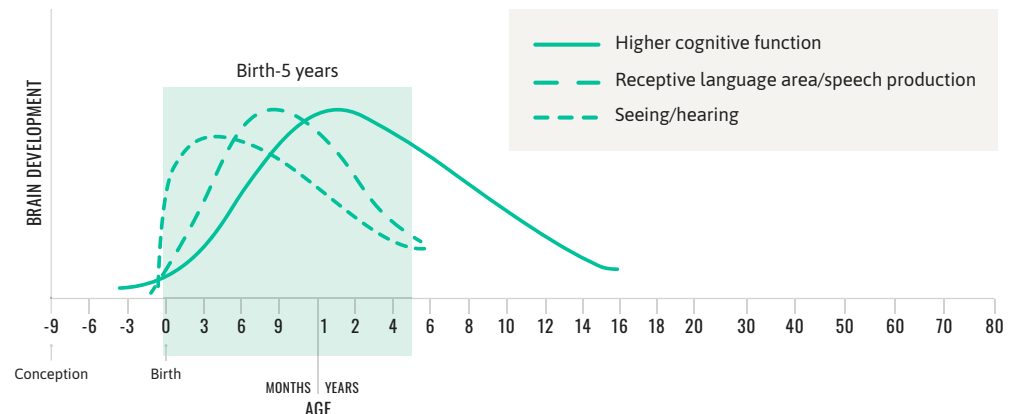
Source: Charles A. Nelson, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, 2000.

> From the moment an infant takes their first breath, they are learning, exploring and growing.

From the moment an infant takes their first breath, they are learning, exploring and growing. How the child develops from there depends on their real-world experiences, including in their immediate environment and through their relationships with parents and caregivers. Brain development occurs as the child interacts with and makes sense of the world around them. While research continues to uncover how early experiences and environments shape children's present and future, this much is certain: **the early years represent a unique, malleable period of human development and a finite window for high-impact investment.**

Nurturing care for early childhood development (ECD) is widely recognized as a smart investment that delivers outsized impact and returns – up to 13% per year – through improved education, health and economic outcomes. Yet despite growing evidence that the early years are the most cost-effective opportunity to reduce the effects of poverty, inequality and trauma, millions of children born into crisis and conflict lack access to the essential elements of nurturing care, including early learning opportunities (Zubairi and Rose 2017). Targeted investment and scale-up of quality, inclusive and equitable learning opportunities for young children and families in crisis and conflict will pay off for individuals, families and society now and in the longer term.

While recent global initiatives have rightly prioritized quality pre-primary education as a critical investment with potential for high returns, there has been relatively little consideration of how the education sector can support learning *before* children reach preschool age. **To catalyze a true transformation in how education is delivered in humanitarian response and realize every child's fundamental right to education, we must nurture learning during the foremost window of opportunity that occurs in the earliest years, from birth through preschool** (Fredman et al. 2022). This brief makes the case for 1) expanding opportunities to learn in humanitarian settings for the very youngest children age 0-2, and 2) expanding access to quality early childhood education (ECE) in emergencies for children age 3-6.[1] Priority actions for cross-sectoral collaboration and promising program examples are provided to point the way forward.

A period of great opportunity and great vulnerability

In the earliest stages of development, children are most receptive to external influences, both positive and negative. Providing appropriate stimulation and sensory input in the context of stable, responsive relationships helps to build a healthy brain, ensuring a strong foundation for lifelong learning, behavior and well-being. To promote early learning in humanitarian settings and enable young children to make the best start in life, the Nurturing Care Framework recommends that:
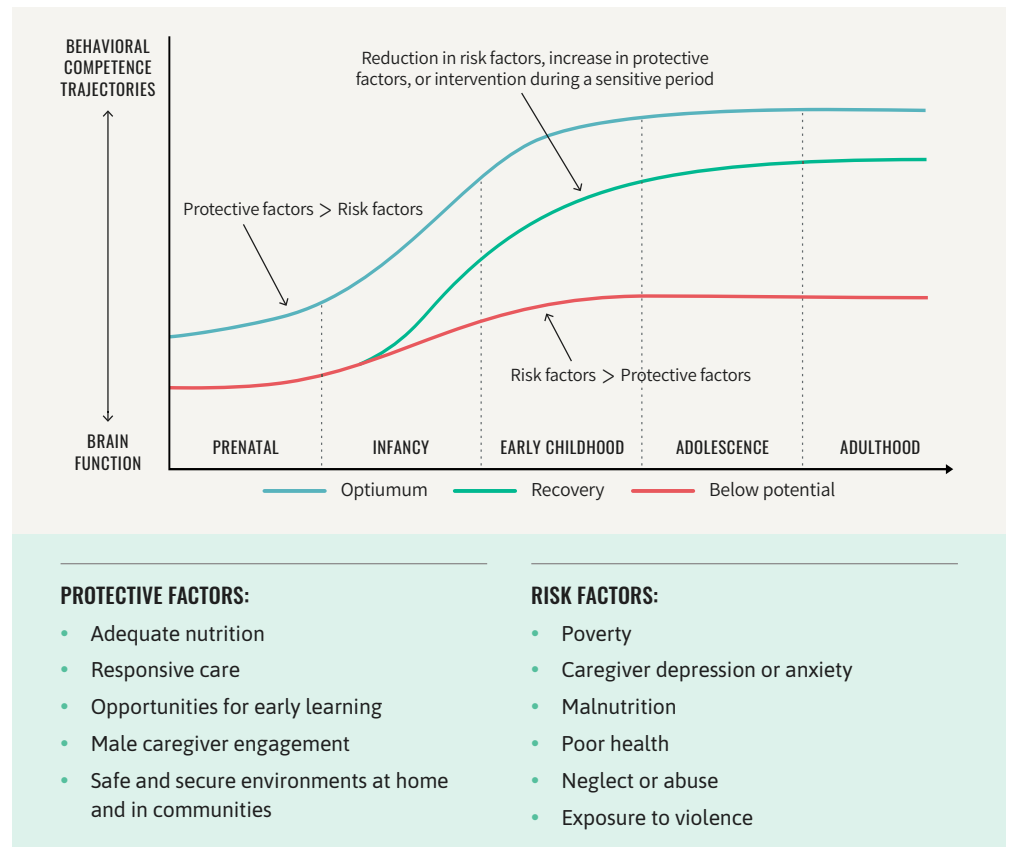
> All infants and children engage in early learning activities with their parents and other caregivers during the first three years of life.

> Parents and other caregivers be supported to engage their infants and young children in early learning.

> Safe and inclusive play and learning spaces be established for young children and caregivers in community centers, clinics, homes, and other designated structures (Solon et al. 2020).

[1] Note: In this brief, "early stimulation" and "early learning" refer to children's development of skills and capacities prior to school entry (age 0-2), while "early childhood education (ECE)"—also known as pre-primary, preschool, kindergarten or nursery—refers to the initial pre-primary stage of organized instruction, often center- or school-based (from age 3 to age of entry into primary).

FIGURE 2: Risk and protective factors affect developmental trajectories

PROTECTIVE FACTORS:
- Adequate nutrition
- Responsive care
- Opportunities for early learning
- Male caregiver engagement
- Safe and secure environments at home and in communities

RISK FACTORS:
- Poverty
- Caregiver depression or anxiety
- Malnutrition
- Poor health
- Neglect or abuse
- Exposure to violence

Source: World Bank 2018

> "Children with stunted bodies and brains attempting to compensate for developmental gaps face daunting odds as they start formal schooling."
>
> – WORLD BANK 2018

On the other hand, experiences of severe deprivation and chronic, excessive stress during this time, in the absence of nurturing, protective relationships, can become toxic to early brain development, leading to emotional difficulties, disruptive behaviors and impaired cognitive functioning (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2014).[2]

For children growing up in crisis settings, efforts to increase protective factors around the child while minimizing risk factors have greater value and long-term impact during the early years than interventions later on (see Figure 2 above). "Children with stunted bodies and brains attempting to compensate for developmental gaps face daunting odds as they start formal schooling because of the sequential nature of development, coupled with the sharp decrease in brain malleability after a child's sixth birthday" (World Bank 2018).

For better or for worse, children's early experiences have a tremendous influence on their holistic development. There are many ways the Education in Emergencies sector can contribute to ensure that the positive and protective experiences outweigh or mitigate against the negative ones, so that children are better prepared to take full advantage of the promise of education when they enroll in school.

Early learning and education needs are largely unmet in emergencies

Around the world, more than 250 million children (43%) under age 5 in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) including humanitarian contexts are at risk of not reaching their development potential, often due to adversities in the early years (Lu et al. 2016). According to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2019), children under age 5 make up 16% of the world's forcibly displaced population. That's 4 million young children globally whose development is threatened by compounding risks in severely adverse environments. Without

[2] To learn more about the impact of severe stress on brain development, see "Young Children in Crisis Settings #2: The developing brain in crisis contexts" in the Moving Minds Alliance Resource Kit.

> **In emergencies, the siloed humanitarian architecture with limited coordination across sectors poses a significant barrier to the delivery of quality early learning opportunities and education.**

GRAPHIC: Key Facts on Early Childhood Education Globally

responsive, protective relationships and adequate stimulation, the negative impacts of growing up in humanitarian contexts can lead to long-term physical, social and economic problems. In particular, inadequate opportunities for early learning can hinder the development of foundational skills, placing millions of young children at a disadvantage before they even reach school age, and further exacerbating the global learning crisis (UNICEF 2019; World Bank 2018).
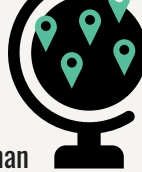
In emergencies, the siloed humanitarian architecture with limited coordination across sectors poses a significant barrier to the delivery of quality early learning opportunities and education. The result is a gap in services during the most sensitive period of human development between birth and the start of formal education, typically around age 5 or 6. As no single humanitarian sector or cluster prioritizes support for stimulation and learning in the earliest years, the resulting fragmentation leaves crisis-affected families and caregivers on their own to plug the gap.

The persistent gap in humanitarian investment, implementation, research and evidence in the early years means we know very little about the early learning opportunities currently available to the youngest children (age 0-2) in crisis settings, or which interventions are effective, for whom and in which contexts (Murphy et al. 2018). Recent analyses commissioned by the Moving Minds Alliance revealed that the nurturing care domains of responsive care and early learning are often left out of humanitarian and refugee response plans altogether, and thus continue to go unsupported and unfunded.

Within the education sector, pre-primary education is increasingly recognized as an effective way to improve learning preparedness for primary school, while having a positive impact on school completion, academic outcomes, emotional skills and even lifelong health and earnings (Zubairi et al. 2019). Still, government investments tend to prioritize later periods of human development. Although 193 countries committed to deliver ECE to all children by 2030 under SDG 4 (see box on SDG 4.2 on page 7), action is still lagging: only 38 countries currently provide free, compulsory pre-primary education (Zubairi and Rose 2017). Other global data points on access, equality and funding to ECE reveal a stark global divide between the haves and have-nots.
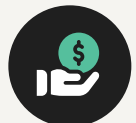

50% of the world's pre-primary-age children–at least 175m–are not enrolled in pre-primary education.

Across 64 countries, the poorest children are **7x less likely** to attend ECE programs than children from the wealthiest families.

Girls in crisis-affected countries are far less likely to attend pre-primary school than girls in non-crisis-affected LMICs.

>80% of children in high-income countries are attending pre-primary education.

>80% of children in low-income countries are denied access.

<1% of the global education aid budget goes to pre-primary education.

Only **6%** of domestic education budgets globally were allocated to pre-primary education in 2017.

For 2020-2021, refugee enrollment in pre-primary education was only **42%**

Only **50%** of the pre-primary teachers in low-income countries are trained.

Countries affected by emergencies are home to nearly a **1/4** of the world's pre-primary-age population, but... **only 1 in 3 children** in those countries are enrolled in preschool.

Sources: INEE 2021; UNHCR 2022; UNICEF 2019; Zubairi and Rose 2018; Zubairi et al. 2019

> "
> Starting behind in the early years means staying behind — for individual children and for an education system as a whole.
>
> — OECD 2020

Early learning is a win-win for the education sector

All humanitarian sectors can help to transform the early learning experiences of young children in crisis, but the Education in Emergencies sector is particularly well positioned with technical expertise, mechanisms and structures that can be leveraged to promote early learning starting from birth. **Expanding efforts to support early learning for the youngest and most marginalized children before they reach school age is in many ways a "win-win" for the education sector, yielding positive impacts across many key education objectives** (see below).

Conversely, neglecting to support early learning for children in humanitarian settings leads to poorer education outcomes and attainment in the longer term, reinforcing inequality between groups and undermining the right to education. Inequalities in access to learning emerge early in life — before children enter school — and continue to amplify over time in the absence of appropriate countermeasures, which are more difficult and expensive than prevention early on. **Failure to prioritize and invest in early learning is a persistent blindspot in humanitarian response that jeopardizes SDG 4 as well as many other SDGs related to poverty, health, gender, equality and peace** (Woodhead 2016).

Proven benefits of early learning and education

Prioritizing quality early learning for young children and families in humanitarian settings is an investment in...

Foundational learning

Sources: J-PAL 2020; Zubairi and Rose 2019; UNICEF 2019

- Early childhood stimulation for children age 0-3 can increase the quality and quantity of play opportunities in home environments and improve children's cognitive development.
- Children who receive pre-primary education do consistently better in mathematics, science and reading, even after accounting for socio-economic factors.
- Children who attend a quality preschool program start primary school with stronger social skills, larger vocabularies, better number sense and curiosity to learn more.
- Quality ECE and learning through play also build social and emotional skills, such as collaboration, self-regulation, critical thinking and motivation.

School readiness

Sources: Global Partnership for Education 2019; UNESCO 2021

- Preschool-educated children are more likely to enter primary school on time and less likely to drop out or repeat grades.
- Collaboration between the family, early learning sites and elementary schools can help prepare and support transitions from preschool to primary, ensuring knowledge about the child's needs are transferred and inclusive services are in place.

Socio-economic and gender equality

Sources: OECD 2020; Plan International and Promundo 2021; UNESCO 2007; UNESCO GEMR 2021; UNICEF 2019; Zubairi and Rose 2017

- Children from poor households often lack stimulating home environments, but positive early learning experiences can help children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds catch up to their more advantaged peers, enabling a fairer chance along their educational journey.
- Deprivations in early learning impact cumulatively on children's long-term outcomes. But quality ECE programs reduce inequality within education systems and narrow early achievement gaps between children from disadvantaged households and their wealthier peers.
- When young children attend pre-primary school or affordable daycare, their caregivers are free to pursue income-generating activities. As women typically shoulder the burden of care, children's access to pre-primary increases women's earnings and empowerment, facilitating the upward mobility of both generations.
- Similarly, access to preschool enables adolescent caregivers and older siblings to exercise their own right to education, removing a barrier to girls' education and helping to reduce gender disparities.
- Engaging male caregivers can improve familial relations, mobilize men to better support their partners and provide the socioemotional benefits of growing up with multiple nurturing caregivers.
- Gender transformative practices, curriculum, materials and training in early childhood learning and education can help challenge entrenched biases and stereotypes.[3]

Inclusion

Sources: UNESCO 2021; UNESCO GEMR 2021

- Developmental monitoring and screening can be used to identify young children at risk for developmental difficulties so they can receive appropriate services or referrals as early as possible.
- Inclusion of newcomer children in national early learning systems facilitates acquisition of the host country language as well as social integration of children and families.
- Inclusive early learning curricula that reflect all children's abilities, identities, languages, and worldviews can help them feel valued and that they belong.

Protection

Sources: IRC 2014; Jeong et al. 2021; Landers 1998; Nemiro et al. 2022; Bendini and Devercelli 2022

- Quality early learning and education programs play a vital protective role by providing a secondary caregiving and learning environment that complements and supports the family.
- Additional protective elements of quality early learning and education environments include opportunities to learn and play, feel safe and access other essential services, such as nutrition and links to health and social welfare services.
- Parenting programs for caregivers with young children can improve caregiver well-being and caregiver-child interactions, reduce domestic violence and the use of harsh punishment in the home, and increase the use of positive discipline.

[3] To learn more about how quality ECD services can help close the gender divide, see "Young Children in Crisis Settings #4: How early childhood development in emergencies promotes gender equality" in the Moving Minds Alliance Resource Kit.

Well-being	• Access to safe and responsive early learning and education environments can improve mental health and resilience in children who have been exposed to war, disaster and displacement, restoring a much-needed sense of routine and normality.
Sources: Nemiro et al. 2022; OECD 2018; UNICEF 2020; UNESCO 2020/1; UNICEF 2017	• Early learning and education sets individuals on a path toward physical health and well-being in adulthood.
	• Playful learning activities benefit children as well as adults, encouraging caregivers to engage in responsive interactions while also strengthening children's resilience.
Social cohesion	• Early childhood settings are often the first place young children encounter and learn about differences among people. Inclusive settings offer opportunities for participation and interaction with socially diverse groups.
	• Early learning programs that recognize diversity as an asset and promote pro-social behavior and values such as tolerance, inclusion and empathy can foster reconciliation and social cohesion, contributing to more peaceful and stable societies.
Sources: ECPC 2018; UNICEF 2015; UNESCO 2021	• By bringing caregivers together from different cultural backgrounds—such as refugee and host communities—with a shared focus on child well-being, inclusive and conflict-sensitive early childhood settings can serve as a platform for reducing violence and promoting peace.
Stronger education systems	• Children who have attended pre-primary are more likely to enter primary school on time, less likely to drop out or repeat grades, and more likely to complete primary and secondary school.
Sources: UNESCO GEMR 2021; UNICEF 2019	• Quality pre-primary education makes education systems more effective and efficient, ultimately helping each country meet its goals for primary, secondary and higher education.

Early learning and education in SDG 4

TARGET 4·2

EQUAL ACCESS TO QUALITY PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION

The importance of ECD as a necessary component of global and national development was recognized through inclusion in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Target 4.2 of SDG 4 on quality education calls for all children to have access to quality early learning opportunities by 2030, with indicators to measure the proportion of children aged 24-59 months who are developmentally on track in learning, and the proportion of children under 5 years of age experiencing positive and stimulating home learning environments.

> **TARGET 4.2:**
> By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education

GLOBAL INDICATORS:

- **4.2.1** – Proportion of children aged 24-59 months who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being, by sex
- **4.2.2** – Participation rate in organized learning (one year before the official primary entry age), by sex

THEMATIC INDICATORS:

- **4.2.3** – Percentage of children under 5 years of age experiencing positive and stimulating home learning environments
- **4.2.4** – Gross early childhood education enrolment ratio in (a) pre-primary education and (b) early childhood educational development
- **4.2.5** – Number of years of (i) free and (ii) compulsory pre-primary education guaranteed in legal frameworks

What works to promote early learning and education in humanitarian settings

While universal access to quality early learning and education opportunities starting from birth is the ultimate goal, the following focus areas are recommended to strengthen the response of the Education in Emergencies sector in addressing the early learning and education needs of young children and families in humanitarian settings:

Strengthen caregiver capacity through a family-centered approach

Support the early childhood workforce

Promote learning through play

Establish safe and inclusive early learning and education environments

Strengthen caregiver capacity through a family-centered approach

Young children learn in the context of relationships and experiences, through daily interactions with their primary caregivers and others that build brains and shape physical, emotional, social and cognitive development for a lifetime (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2014; Immordino-Yang et al. 2018).

Caregivers are tasked with establishing a safe, stimulating and nurturing environment in the home, which plays a critical role in determining children's survival, development and well being. But recent evidence shows that children from disadvantaged households are more likely to miss out on educational activities at home and less likely to receive early stimulation and responsive care when compared with their wealthier peers (Shuey and Kankaraš 2018; UNICEF 2022).

In humanitarian contexts, families and caregivers face tremendous obstacles with little support in providing responsive care and early learning opportunities for their young children. Experiences of loss, insecurity and depression combined with disruptions in essential services and community supports can hinder caregivers' capacity to be attentive and responsive to their children. For these reasons, early learning interventions in humanitarian contexts must adopt a family-centered approach to bridge the gap across health and education services and support caregivers in establishing a safe, stimulating and nurturing home environment (UNHCR 2019). Programs that also provide caregivers with cash or psychosocial support complement interventions to improve parenting (World Bank 2018).

> " ECE in fragile settings should have a specific focus on primary caregivers and other adults because they can mitigate the negative effects of trauma and provide care and stimulation even in the absence of formal structures and when families are on the move.
>
> – BENDINI AND DEVERCELLI 2022

PRIORITY ACTIONS:

Provide **practical and interactive parenting education or coaching programs** to build caregivers' capacity to create stimulating environments at home and engage in responsive, playful interactions with their children.

Engage male caregivers to share child-rearing responsibilities, support their partners as allies in parenting and get involved in their young children's learning.

Support **adolescent caregivers in particular, including by offering early childhood services within or close to education facilities**, and providing referrals for clinical treatment of maternal depression when needed.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES:

- **Go Baby Go!** by World Vision in multiple countries
- **Health, Early Learning and Protection Parenting Programme (HEPPP)** by the Arab Resource Collective (ARC) in Jordan and Lebanon
- **Toxic Stress Mitigation Model** by Save the Children in El Salvador
- **Families Make the Difference** by IRC in multiple countries

Support the early childhood workforce

Beyond primary caregivers and families, early childhood facilitators, educators and childcare providers represent the next layer of support for early childhood development, especially in emergency settings where unaccompanied or separated children may lack parental support.

Since supportive connections with trusted adults can counterbalance the effects of prolonged stress, the early childhood workforce is also positioned to respond to children's emotional needs in the face of uncertainty, helping to alleviate the impacts of severe trauma and stress on young children. However, working in challenging conditions with fewer resources and support personnel can result in overburdened teachers, who may also be struggling to meet their own families' needs.

PRIORITY ACTIONS:

Improve the **capacity of the early childhood workforce to support play-based learning** and to create an inclusive learning environment through ongoing professional development, in-service training, coaching and peer learning.

Train **early childhood facilitators and teachers on the basic science of ECD**, the value of nurturing relationships and the negative effects of trauma on child behavior, so they can recognize the signs and use teaching methods to help mitigate its effects on learning.

Ensure **facilitators and teachers have access to basic social services** to address their own psychosocial and emotional needs.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES:

- **Right Start!** by Anera in the West Bank and Gaza
- **CORE Intervention** by War Child in Colombia and Uganda
- **Preschool Healing Classrooms** by IRC in Lebanon

Promote learning through play

Play is an essential vehicle for young children's learning. In humanitarian contexts, play-based activities can also help children cope and recover from intense adverse experiences (UNICEF 2018).

Research has increasingly shown the link between play-based learning and a child's ability to understand the demands of their environment, respond to challenges with creative problem solving and manage their own behaviors and emotions in stressful situations. Implementing play interventions that address the coping skills of adults and children can support caregivers in engaging in responsive interactions at home while also promoting children's resilience (Solis et al. 2020).

There are many ways to promote learning through play, from exploration, to imaginative storytelling to puzzle-solving and games with peers. A minimum set of diverse and inclusive learning and play materials (including toys, books and musical instruments, many of which can be made at a low to no cost using locally available resources) should be available in homes and other early learning sites. Culturally responsive play approaches should follow universal design principles, be age-appropriate, and promote exploration, play and creativity, as well as emerging literacy and numeracy in order to stimulate the developmental needs of all children (Solis et al. 2020).

> **"**
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PRIORITY ACTIONS:

Expand spaces and opportunities for play as a vehicle for learning and coping with stress. Engage caregivers in play activities and toymaking, or conduct awareness-raising campaigns in the community on the importance of early learning and learning through play.

In contexts where resources and play materials are limited, use low- or no-cost, readily-available materials such as plastic bottles, bottle caps, string, socks and pebbles to create handmade toys (e.g. mobiles, blocks, musical instruments, cars and dolls).

Strengthen young children's psychosocial well-being through social and emotional learning and activities that promote creative expression, such as art, music, movement, dance, storytelling or role-playing.

- **Humanitarian Play Labs** by BRAC in Bangladesh
- **Playful Parenting** by LEGO Foundation in multiple countries

Establish safe and inclusive early learning and education environments

All young children should have access to safe, inclusive early learning spaces where their developmental needs are met and to age-appropriate, locally available play and learning materials.

Early learning spaces can be informal or formal, and can be established in locations such as preschools, community centers, places of worship, under trees or in the home. Where buildings are not available, providing access to early learning and education in safe temporary learning spaces such as tents must be a priority. Child-friendly spaces organized by the child protection sector can also include an area for infants and young children to play (UNICEF 2017). In situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic when gathering in-person is not possible, radio, television, mobile and other media can increase home access to early child development programming aimed at either children or caregivers.

Early childhood spaces and programs should be hardwired for inclusion of the most marginalized children in the poorest, most remote and most vulnerable situations, particularly those with disabilities. Participation in early learning and education facilitates screening and identification of children with disabilities or developmental delays, so they can be assigned appropriate interventions (UNESCO GEMR 2021). Early childhood facilities should be safe and physically accessible to all children and caregivers, and the early childhood workforce should be supported to increase their skills and understanding of how to adapt activities to meet the needs of all children. Not only can early childhood staff aid in creating safe and healing learning environments, but they can also make necessary links to protection and health services. The curriculum should also be flexible, relevant and accessible, recognizing the value of diversity and responding to various learners' needs.

> "
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PRIORITY ACTIONS:

Identify children with disabilities or children at risk for developmental delays through community outreach and door-to-door visits; raise awareness among caregivers and the broader community on the importance of early learning opportunities for all children.

Promote the empowerment of caregivers through information sharing and peer support groups where they can exchange experiences and address misconceptions and social stigma.

Establish policies and practices that respect and support the cultures and languages of all families. Where possible, employ teachers and other staff from the same population as the target population and work toward community-led or refugee-led programming.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES:

- **Baytna** by Amna (formerly Refugee Trauma Initiative) in Greece
- **Cluster Learning Approach** by Children on the Edge in Uganda
- **Ubuntu and Baby Ubuntu** by Ubuntu Hub in multiple countries

> "
A large body of evidence confirms that investing in quality programs that support children's early learning and well-being improves learning outcomes and ultimately increases adult wages and productivity.

Conclusion

Childhood experiences in the early years have an immense influence on later life outcomes. A large body of evidence confirms that investing in quality programs that support children's early learning and well-being improves learning outcomes and ultimately increases adult wages and productivity. But if early learning and education continue to fall through the cracks in humanitarian response, the learning needs of millions of young children will be left unmet and SDG 4 will remain out of reach.

Education actors can help to close the gap by working with caregivers, families and communities to strengthen knowledge and capacity to provide adequate early stimulation, learning and education, and by coordinating with other sectors like health, nutrition and child protection that serve the same populations. Doing so will improve the results and effectiveness of existing Education in Emergencies interventions. More importantly it will transform the educational experiences for young children, families and communities facing crisis.

Further reading

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Acknowledgements

About Moving Minds Alliance

The Moving Minds Alliance is a growing collaborative network of 26 member organizations globally, focusing on early childhood in crisis contexts.

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