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Claremont McKenna College

Children's Development and Crisis:
Comparing Developmental Best Practices Against Aid
Program Curricula

submitted to
Professor Jennifer Taw

by
Martha Baker

for
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Table of Contents

Abstract	v
Introduction	1
Chapter I: Standardized Cognitive Neuroscience	6
of Early Childhood Development	
<i>Experimental Research of Early Childhood</i>	6
<i>The Western Bias in Cognitive Science Research</i>	9
<i>Brain Science Behind Early Childhood Development</i>	15
<i>The Importance of Language Development in Early Childhood</i>	21
<i>Forming Self-Regulatory Capabilities</i>	25
<i>The Importance of Caregivers and Consequences of Neglect</i>	30
Chapter II: Theory of International	34
Non-governmental Organizations	
<i>MEL4AM</i>	44
<i>Emergency Intervention for Children in Crisis</i>	48
Chapter III: Sesame Workshop’s Intervention for	57
Syrian Refugees	
<i>Programmatic Overview</i>	57
<i>Ahlan Simsim</i>	64
<i>Evaluation of Ahlan Simsim</i>	73
Chapter IV: UNICEF’s Intervention for Children	82
at the US-Mexico Border	
<i>Programmatic Overview</i>	82
<i>UNICEF in Matamoros</i>	92
<i>Evaluation of Matamoros Intervention</i>	98
Conclusion	101
Bibliography	103

Abstract

Using the monitoring, evaluation and learning for adaptive management model (MEL4AM), this paper examines how international organizations translate productive criteria for early childhood development (ECD) into emergency response programming for children. Early childhood is a crucial developmental time in individual's lives and adverse experiences undermine, among other things, language development, self-regulatory capabilities, and child-caregiver interactions. International aid organizations are operationalizing the research on ECD best practices into site-level programming. This thesis examines whether the developmental needs of these children in crisis are being met through these efforts and offers two in-depth case studies: Sesame Workshop's intervention for Syrian refugee children in the Middle East and UNICEF's initiative for migrant children in Matamoros, Mexico.

Introduction

The president and CEO of the International Rescue Committee, David Miliband, noted during a 60 Minutes spotlight that the average length of displacement for a refugee is 20 years.¹ However, Miliband explained that “less than 2% of humanitarian aid goes towards funding education, even though half of the world’s refugees are kids.”² Indeed, there are currently 12.9 million refugee children forcibly displaced by violence³ and another 33 million migrant children have been uprooted in search of opportunity and future security.⁴ Some of these children are unaccompanied; others travel with families. Many end up in refugee camps in Bangladesh, Lebanon, and Kenya, or detention facilities along the US-Mexico border and throughout Europe. Children on the move face unimaginable realities throughout their journeys, are deprived of basic developmental necessities, and are unprotected from harm, abuse, and exploitation.⁵ Miliband noted that meeting international development goals are inconceivable as long as children remain in crisis without access to adequate resources.⁶

Cognitive research has shown that constant stress on children can disrupt brain development, trigger high levels of anxiety, and delay the onset of skills

¹ *60 Minutes*, season 52, episode 8, “Sesame and the IRC Join Forces to Help Syrian Refugee Children,” produced by Shari Finkelstein and Jaime Woods, featuring Lesley Stahl, aired November 17, 2019, in broadcast syndication, CBS News.

² *60 Minutes*, “Sesame and the IRC,” aired November 17, 2019.

³ “Child Migration,” Data, UNICEF, last modified April 2020, <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/migration/>.

⁴ “Refugee Statistics” Refugee Facts, USA for UNHCR, last modified Winter 2018, <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/>.

⁵ UNICEF, *A Child is a Child: Protecting Children on the Move from Violence, Abuse, and Exploitation*, (UNICEF, May 2017), 18, https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF_A_child_is_a_child_May_2017_EN.pdf.

⁶ *60 Minutes*, “Sesame and the IRC Join Forces to Help Syrian Refugee Children,” 2019.

necessary for healthy social interactions – compassion, acceptance, empathy, and perspective – as well as affect the ability to regulate emotions, manage information, and inhibit impulsive behaviors.⁷ Therefore, crisis environments can compromise a child’s developmental trajectory and instill the perception that the world is threatening and unsafe. This perception engrains a survivalist mentality in young children, and can potentially lead to defensive, impulsive, and even aggressive behaviors,⁸ as well as underdeveloped competencies such as negotiating skills and recognition of discrimination.⁹ The compounding nature of adversity in early childhood disrupts the synergy between cognitive, social, and emotional development, leading to generations that lack empathy and address conflict violently and irrationally. If generations of refugees perpetually exist in this disadvantageous developmental cycle, it is understandable that international development goals, like multi-national peace building and global prosperity, remain unattainable. Conversely, it is also clear that early resource allocation for children in crisis may contribute to making international development goals attainable.

Historically, the scarcity of funding for international humanitarian initiatives in early childhood stemmed from a dearth of scientific evidence. Today, such research shows the deleterious effects of trauma, adversity, and instability on early cognitive development. In the past, efforts involving children in emerging

⁷ Vidur Chopra, *Peace Building Through Early Childhood Development*, (UNICEF), 5, https://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/files/ECD_Peacebuilding_GNote_.pdf.

⁸ This paper is not assuming all trauma leads to aggression, as not all children who experience trauma have these outcomes. In fact, some children show remarkable resiliency.

⁹ Chopra, *Peacebuilding*, 7.

countries existed as long-term development responses to systemic issues pertaining to education, poverty, and/or gender discrimination. In an interview, Aditi Shrikhande, an Early Childhood Development Project Coordinator at UNICEF, made the point that ECD programming in settings of humanitarian crisis are a new priority for international actors.¹⁰ Within the last decade, research in ECD has called attention to the lifesaving properties of early and effective interventions for a child's cognitive, emotional, and social well-being. Shrikhande noted that, despite this emerging and persuasive research, ECD programming remains disproportionately underrepresented as a humanitarian crisis intervention priority.¹¹ In attempts to catalyze interventions in this domain, international organizations often piggyback ECD with other types of well-established assistance programs such as vaccine and birth registration initiatives. However, Shrikhande observed that these types of hybrid ECD interventions often fail to include essential protections for children in crisis and may not productively serve the developmental cognitive needs of children.¹²

In light of the foregoing, this thesis looks to evaluate interventions for Syrian refugees and Latinx migrants caught at the US-Mexico border across two dimensions: first, how the programs reflect fundamental principles and best practices of the new findings in early childhood research and, second, whether adaptive mechanisms exist to test these programs' successes and failures to effectively address the needs of vulnerable children. This research considers

¹⁰ Aditi Shrikhande, interviewed by author, February 26, 2020.

¹¹ Shrikhande, interview.

¹² Ibid.

methodological best practices both in child development cognitive science and international theories of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to evaluate the successes and failures of aid interventions for children in crisis, given the realistic considerations migrant children face.

Overview

Chapter I will outline gold-standard experimental components in early childhood research. It will also discuss why early childhood is a crucial developmental time in individual's lives, outlining the rudimentary components of an early childhood, including language development, self-regulatory capabilities, child-caregiver interactions, and the long-standing implications of early trauma or adverse experiences. When the study of early childhood education is examined at the international level, we see international aid organizations translating this body of research into site-level programming. Chapter II will discuss the theoretical framework outlining NGO functionality, then examine this general paradigm in the context of NGOs responding to global early childhood crises. Chapters III and IV will present two case studies: the first looking at Syrian refugee children and the Sesame Workshop and International Rescue Committee (IRC) partnership targeting early childhood education in crisis; and the second looking at children in the migrant camps along the US-Mexico border and UNICEF's response in Matamoros. Each chapter will holistically analyze these crises intervention programs within the scientific and theoretical archetypes previously outlined.

Methodology

Research for this thesis primarily relied on online academic sources and print literature on early cognitive development and non-governmental functional theory. Additionally, both Sesame Workshop and UNICEF provided organization specific literature on early childhood initiatives. Primary interviews between January and April 2020 with the Senior Education Manager of Humanitarian Programs at Sesame Workshop, an Associate Research Scientist at NYU Global TIES for Children, the Early Childhood Development Project Coordinator at UNICEF, and two UNICEF field officers placed in Mexico filled some informational gaps. However, a research limitation was the inaccessibility of NGO internal data collections, inter-agency funding reports, and project proposals.

This paper does not examine uncontrollable external circumstances when analyzing the best and worst practices of international aid programs for developing children; these circumstances include deadly infections, environmental toxins, as well as the type of community, trauma, and violence. It also does not examine the effects of healthy childhood development impacted by other forms of brain trauma or health such as chronic health, trauma, injuries, or disease.

Chapter I: Standardized Cognitive Neuroscience of Early Childhood Development

Research on successful pillars of early childhood development would ideally drive global aid provisions for children in crisis. It is important to note the research defining these principles exists in a limited, western-dominated context, and that western-dominated research is potentially irrelevant and inappropriate to cross-cultural conditions in which refugee and unaccompanied children are living. However, despite research limitations, some of the findings are generalizable with respect to the fundamental biological processes the early brain experiences and how culturally specific communities interact with children. Therefore, aid providers' efforts can be compared against early childhood best practices focused on the human brain's maturation process as long as there is awareness of unique cultural considerations.

Experimental Research of Early Childhood

Cognitive science studies how the mind works. Blending disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, neuroscience and philosophy, cognitive science offers an interdisciplinary perspective on mental phenomena such as stimuli interpretation, language acquisition and representation, and memory. The field breaks down barriers that restrict our understanding of human functioning and deeply explore the neural mechanisms that process information and lead to behavioral interactions.

Research in cognitive science strives to uncover causal relationships between a stimuli and cognitive change. However, researchers interested in human cognitive development struggle to isolate experimental variables given the innate unpredictability of the human experience, especially when hypothesizing, evaluating, and generalizing conclusions about that experience itself.¹³ The interplay of scientific challenges such as confounding variables, selection bias, and simultaneity bias can influence data. Researchers interested in childhood development encounter this research dynamic when examining influential factors pertaining to child development, as children are influenced by external experiences and environments.¹⁴ To mitigate these potentially distorting aspects of early childhood research, studies employ longitudinal research to gather data from a specific sample over a long period of time, and monitor independent variables that could influence developmental features such as such as height, weight, language, quantitative reasoning, motor skills, workforce participation, socioeconomic trajectories, relationship maintenance, and family structure.¹⁵ Additionally, randomized control trials exist as *the* early childhood research standard to reduce confounding variables and maximize confidence that any change observed after the program implementation was caused by the intervention, not by some other external

¹³ Heidi Keller, Bettina Lamm, Monika Abels, and Relindis Yovsi, "Cultural Models, Socialization Goals, and Parenting Ethnotheories: A Multicultural Analysis," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 37, no. 2 (2006): 165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022105284494>.

¹⁴ Jack P. Shonkoff, Deborah A. Philips, and the Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2000), 17.

¹⁵ Katharine B. Stevens and Elizabeth English, *Does Pre-K Work? The Research on Ten Early Childhood Programs – And What It Tells Us* (The American Enterprise Institute, 2016) 5.

variable.¹⁶ By selecting participants randomly to partake in the program or non-program group, researchers have theoretically isolated all other variables to ensure the only difference between groups is their participation, or lack of, in the program.

The quality of early childhood experimental design and execution determines the quality of programs derived from that research and how successful they might be in serving children's developmental needs. These programs include anything from global interventions for children in crisis to domestic initiatives serving low-income, minority families. However, regardless of the target audience, programs need independent evaluations mechanisms that assess effectiveness, efficiency, and impact on children throughout developmental phases. It is most important to note that that monitoring efforts must be detached from the implementing body. Anthropologists recognize that with a general decrease in budgets for independent research, the gap is filled with other agencies, both governmental and non-governmental, evaluating programs under specific reform agendas or political goals.¹⁷ The tendency to evaluate programs that include early childhood components, but skew the evaluation measures given external influences, both discredits the science collected from these interventions and possibly further impairs child development if the program is failing to provide adequate resources.¹⁸ In turn, programmatic evaluations become less about increasing developmental or educational outcomes for children, and more about

¹⁶ Stevens and English, *Does Pre-K Work?* 6.

¹⁷ Agnès van Zanten, "Conclusion. Ethnography of Education Around the World," in *Anthropologies of Education: A global Guide to Ethnographic Studies of Learning and Schooling*, ed. Kathryn M. Anderson-Levitt (Berghahn Books, 2012), 316.

¹⁸ Zanten, "Conclusion," 316.

agencies leveraging fiscal resources and institutional access as an instrument for benefits exceeding the scope of the child in need.¹⁹

Early childhood development knowledge and studies are cumulative and necessitate connections across research outcomes, influences on those outcomes, how those outcomes can be defined as causal relationships, and finally, generalizable policies. Research in early childhood is intended to ensure that children receive programming and other interventions that productively contribute to their development.

The Western Bias in Cognitive Science Research

It is acknowledged that these tenets of early educational program research, implementation, and evaluation most often develop through Western experiments. The Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) population dominates the sample pool evaluated in developmental research,²⁰ leading to an inherent bias toward WEIRD-specific environments as a lens for productive educational programming. This is problematic because findings on an isolated and non-diverse population are then applied abroad to communities with dissimilar cultural characteristics.²¹ Mischaracterizing Western research as generalizable cognitive findings from largely unrepresentative WEIRD populations therefore leads to insufficient, and potentially inaccurate, conclusions regarding child

¹⁹ Zanten, "Conclusion," 316.

²⁰ Mark Neilson, Daniel Haun, Joscha Kartner, and Cristine H. Legare, "The persistent sampling bias in developmental psychology: A call to action," *Journal of experimental child psychology* 162, (October 2017): 32, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2017.04.017>.

²¹ Zanten, "Conclusion," 303.

development.²² Thus, researchers must exercise caution when overextending findings beyond a specific sample.²³

This process of streamlining WEIRD findings to different cultural communities is identified as a routine practice to expand academic programming. But, too often, the failure to recognize the interdisciplinary and cross-cultural influences on child development results in an incomplete understanding of the developing brain. Therefore, it is necessary to harness diversity in cognitive research as a means to improve both encompassing theories about human development and community specific initiatives for child development. Science must emphasize cross cultural influences to understand the nuances of human cognition and its contributions to child development.²⁴

Cross-cultural influences in cognitive functioning refer to the inputs that customize an individual's cognitive system during a lifetime.²⁵ For children, the preliminary dissemination of cultural influences happens through caregiver-child interactions. How caregivers interact with children in different settings determine what children experience and how those experiences condition them as members

²² In an interview with Joyce Rafla, Associate Research Scientist for Ahlan Simsim, she spoke candidly regarding contentions that exist in the international community around superimposing Western principles onto developing or crisis communities. She noted Western leadership teams predominately guide intervention protocol and relevant literature framing program development derives from western research, culture, and ideology: infrequently do leadership teams or literature accurately incorporate and reflect the target community. This discord between what aid beneficiaries want or need and what Western aid providers develop and implement can exacerbate realities and further hurt communities in crisis.

²³ Nielsen et al., "The persistent sampling bias," 32.

²⁴ Daniel B. M. Haun, "Comparative and Developmental Anthropology: Studying the Origins of Cultural Variability in Cognitive Function," in *The Oxford Handbook of Human Development and Culture: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Lene Arnett Jensen (Oxford University Press: 2015), 13.

²⁵ Haun, "Comparative and Developmental Anthropology," 2.

of their respective societies. This framework is described as caregiver ethnotheories: the shaping of children development through determined cultural agendas under which children achieve cognitive competencies.²⁶ Caregiver ethnotheories exist hierarchically in nature, where the agenda broadly ranges from basic survival tactics to high cognitive function and attainment of cultural values.²⁷ Regardless of cultural variation, cognitive science demonstrates that any developmental benchmark caregivers hold then sets a developmental agenda for children to reach prescribed aspects of socialization.²⁸ The agenda, or a lack of, determines the substance of daily interactions and caregiver intentionally children experience.

Therefore, individuals are not separate entities from cultural processes. They exist dialectically. Communities and caregivers offer different dimensions of culture that socialize young children.²⁹ This socialization process is not monolithic; children evolve both through immediate and subtle influences comprised of their social setting, cultural regulations and customs, as well as the psychology of caregivers.³⁰ Additionally, caregiving and disciplinary duties are the responsibility of anyone near the child, often involving the entire community in a child's upbringing.³¹ Around the world, caregivers take on individualized and specialized

²⁶ Sara Harkness, Caroline J. Mavridis, Jai Ji Liu, and Charles M. Super, "Parental Ethnotheories and the Development of Family Relationships in Early and Middle Childhood," in *The Oxford Handbook of Human Development and Culture: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Lene Arnett Jensen (Oxford University Press: 2015), 24.

²⁷ Harkness et al., "Parental Ethnotheories," 10.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 7.

²⁹ Barbara Rogoff, *The Cultural Nature of Human Development* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 41.

³⁰ Rogoff, *The Cultural nature of Human Development*, 48.

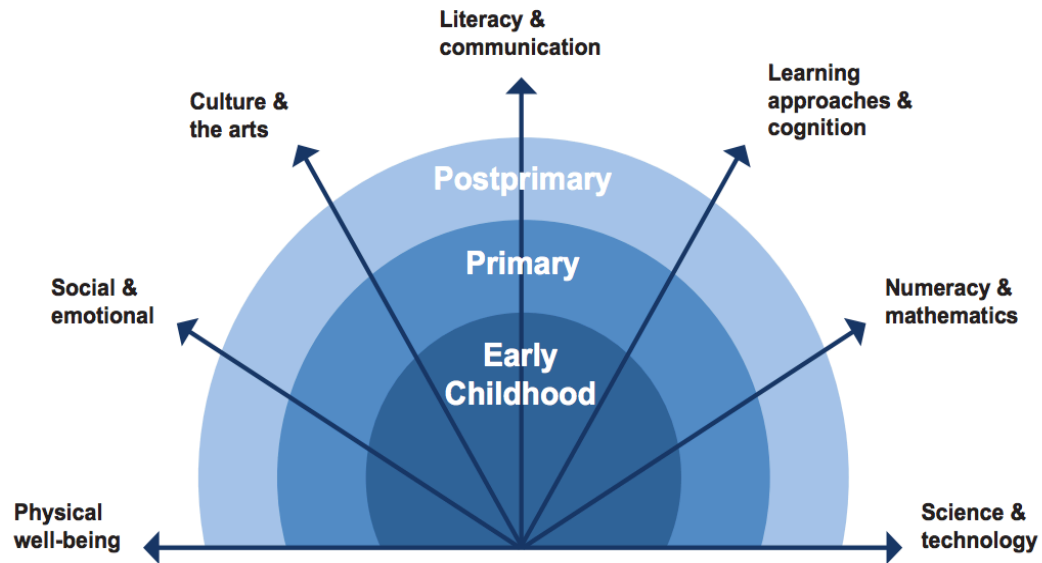
³¹ *Ibid*, 148.

roles in child-upbringing; those roles are defined by cultural standards and expectations.³²

The Brookings Center for Universal Education, in collaboration with The United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics, developed a *Global Framework for Learning Domains* (See Figure 1). Throughout development, this framework postulates that every individual should be engaged in a complete model of learning, where all aspects of the human mind are activated. This framework is important to evaluate alongside cross-cultural learning initiatives to understand what aspects are prioritized in different communities. The arrows, symbolizing one domain of learning, radiate out from birth, highlighting the compounding nature of development. The extending arrows demonstrate continued and deepening learning. Using the framework, it is possible to understand the cultural attentions communities place on specific learning priorities.

³² Ibid, 118.

Figure 1: A Global Framework for Learning Domains



Source: *Toward Universal Learning: What Every Child Should Learn* (Center for Universal Education at Brookings, 2013)

Scholars and commentators agree that culture directs the essential frameworks of caregiving, and broader socialization goals, for effective child rearing.³³ The receptibility of the infant mind to experiential and environmental influences dictates early learning, and later, individualism. When examining international educational programming for early childhood, it is important to understand how culture influences each of these educational variables in order to both enrich the implementation and evaluation programs in early childhood.³⁴

When children are displaced or detained, many aspects of healthy emotional and cognitive development can be compromised. Children often confront a reality where caregivers are preoccupied or even absent, their social interactions include abuse and exploitation, and they are deprived of linguistic inputs to build a lexicon.

³³ Keller et al., “Cultural Models, Socialization Goals, and Parenting Ethnotheories,” 156.

³⁴ Zanten, “Conclusion,” 316.

Enduring such hardships not only poses immediate danger to a child's early development, but also holds long-lasting implications for their futures. As programs intervene in hopes of identifying developmental adversity, and mitigating its negative effects, it is important to highlight that such programs have the capacity to greatly help children, but also could exacerbate the developmental implications of trauma. When involved programs fail to consider cultural differences, child development science, environmental factors, fail to adequately train providers, or lack a centralized goal, the intervention can hurt a child's developmental trajectory. Damage to the developmental trajectory could include failed self-regulatory responses, immature socio-emotional capabilities, delayed cognitive functioning, and caregiver neglect issues. Therefore, when building, implementing, analyzing, and restructuring intervention programs for children, it is of paramount importance that the curriculum reflect this developmental research and remain child-centric throughout implementation.

This thesis offers insight into whether early childhood programming in crisis situations is consistent with the best practices that cognitive research suggests, or if it runs counterintuitive in the most important domains. While anthropologists critique a type of superimposed educational programming that focuses on the myopic slice of WEIRD research on global educational programming, this section offers an outline of basic early childhood development phenomena and criteria to later examine whether the actions that the early childhood development research suggests are being implemented in programming for displaced kids.

Brain Science Behind Early Childhood Development

Early childhood is critical for healthy brain development.³⁵ Early experiences and environmental influences impact the developing brain, where stimulating and appropriate inputs optimally structure later learning and cognitive growth.³⁶ The latest research influencing work in western educational contexts takes the position that although genes offer the framework, experiences and environments mold the cognitive processes that dictate the quality of the brain's architectural foundation. During the first years of life, billions of neural signals communicate across the developing brain.³⁷ These connections form circuits that slowly build upon a child's genetic framework; the expansion of these circuits is called proliferation.³⁸ As the electrical signals proliferate, experiences and environments dictate which connections are more frequently used, and therefore reinforce those specific circuits.³⁹ As a child uses specific circuits more and more, they grow stronger and more permanent. Connections that are used less deteriorate through a natural process called pruning.⁴⁰ Once concentrated brain circuits create enough neural connections; these circuits branch out and start communicating across different brain regions. This order process, where basic functions build on

³⁵ Adrienne Tierney and Charles Nelson, "Brain Development and the Role of Experience in the Early Years," *Zero to Three* 30, no. 2 (November 2009): 5.

³⁶ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *The Timing and Quality of Early Experiences Combine to Shape Brain Architecture: Working Paper #5* (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007), 1, <https://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>.

³⁷ "Brain Architecture," Key Concepts, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, last modified April 2017, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>.

³⁸ "Brain Architecture."

³⁹ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *The Timing and Quality*, 3.

⁴⁰ "Brain Architecture."

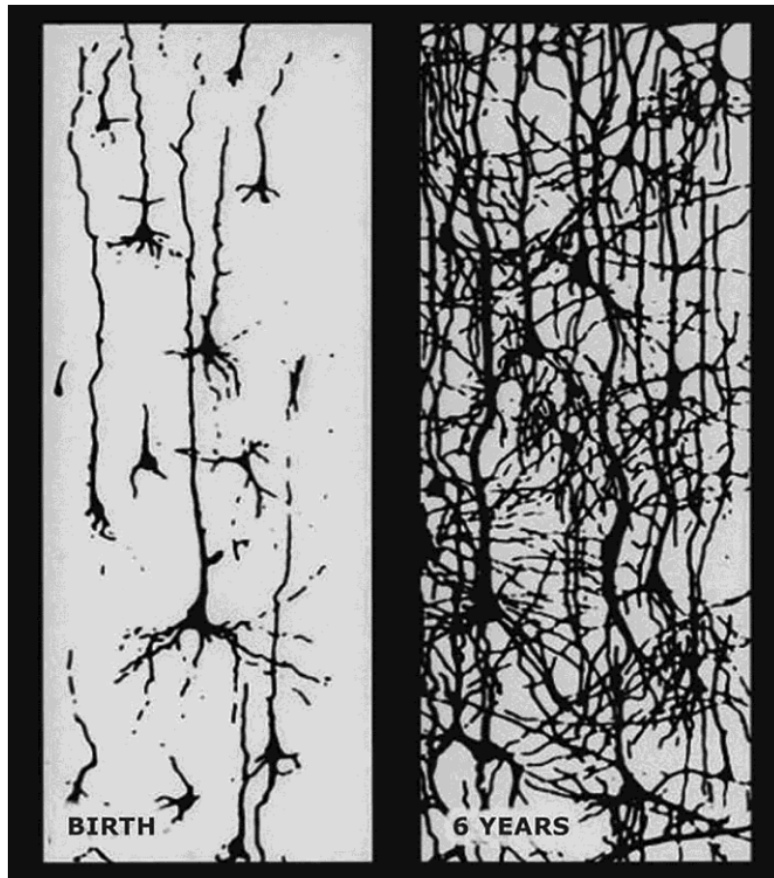
each other, then expand, provide a foundation for later, more complex cognitive systems (see Figure 2 for example of growth in these neural connection).⁴¹ Therefore, neural signals between visual, emotional, memory, motor, behavioral, and language control systems that interact during early development create the bedrock for processing abilities further along a child's development.⁴² Similar to the pruning process discussed before, connections that are not used repeatedly across cognitive regions decay, whereas circuits experiencing repeated use become stronger and more efficient.⁴³ This lends itself to an interconnected brain and showcases the interdependency of specific cognitive functions on other processing abilities.

⁴¹ "Brain Architecture."

⁴² "Brain Architecture."

⁴³ Shonkoff et al., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, 53.

Figure 2: Development of Synapses in Children Brain: Birth to Age 6



Source: J. LeRoy Conel, *The Postnatal Development of the Human Cerebral Cortex* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959)

Another related strand of research demonstrates that brains are built for change, by which the brain undergoes adjustments to its genetic outline as electrical signals circulate information between brain regions.⁴⁴ The proliferation and pruning processes collect and refine individualized skills and abilities acquired through a child's experiential and environmental influences.

During early childhood, this process of neural expansion is more or less influenced by the specific windows for developmental opportunity. A *sensitive*

⁴⁴ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *The Timing and Quality*, 2.

period in development describes the limited temporal window when the brain is particularly susceptible to influences.⁴⁵ *Sensitive periods* interpret experiences and guide neural connections, which in general allow for children to adapt.⁴⁶ Experiential and environmental inputs during sensitive periods augment normal development by building neural circuits for the footing of skills such as planning, socio-emotional resiliency, and independence.⁴⁷ Another, and more finite, important temporal window in development is categorized as a *critical period* in development. A *critical period* highlights when experiential and environmental influences alter development permanently.⁴⁸ When the nervous system is extremely vulnerable to stimuli during a critical period, it is more important that the brain receives adequate inputs to develop a function, such as sensory abilities, vision, or language.⁴⁹ If the critical period for development is not capitalized on, it is difficult, potentially impossible, to reverse the neural connections formed during early life.⁵⁰ Therefore, it is possible a child could not receive input for sensory skills, language, and vision, leaving that child at risk for never developing these skills in sufficient ways. As a child continues to grow, distorted neural connections could hinder long-term cognitive performance.⁵¹ Research indicates that the brain is much more

⁴⁵ Eric I. Knudsen, "Sensitive Periods in the Development of the Brain and Behavior," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 16, no. 8 (November 2004): 1412.

<https://doi.org/10.1162/0898929042304796>.

⁴⁶ Knudsen, "Sensitive Periods," 1412.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Charles Nelson, Charles Zeahan, and Nathan Fox, "How Early Experiences Shapes Human Development: The Case of Psychosocial Deprivation," *Neural Plasticity* (January 2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1155/2019/1676285>.

⁵⁰ Nelson, Zeahan, and Fox, "How Early Experiences," 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

sensitive to experience in the first few years of life when enhanced neural plasticity underlies much of early learning. In sum, early learning through experiential and environmental input leaves permanent traces across the brain in the form of neural connections, and these connections solidify the architecture for later cognitive functioning.⁵²

The interaction between circuits and windows for development builds personalized brains specific to a child's developmental history.⁵³ However, despite the heightened developmental time frame for cognitive function acquisition, even more recent research indicates the brain maintains a life-long capacity for plasticity. *Plasticity* is defined as the nervous system's adaptability and ability to reorganize neural connections.⁵⁴ As outlined by neuroscientist Michael Merzenich, human brain plasticity is characterized by two main epochs.⁵⁵ The first referring to the *critical period*. As discussed, during *critical period*, the brain organizes its basic processing function given surrounding environmental and experiential influences.⁵⁶ For normal and healthy development, activating the nervous system early ensures normal organization and establishment.⁵⁷ The second epoch refers to *adult plasticity* where the basic functions developed during the critical period are refined throughout adulthood to master a wide range of skills and abilities.⁵⁸ This *adult plasticity* period builds on the foundation of the critical period, where the brain's

⁵² Aage R. Moller, *Malleable Brain*, (Nova Science Publishers: November 2009), 45.

⁵³ Michael Merzenich, "Exploring the Rewiring of the Brain," March 15, 2012, TED, <https://digital.films.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=278170&xtid=48143>.

⁵⁴ Merzenich, "Exploring the Rewriting."

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Moller, *Malleable Brain*, 48.

⁵⁸ Merzenich, "Exploring the Rewriting."

learned strategies to regulate and control inputs are tested given everyday interactions.⁵⁹ However, while brain plasticity continues during adult life, the brain's malleability declines, making later learning less effective.⁶⁰ Therefore, the brain structure built throughout early childhood is paramount in solidifying a strong foundation for the less impactful refinement of neural circuits to continue long-term.⁶¹

Simply, then, brain development is a hierarchical process where functions build off of each other throughout different timeframes and under different external experiential and environmental inputs. Changes in the brain occur through the neural activation processes of proliferation, which causes the reinforcement of some brain connections and the elimination of others.⁶² This neurological process allows for low level circuits to formulate a sturdy architecture for higher functioning to capitalize on and integrate genetic potential.⁶³ Guided by experiential and environmental influences, neural plasticity is a form of learning where the nervous system opens and solidifies new routes for information.⁶⁴ How neural plasticity is activated powerfully influences development, either enhancing or suppressing system reflexes and responses to cognitive processes of the brain.

Early childhood exists within the parameters outlined by neural interactions, periods of development, and experiential and environmental influences. The

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Tierney and Nelson, "Brain Development," 4.

⁶² Moller, *Malleable Brain*, 28.

⁶³ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *The Timing and Quality*, 4.

⁶⁴ Moller, *Malleable Brain*, 28.

interaction of neural circuits creates capacities such as language, socio-emotional capacities, quantification, spatial reasoning, physical, motor, problem-solving, categorization, and literacy. Moving ahead, this chapter will outline the necessary requirements for productive early childhood development in areas such as language acquisition, self-regulatory capabilities, and caregiver interactions, specifically maternal influences as they effect learning stimulation. These early developmental domains together are the most important factors contributing to the framework that allows for later onset of more refined skills and abilities. When adverse childhood experiences and/or neglect compromise these developmental domains, they can lead to long-term negative implications for brain development.

The Importance of Language Development in Early Childhood

Language is powerful: it exposes children to human behavior, helps them to interpret social interactions, and eventually allows them to engage with others. Starting from a young age, children use social feedback and reciprocal interactions to develop vocal behavior and acquire different speech sounds that mature rapidly from babbles to full sentences.⁶⁵ As children listen to conversations, they are aware of intonation, tone, and content, which are all important in building social understanding.⁶⁶ Children are primed during the early years to learn structures, regularities, social norms, and conventions around linguistic inputs.

⁶⁵ Shonkoff et al., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, 128.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Through experiences and environmental inputs, the regularities of linguistic inputs prime children to engage in social situations. Again, neurobiology serves as the framework, but language acquisition hinges on the brain's neural network plasticity to process, code, store, and retrieve language stimuli.⁶⁷ When a child is presented with a new word, it enters the mental lexicon, where that word becomes associated with syntactic categorizations and semantic properties that both distinguish and link that word to others.⁶⁸ Learning words to build linguistic fluency entails a great deal of neural commitment. As brains are most receptive to inputs during the critical period, it is paramount that language acquisition is encoded early on to allow the brain to expand its neural patterns for future learning.⁶⁹

Reciprocity between caregivers and a child is principle in language development, as the variation and consistency of linguistic input that children receive dictates language acquisition.⁷⁰ Studies establish that early and often language exposure is key for increased, greater, and more complex linguistic proficiency. In fact, across cultures, similarities in language acquisition include verbally interacting with others, observing physical behavior, and hearing.⁷¹ As an example, Albert *et al.* manipulated caregiver responsiveness.⁷² Children who did not experience harsh changes in maternal responsiveness produced more

⁶⁷ Patricia K. Kuhl, "Early language acquisition: cracking the speech code," *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 5, (2004): 831.

⁶⁸ Susan Carey, "The Child as a Word Learner," *Psychology*, (1978). 265.

⁶⁹ Kuhl, "Early language acquisition," 83.

⁷⁰ Shonkoff et al., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, 132.

⁷¹ Shonkoff et al., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, 148.

⁷² Rachel Albert, Jennifer Schwade, and Michael Goldstein, "The social functions of babbling: Acoustic and contextual characteristics that facilitate maternal responsiveness," *Developmental Science* 21, no. 5 (September 2018): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.12641>.

vocalizations compared to children whose caregivers did not respond as quickly or naturally.⁷³ Another study by Vernon-Feagans *et al.* underscores the importance of caregiver linguistic input in predicting children's early language outcomes.⁷⁴ More specifically, this study shifted environments under which children received linguistic input, and found that reciprocal interactions, both initiated by the caregiver to a specific child and initiated by a specific child and well-received by the caregiver, augmented a child's language development.⁷⁵ Therefore, to buffer children from poor language outcomes, research emphasizes the need to incorporate diverse linguistic inputs from caregivers to children.⁷⁶ In general, other studies found the amount of conversation a caregiver directs at their child as directly associated with vocabulary growth.⁷⁷ Where language exists as the bedrock of deeply important relationships, research demonstrates that social interactions affect speech learning. In order for children to communicate, interact, accomplish goals, and sustain friendships, they need early and often exposure to linguistic inputs.

A growing body of research explores how a deviation from positive environmental influences affects the normal equality or quality of a child's received linguistic input.⁷⁸ First, sterile and didactic structures can stifle the learning capacities of children as it depresses motivation, innovation, and creative

⁷³ Albert, Schwade, and Goldstein, "The social functions of babbling," 10.

⁷⁴ Lynne Vernon-Feagans, Mary Bratsch-Hines, and The Family Life Project Key Investigators, "Caregiver-child verbal interactions in childcare: A buffer against poor language outcomes when maternal language input is less," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2013): 870. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2013.08.002>.

⁷⁵ Vernon-Feagans and Bratsch-Hines, "Caregiver-child verbal," 871.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Shonkoff *et al.*, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, 137.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

thinking.⁷⁹ Additionally, intrusive, disruptive, or harsh language from caregivers can discourage productive development and interfere with cognitive wandering and neural connections.⁸⁰ By not demonstrating exemplary communication skills, caregivers set an inadequate standard for appropriate emotional responses which children will undoubtedly follow. Therefore, communicating well to navigate conflict and arrive at compromise's illustrates effective strategies to monitor children and embody productive habits they can emulate.⁸¹

Not only is the wrong type of input detrimental for child language development, but so is social neglect. It has been found that social and linguistic deprivation negatively impacts language development and can be so severe as to prevent the acquisition of normal language skills.⁸² This devastating effect leads children to receive inadequate inputs as the coding material for their developing brains.⁸³ With distorted or even absent inputs during the critical period, children are forced to navigate defective representations of words and sounds.⁸⁴ Therefore, human interactions, or the lack of, influence early language development and emphasize the importance of orienting early inputs around productive social interactions.

Language development necessitates integrated neural network capacity and a massive influx of human socialization and linguistic exposure. Designed to enable

⁷⁹ Ibid, 158.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid, 159.

⁸² Kuhl, "Early language acquisition," 836.

⁸³ Merzenich, "Exploring the Rewriting."

⁸⁴ Merzenich, "Exploring the Rewriting."

people to communicate, early language acquisition dictates how successfully individuals will interact with each other.⁸⁵ The mechanisms in which children learn new words and perceive interactions contribute to the evolution of language. The importance of caregiver interactions not only underscore the importance of a child's early language acquisition, but also contribute to many other cognitive functions.

Forming Self-Regulatory Capabilities

Our brains contain a hive of skills categorized as self-regulating.⁸⁶ Self-regulatory skills are key in lifetime performance and encompass an individual's ability to manage emotions and behaviors given demands (physical, emotional, and intellectual) of any situation: while working with others, with distractions, and with multiple demands.⁸⁷⁸⁸ Self-regulation involves not reacting to environments with volatile outbursts, and instead, adapting to upsetting stimuli with a calm, pragmatic level-headedness. This type of executive functioning develops through the same proliferation and pruning processes, however, continues maturing after early childhood and into adulthood.⁸⁹

Regulatory systems stem from children's interpersonal interactions, specifically those with direct caregivers. Under various models of intervention, direct caregivers are defined differently. While parents are often the most

⁸⁵ Shonkoff et al., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, 841.

⁸⁶ "Executive Function & Self-Regulation," Key Concepts, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, last modified April 2017, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function/>.

⁸⁷ Shonkoff et al., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, 95.

⁸⁸ "Executive Function & Self-Regulation."

⁸⁹ "Executive Function & Self-Regulation."

traditional version of a “direct caregiver,” aid providers themselves serve as caregivers for children in crisis. Often, aid providers will offer interventions in the form of parental educational workshops, therefore serving children tangentially. However, when children are abandoned or separated from their families, aid providers can serve as a child’s direct caregiver. Additionally, interventions also exist as a hybrid model, most often seen throughout home visiting programs, where families are being trained by aid providers with the child present, so interventionists are in direct contact with children. Regardless of the type of caregiver, it is important to remember that utilizing caregivers as the entry point into the human experience can either jumpstart or offset development. There are five main domains in which caregivers contribute to emotional regulatory systems.

First, caregivers can directly intervene to deescalate emotional outbursts.⁹⁰ Specifically, responding sensitively, compassionately, patiently or respectfully, can enhance developmental outcomes as it engrains in the minds of children positive reaction behaviors.⁹¹ Second, caregivers can manage children's daily experiences to maintain routine, comfortable and predictable circumstances. As discussed before, negative environmental influences can jeopardize the effectiveness of developmental outcomes. Providing security for children can limit stressful responses that hinder cognitive development. Third, caregivers can exemplify positive emotional coping skills. As a caregiver, experiencing and then effectively coping with emotions in front of children contributes to a child’s development,

⁹⁰ Shonkoff et al., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, 113.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 97.

because it showcases how to regulate extreme emotions and adapt to social interactions.⁹² Because of this, children do learn from others and become more acutely aware of the emotional cues of their caregivers. Fourth, caregivers can instruct children on how to empathize, take turns, use their manners, deal with frustration and disappointment.⁹³ Children need direction to learn how to regulate their reactions as such direction transitions children from helpless to competent.⁹⁴ And finally, caregivers can provide reassurance and security. Simply by demonstrating a presence, children can feel comfortable reacting and controlling their emotional responses more effectively and quickly.

Research also demonstrates that if self-regulatory skills aren't learned from an early age, children are ill-equipped adults to maintain employment and relationships, as well as take care of themselves. In fact, engaging in civil society becomes difficult.⁹⁵ Children who are constantly confronted with confusing, tense, overwhelming and difficult emotional demands incorporate those experiences into their developmental neural framework.⁹⁶ As outlined by the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Study, ACE's include "psychological, physical, or sexual abuse; violence against mother; or living with household members who were substance

⁹² Ibid, 107.

⁹³ Ibid, 113.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 95.

⁹⁵ "Executive Function & Self-Regulation,"

⁹⁶ Some children are born with disabilities that elevate these emotional responses, such as children on the Autism Spectrum. The emotional regulatory systems of children with such neural differences can, in fact, be pre-critically impacted. Much of the cognitive research assumes no physical or neurological reasons for the behavioral differences, indicating that children are not born with brain damage or other medical conditions.

abusers, mentally ill or suicidal, or ever imprisoned.”⁹⁷ While learning to manage stress is an important aspect of regulatory system development, the continuous activation of a child’s psychological stress response system can lead to detrimental health conditions for children.⁹⁸ When the stress responses system activates, it transitions the body and brain into high alert – heart rate increases, blood pressure rises, and adrenal glands release hormones of adrenaline and cortisol, – where the body is either ready to fight or escape the stressful environment.⁹⁹ Normally, this natural response system helps a child adapt to circumstances. However, when this responses system is triggered over and over again, it shifts to becoming maladaptive and health damaging, whereby the high doses of repeated stress hurts the architecture and function of the developing brain.¹⁰⁰

The repetitive activation of this stress responsive system creates an environment of *toxic stress* for a child.¹⁰¹ Research posits that the prolonged activation of this fight or flight system when faced with circumstances of abuse, neglect, deep poverty, or maternal mental health¹⁰² causes a reduction in productive neural connections between brain regions.¹⁰³ The reduction of neural connections

⁹⁷ Vincent J. Felitti, Robert F. Anda, Dale Nordenberg, and Valerie Edwards, “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Leading Causes of Deaths in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study,” *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 14, no. 4 (May 1998): 245. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8).

⁹⁸ Nadine Burke Harris, “How childhood trauma affects health across a lifetime,” February 15, 2015, TED, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95ovIJ3dsNk>.

⁹⁹ Harris, “How childhood trauma.”

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

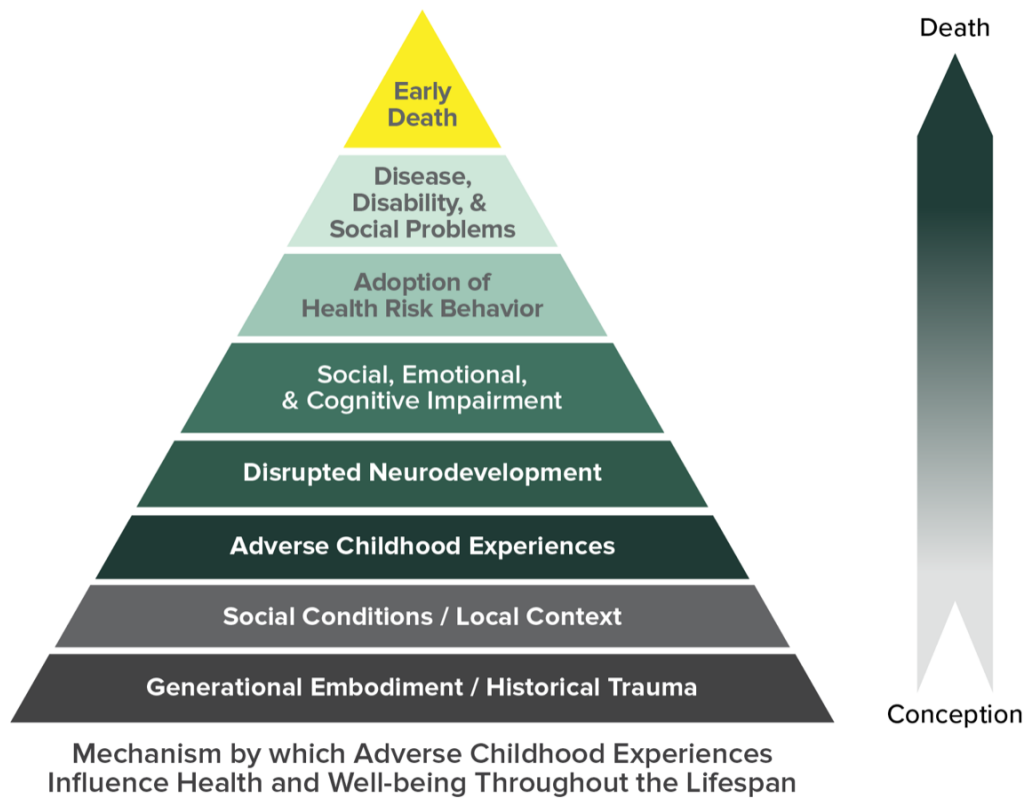
¹⁰¹ “Toxic Stress,” Key Concepts, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, last modified April 2017, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>.

¹⁰² Cognitive research on caregivers most often assumes a lens where caregiver and mother are synonymous. However, throughout western society and around the world, individuals who are not mothers assume caregiver roles.

¹⁰³ “A Guide to Toxic Stress.”

can disrupt the important learning and reasoning connections made during sensitive period.¹⁰⁴ Early neural disruption can lead to social and cognitive impairments that impacts both day-to-day interactions, as well as long-term functioning.¹⁰⁵ As demonstrated by the ACE study, prolonged, multi-dimensional impairment can influence the adoption of risky behaviors which increase the occurrence of disease, disability, inter-personal problems, and even early death¹⁰⁶ (see Figure 3 for visual model of this compounding process).

Figure 3: The Adverse Childhood Experience Pyramid



Source: Vincent J. Felitti, et. al, *The Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults*, (Center for Disease Control, 1998).

¹⁰⁴ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *The Timing and Quality*, 8.

¹⁰⁵ Harris, "How childhood trauma."

¹⁰⁶ Felitti et al., "Relationship of Child Abuse," 250.

The Importance of Caregivers and Consequences of Neglect

What helps mitigate the neurological impacts of toxic stress in most children? Responsive, present, and active caregivers that provide environmental stability.¹⁰⁷ As a child's heart rate increases and stress hormones release, the response a child receives from a caregiver can reduce the stressful experience, mitigate the neurological imprint of that experience, as well as facilitate a more proactive and adaptive response mechanism for that child long-term.¹⁰⁸ Rugged individualism does not build resilience. In fact, when the commitment to caregiving is widely shared among community members, children are more exposed to, engage with, and observe different activities that broaden cognitive exposure to all aspects of society.¹⁰⁹ If children are segregated, their cognitive development stagnates and their maturity is at risk of not advancing beyond childhood immaturity. Therefore, children need nurturing relationships that provide opportunities for children to witness, and then establish, effective coping skills when faced with adversity.¹¹⁰

Children are reliant on the emotional support of caregivers to combat the negative effects of stressful environments. However, when caregivers themselves embody an ACE, children are more vulnerable to insecure, stressful, and troubled interactions. In particular, maternal depression¹¹¹ has been associated with the

¹⁰⁷ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, *8 Things to Remember about Child Development*, (2016), 1. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/8-things-remember-child-development/>.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Schofield, Brent Donnellan, and Melissa Merrick, "Intergenerational Continuity in Adverse Childhood Experiences and Rural Community Environments," *American Journal of Public Health* 108, no. 9 (September 2018): 1148. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2018.304598>.

¹⁰⁹ Rogoff, *The Cultural nature of Human Development*, 138.

¹¹⁰ Center on the Developing Child, *8 Things*, 4.

¹¹¹ In this context, a child's caregiver is its mother.

quality of early childhood development across cultures.¹¹² Risks for maternal depression include, “poverty, low education, high stress, lack of empowerment, and poor social support.”¹¹³ Given the understood precedent of supportive and intentional maternal interactions when examining early childhood, mothers who face such conditions are therefore more likely to compromise the early childhood experience of their child.¹¹⁴ Specifically, mothers who are less educated are more likely to expose their child to developmental risks, and therefore, demonstrate a higher need for intervention programs.¹¹⁵

Research links mothers who embody symptoms of maternal depression with poor early childhood development across cultures and socio-economic standards.¹¹⁶ Mothers navigating depression risk factors are less likely to form secure attachments with their children.¹¹⁷ Weak social and emotional attachment can negatively affect child development as children then lack the support when confronted with stressful situations, which, as discussed before, is needed to positively regulate the stress response system and reduce physiological impacts of toxic stress.¹¹⁸ Therefore, reduced caregiver responsiveness can result in adverse developmental consequences for children of depressed mothers.¹¹⁹ A severe

¹¹² Susan Walker, Theodore Wachs, and Sally Grantham-McGregor, “Inequality in early childhood: risk and protective factors for early childhood development,” *The Lancet: Childhood Development* 378, no. 9799 (October 2011): 1331. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(11\)60555-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(11)60555-2).

¹¹³ Walker et al., “Inequality in Early Childhood,” 1331.

¹¹⁴ Vikram Patel, “Effect of maternal mental health on infant growth in low income countries,” *BMJ* 328, no. 7443 (May 2004): 820. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.328.7443.820>.

¹¹⁵ Walker et al., “Inequality in Early Childhood,” 1333.

¹¹⁶ Walker et al., “Inequality in Early Childhood,” 1331.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1332.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Patel, “Effects of Maternal Mental Health,” 821.

reduction in caregiver presence is called *neglect* and poses additional health and developmental threats.¹²⁰ Neglect encompasses the chronic physical and emotional failure of caregivers to attend to the needs of children.¹²¹ It is associated with lags in early development, where cognition processes are slower, children are more anxious in social circumstances, and experience poorer social adaptation due to insecure attachments.¹²² The ramification of neglect permeates deep into the neural architecture of a child, leaving them without the nurturing, supportive, and protective relationships necessary to thrive.¹²³ Therefore, children experiencing neglect are at a higher risk for maladaptive outcomes.

However, on the flipside, caregivers at a low risk of maternal depression, or even those who have strategies and tools to mitigate symptom side effects, can provide a more optimum childhood environment. One study in conducted in India and China, implemented training protocols for caregivers to learn how engage with and stimulate their child within different environments.¹²⁴ Implementing strategies such as home-visits, caregiver support curriculum, and screening processes prove beneficial in enhancing caregiver-child interactions and reducing cognitive risks such as neglect, and health risks, such as malnutrition.¹²⁵ Therefore, mediating caregiver depressive symptoms and consequential child irritability through

¹²⁰ Center on the Developing Child, *8 Things*, 2.

¹²¹ Kathryn Hildyard and David Wolfe, "Child neglect: developmental issues and outcomes," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 26, no. 6-7 (June 2002): 681. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134\(02\)00341-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134(02)00341-1).

¹²² Hildyard and Wolfe, "Child Neglect," 684.

¹²³ Hildyard and Wolfe, "Child Neglect," 690.

¹²⁴ Walker et al., "Inequality in Early Childhood," 1330.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

caregiver support can shift caregiver mental well-being and child development.¹²⁶ Early interventions such as these can reduce risks of adverse neurological consequences and support children during their most formative years. A caregiver environment which supports development can nourish a young brain to enable lifelong cognitive development and personal and social achievement.

Outlining the principles in which a child's brain develops sets the scope to examine how experiences and environmental inputs impact a brain. To ensure productive development, children need an early inflow of positively stimulating care to cultivate productive neural connections that build upon their predisposed genetic architecture. Both experiences and environments contribute to the expansion of circuits across brain regions for the procurement of sensory, linguistic, vision, motor, emotional, and behavioral functions. As demonstrated, poor inputs can derail early childhood development, including lack of stimulation, maternal depression, and neglect.

¹²⁶ Theodore Wachs, Maureen Black, and Patrice Engle, "Maternal Depression: A Global Threat to Children's Health, Development, and Behavior to Human Rights," *Society for Research in Child Development* 3, no. 1 (April 2009): 55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2008.00077.x>.

Chapter II: Theory of International Non-governmental Organizations

An NGO is defined as a non-profit, formalized, task-oriented group that exercises autonomy independent of states, governments or corporations, involves volunteerism and philanthropy into its functionality, and often serves a development purpose.¹²⁷ These types of organizations accumulated international recognition by historically underscoring the importance of humanitarianism: advancing human welfare and promoting altruism.¹²⁸ In contemporary society, NGOs serve as major conduits for issue advocacy, global development, and emergency aid efforts where their agendas are not only grounded in an ethical imperative to mitigate suffering, but also in a larger social movement designed to improve conditions of human lives long-term.¹²⁹ They exist as helper actors, managing resource distribution, implementation strategy, and program expectations of all relevant collaborators.¹³⁰ However, several related dynamics can inhibit NGOs' ability to effectively assist in crisis, including a failure to tailor programming to local needs, the principal-agent problem, funding competition that incentivizes misrepresentation of outcomes, and a lack of oversight that compounds the principal-agent problem. This chapter will examine these theoretical confines,

¹²⁷ Debora Spar and James Dail, "Of Measurement and Mission: Accounting for Performance in Non-Governmental Organizations," *Chicago Journal of International Law* 3, no. 1 (2002): 173. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cjil/vol3/iss1/15>.

¹²⁸ Craig Calhoun, "The imperative to reduce suffering: charity, progress, and emergencies in the field of humanitarian action," in *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, ed. Michael Barnett and Thomas Weiss (Cornell University Press: 2008), 77.

¹²⁹ Calhoun, "The imperative to reduce suffering," 95.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

then present the MEL4AM model as a potential remedy. Subsequently, this chapter will evaluate this model with respect to NGOs' provisions of psychosocial interventions for children.

Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore describe *bureaucratic universalism*: an organizational pathology derived from the programmatic practice of “flattening diversity to generate universal rules and categories that are, by design, inattentive to contextual and particular concerns.”¹³¹ This pathology exists as some organizations naively assume established and effective technical knowledge in one circumstance is transferable across most.¹³² However, Barnett and Finnemore argue generalized knowledge is not appropriate in most circumstances and designing universal rules in international assistance that are inattentive to contextual concerns can cause disastrous results.¹³³

This paradigm of bureaucratic universalism is acutely relevant to NGO programming: if universally applied, it cannot achieve ideal outcomes. While fundamental principles, science, or missions can frame programmatic characteristics, the implementation needs to be considerate of the cultural concerns of an aid audience. If contestation exists between implementing NGOs and local values, the program will fail. Therefore, implementing agents need to cross-

¹³¹ Michael N. Barnett and Martha Finnemore, “The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations,” *International Organization* 53, no. 4 (Autumn, 1999), 721.

¹³² Barnett and Finnemore, “The Politics, Power, and Pathologies,” 721.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 722.

reference against local knowledge to avoid missteps, remain open towards suggestions for correction, and to gain validation for program effectiveness.¹³⁴

Frequently, NGOs overcome bureaucratic universalism by maximizing coordination capabilities. In a comprehensive study commissioned by the United Nation's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), Larry Minear defines coordination as:

...the systematic use of policy instruments to deliver humanitarian assistance in a cohesive and effective manner. Such instruments include strategic planning, gathering data and managing information, mobilizing resources and ensuring accountability, orchestrating a functional division of labor, negotiating and maintaining a serviceable framework with host political authorities and providing leadership.¹³⁵

This type of humanitarian coordination serves as a solution to minimize structural, institutional, and management obstacles that impose barriers to implementation. Additionally, coordination helps elevate the needs of the aid audience to the highest priority by streamlining the efforts of all relevant actors. The UNOCHA report outlines six key components for successful humanitarian coordination:

- 1) Diluting obstacles through interagency relationship building
- 2) Sharing technical expertise that promotes coordination despite disadvantageous contexts
- 3) Persuading humanitarian agency leaders to coordinate where it adds value and allows for leaders to focus teambuilding and collaboration for the humanitarian response itself
- 4) Incentivizing coordination through interagency agreements, media scrutiny, or donor conditionalities

¹³⁴ Janice Gross, Stein, "Humanitarian Organizations: Accountable – Why, to Whom, for What, and How?" in *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, ed. Michael Barnett and Thomas Weiss (Cornell University Press: 2008), 140.

¹³⁵ Larry Minear, UBP Chelliah, Jeff Crisp, John Mackinlay, and Thomas G. Weiss. *United Nations Coordination of the International Humanitarian Response to the Gulf Crisis, 1990-1992*. Providence: Institute for International Studies, 1992.

- 5) Systemizing coordination to ensure competent management, clear structures, professionalism, and programmatic monitoring and evaluation
- 6) Committing to customized, culturally considerate, and relevant aid programming for the beneficiary¹³⁶

This report emphasizes the sixth component, arguing that nothing, not even the other ingredients for successful coordination, can compensate for the lack of attention to the needs of beneficiaries.¹³⁷ In spite of this clear advice, within the humanitarian assistance field, a common practice is developing, implementing, and scaling universal programs.

The failure to tailor programming objectives to local concerns, in part, exists as a function of the principal-agent problem. Aid organizations interact with a multitude of actors including donors, governments, other NGOs, and the aid recipients. These interactions within the humanitarian aid system operate based on hierarchical structures delegating processes and procedures. Bertin Martens describes the principal-agent theory which informs this bureaucratic dynamic, outlining how one party (the principal) outsources a second party (the agent) to undertake and execute the principal's desired task.¹³⁸ Therefore, where principals remain hierarchically superior but cannot do everything, agents act and make decisions on behalf of the principal.¹³⁹ Martens states the principal-agent theory breeds several principal-agent problems: one where agents are unmotivated to work

¹³⁶ Nicola Reindorp and Peter Wiles, *Humanitarian Coordination: Lessons from Recent Field Experience, A study Commissioned by the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)* (London: Overseas Development Institute, June 2001), 4.
<https://www.unhcr.org/3bb04e232.pdf>.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 4.

¹³⁸ Bertin Martens, Uwe Mummert, Peter Murrell, and Paul Seabright, *The Institutional Economics of Foreign Aid* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 42.

¹³⁹ Martens et al., *The Institutional Economics*, 42.

in the interests of principals; two, where both principals and agents fail to be working in the interest of the targeted beneficiaries; and three, where agents seek to maximize autonomy despite preferential constraints imposed by principals.¹⁴⁰

In the case of aid organizations, hierarchical structures exist among and cut across each functional domain of programming. As information and instructions transfer from principals to agents, it becomes diluted and distorted as agents exercise their own autonomy – executing other tasks that either advance personal interest or act in the best interest of the target community – and deviate from the wishes of those higher up the chain. Therefore, principal-agent problems persist and replicate because of disconnects between what top-down directors want from the intermediary NGOs and what the intermediaries’ priorities are compared to the aid recipients.

Martens’ principal-agent theory underscores that aid organizations do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they interact with numerous actors across overlapping domains. In practice, organizations seek private and public funding to catalyze aid initiatives. Later, when attempting to implement programs, NGOs interact with local governments to gain geographic access to crisis zones. Once in the crisis zone, NGOs collaborate with grassroots organizations that serve as implementing partners. Throughout this practice, aid recipients undoubtedly express needs while existing in a humanitarian crisis. Therefore, throughout the funding, access, and implementation processes, a variety of relevant actors contribute to a humanitarian

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

intervention. Independent relationships between NGOs, governments, implementing partners, and aid recipients can separately create tension throughout the implementing process, leading to compromised objectives and outcomes. These tensions can stem from misaligned interests, funding conditionalities, restricted resources, misinformation, or a lack of empathy. According to Martens, at the center of humanitarian intervention issues exists the NGO attempting to triage between the relevant actors to advance programmatic goals.¹⁴¹ Therefore, as NGOs exist as both a principal and an agent depending on the circumstance, they face a unique amount of tension in their principal-agent relationships which can further exacerbate actor issues. Concepts such as NGO's competition for limited funds, accountability, evaluation protocols, and legitimacy contextualize these principal-agent dynamics.

The most notable obstacle NGOs face while attempting to create unique programs for each local context is securing financial means to support the initiative. NGOs are externally funded and need a diverse profile to maintain coordinated efforts, transnational legitimacy, programmatic implementation, and functionality. Funds are most frequently awarded as short-term renewable contracts that governments and donors issue through a competitive application process.¹⁴² This race to secure public and private contractual funds creates a competitive culture within the NGO community, as organizations cannot sustain without the support

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 43.

¹⁴² Alexander Cooley and James Ron, "The NGO Scramble: Organizational Insecurity and the Political Economy of Transnational Action," *International Security* 27, no.1 (2002): 11. www.jstor.org/stable/3092151.

provided through them. Therefore, NGOs exist under persistent pressure to renew or win new contracts to maintain and expand functioning.¹⁴³

Beyond instigating a competitive dynamic, short-term contracts infringe on NGO autonomy by pushing concerns such as program ethics and efficacy to the margins.¹⁴⁴ Allocating resources on a conditional basis potentially creates controversy over disconnects between funders' expectations, NGO objectives, and the interests of the recipients, thereby exacerbating dynamics of the principal-agent dynamic. When NGOs receive a conditional contract, they are likely to disclose information to donors regarding programmatic research, implementation, and success that align with the interests of the contractual agreement. Given the competitive nature of these contracts, NGOs may withhold or distort evidence that projects are deviating from their intended outcome in hopes of renewing the contract.¹⁴⁵ Without sound accountability and constructive oversight mechanisms, NGOs maintain no incentive to disclose failing or inappropriate projects; in fact, such transparency is disadvantageous for continued funding.

The misrepresentation of information raises the question; to whom is the intermediary at any level of the humanitarian hierarchy more accountable and why? Alpa Dhanani and Ciaran Connolly, scholars on NGO accountability, attest there should be both internally and externally imposed expectations of accountability. Within the theoretical paradigm, internal organizational management remains fair, honest, and transparent with the capacity to unify staff behind the implementation

¹⁴³ Cooley and Ron, "The NGO Scramble," 11.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

goal for humanitarian betterment.¹⁴⁶ And externally, Dhanani and Connolly offer two types of imposed accountability: first, where principals facilitate a wide umbrella of accountability standards and mechanisms to keep agents honest, specify outcomes, and establish benchmarks; and second, where audits of an organization exist to monitor and evaluate the performance efficacy and ethical intervention.¹⁴⁷ Unfortunately, this two-tiered system of accountability – where principals construct external mechanisms to oversee and monitor agents, and agents aim to perform given the prescribed standards outline by principals and internal management expectations – is often not a reality.¹⁴⁸

Management can be incohesive and unclear, leading to distorted effectiveness and impeding progression towards targeted goals.¹⁴⁹ And beyond the office walls, the lack of external and rigorous third-party evaluation protocols allows for reporting mechanisms to fall to the wayside, thereby diluting both types of externally imposed accountability.¹⁵⁰ Without ongoing evaluation mechanisms of emergency aid programs, it is harder for principals to stay informed of agents' actions and agents become more autonomous when executing tasks. And, without independent evaluation, agents can manipulate information, or even withhold information from a principal, to present self-serving evidence. Here, accountability

¹⁴⁶ Alpa Dhanani and Ciaran Connolly, “Non-governmental Organizational Accountability: Talking the Talk and Walking the Walk?” *Journal of Business Ethics* 129, no. 3 (2015): 616. www.jstor.org/stable/24702963.

¹⁴⁷ Dhanani and Connolly, “Non-governmental Organizational Accountability,” 616.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Spar and Dail, “Of Measurement and Mission,” 179.

standards are sabotaged, and NGO programs end up doing a disservice to both the target audience and themselves.

The growth of humanitarian organizations and the interconnectedness of provisions compound these problems of accountability and principal-agent tensions. Provisions include cash, food supplies, shelter, tools, trained personnel, and much more. Where a single organization is unable to provide all necessary provisions to address an issue, or where an issue necessitates an integrated supply of provisions to prove effective, humanitarian approaches become coordinated.¹⁵¹ However, in such a complex and intertwined humanitarian domain, the monitoring of provision links becomes difficult. Impetus, cause, and effect of one provision might not exist independently of other related humanitarian measures. Again, it is necessary to devise and implement monitoring and evaluation strategies that decode the cause and effect of a single program provision during discrete moments in time to produce sharp results and a greater understanding of whether standards of accountability are being met.¹⁵²

NGO legitimacy is directly impacted by the lack of accountability mechanisms. Without internal and external procedures, NGO legitimacy becomes precarious as politicians, journalists, and researchers question funding sources, implementation motives, unsatisfactory outcomes, and failing evaluation protocols.¹⁵³ It would seem as though NGOs intrinsically strive to maintain high standards of accountability given their support of humanitarian values such as

¹⁵¹ Spar and Dail, "Of Measurement and Mission," 172.

¹⁵² Stein, "Humanitarian Organizations," 140.

¹⁵³ Dhanani and Connolly, "Non-governmental Organizational Accountability," 631.

human rights, civil society, and equality. However, with self-interested or misaligned-interests from the target audiences, NGOs can fail in assistance implementation, or even cause the aid-recipients more harm. As discussed before, when organizations are failing, they distort disclosures in hopes of capturing that same attention and support as if they were succeeding. Unfortunately, this practice casts doubt on the ethics of humanitarian intervention and effectiveness of programmatic practices. Therefore, this informational façade weakens the NGO legitimacy and creates a sense of inauthenticity and ineffectiveness.¹⁵⁴

Here, we see the true shortcomings of NGOs. Despite moral, ethical, and socially-driven intentions to provide humanitarian relief, the lack of accountability practices – perpetuated by competition for finite financial resources, misinformation, failed internal and external mechanism, and provision interconnectedness – can reorient organizations’ priorities away from coordinated and culturally specific interventions. Instead, organizations succumb to the interplay of these dynamics that prevent standards of efficacy.

Success in humanitarian aid includes anticipating and confronting paradigm challenges as outlined before, as well as adapting to environments that resist programs because of inadequate scalability and inadequate attention to cross-cultural considerations. In order to readjust programs whose outcomes assume failure and inadequacies in order to reach implementation goals, programs need monitoring and evaluation protocols. These accountability mechanisms are

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 617.

important for reasons of fiscal liability: international investors expect progress, benchmarks, and deliverables. One solution is reliable program evaluation protocols.

MEL4AM

A consortium of international NGOs advocate for the *monitoring, evaluation and learning for adaptive management model (MEL4AM)* as the standard in international program feedback.¹⁵⁵ Within the model, the consortium emphasizes adaptive rigor and maintaining “documented, transparent trail of intentions, decisions and actions.”¹⁵⁶ Components of adaptive rigor include detailed methods, tools, staff training, program curriculum, and systems.¹⁵⁷ A necessary aspect within each component is the persistent testing of a program’s usefulness, practically, and timeliness.¹⁵⁸ These periodic opportunities for evaluation increase program efficacy.¹⁵⁹ Therefore, by incorporating the MEL4AM model, programs are uniquely tailored to the targeted audience and become increasingly effective and scalable.

The MEL4AM model uses three premises to orient their programming system. First, it is important to diagnose the developmental issue and design a

¹⁵⁵ Ben Ramalingam, Leni Wild, and Anne Buffardi, *Making adaptive rigour work: Principles and practices for strengthen monitoring, evaluation, and learning for adaptive management* (Overseas Development Institute, 2019), 2. <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12653.pdf>.

¹⁵⁶ Ramalingam, Wild, and Buffardi, *Making adaptive rigour work*, 3.

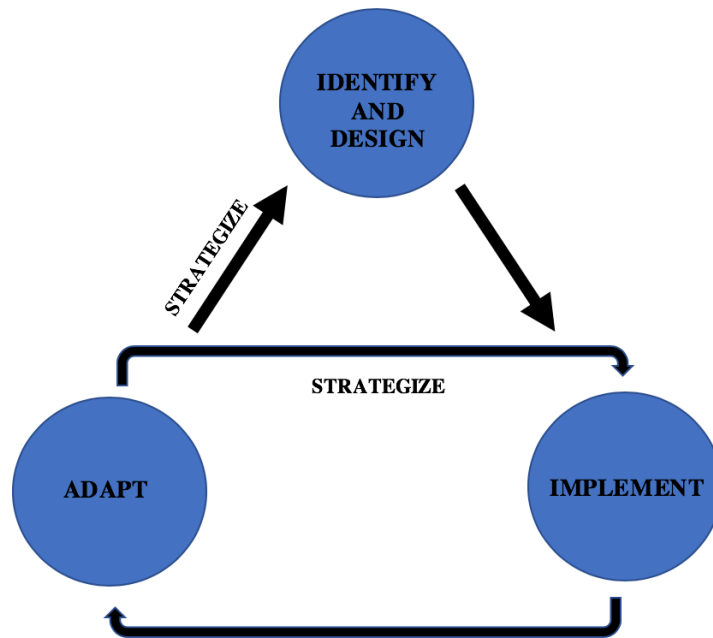
¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

program through multiple stakeholder perspectives.¹⁶⁰ Second, the model implements the program design while tracking outcomes and assessing the scope.¹⁶¹ And third, designers adapt the program given the outcomes of monitoring to holistically evaluating the program and reimagine strategies for change.¹⁶² (see Figure 4 for visual representation of cycle).

Figure 4: MEL in Adaptive Programs



Source: Created by Martha Baker, based off of Ben Ramalingam, et. al., *Making adaptive rigour work, Principles and practices for strengthening monitoring, evaluation and learning for adaptive management*, (Overseas Development Institute, 2019).

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 9.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

The premises of the MEL4AM model address prior concerns between principals and agents. Integrating diagnosis and program design through multiple stakeholder perspectives necessitates ownership and contribution from all relevant actors in aid intervention. If both donors and recipients collaborate with NGOs in this respect, principal-agent tensions could dissolve after establishing norms of information transparency, open discourse, and consensus. Additionally, providing space for all relevant actors, specifically the recipients, to voice opinions and concerns during the design phase ensures the program assesses cultural considerations and uniquely tailor's intervention strategized based on environmental factors. Designing a culturally considerate, transparent, and widely understood program through early collaboration provides the necessary foundation for success in subsequent premises.

By circumventing issues of misinformation distribution in the beginning, the model's second premise – implementing, tracking, and scaling – overcomes principal-agent coordination failure. The foundation built on shared programmatic goals, provisions, and means allows for streamlined execution. Stakeholders, NGOs, and recipients are all equally aware of the unique intervention and are therefore able to track outcomes and access scope. The shared awareness of the humanitarian response also allows relevant actors to overcome constraints imposed by the short-term contractual cycle. Organization implementation is not in tension with funds because the coordinated program design previously integrated stakeholder expectations and the aid audience's needs. NGOs no longer exist as the information gatekeeper, with the autonomy to selfishly distort implementation

results for competitive contractual purposes. Instead, representatives from all aspects of the principal-agent hierarchy are aware of and have access to implementation processes, outcomes, and scope. Therefore, premise two thrives as coordinated design triumphs over misinformation distribution to minimize principal-agent coordination failure.

And finally, premise three offers a more productive alternative for when program outcomes do not deliver expected results. Where fear and selfishness fueled the short-term contractual system, the MEL4AM model's third premise – adapting – emphasizes shared ownership of the programmatic implementation, and, therefore, accountability of all relevant actors to track outcomes, adjust dysfunctional practices, and improve performance outcomes. In fact, if a functional feedback loop exists, donors and NGOs could receive updates from recipients regarding the quality of the program and its impact. Then, given recipient feedback, donors and NGOs would adjust their program and priorities to adequately address recipient needs.

The success of premise three's functional feedback loop hinges on the open flow of information between each component of the implementation system. Institutionalizing a transparent informatic connection between donors, NGOs, and aid recipients would allow recipients to share back data and outcomes, donors to adjust financial priorities and allocate accordingly, and providers to redesign the programs to redistribute to the local context. This model is contingent on equity of information which necessitates closing the communication gap between donors and recipients. As discussed in premise one, the involvement of donors and recipients

during the diagnosis and design process hopes to equalize power asymmetries between relevant actors, normalize interactions across hierarchies of principal-agent dynamics, and disallow false information.

When asked what the biggest issue is restricting adequate international programming, NGO curriculum advisors answered that the lack of long-term evaluations that align with programmatic goals and communities' needs plagues adequate assistance.¹⁶³ Trial and error does not exist and, instead, programs follow rigid, hyper-scaled blueprints that are only evaluated after delivery.¹⁶⁴ The MEL4AM model offers a solution to these constraints and obstacles organizations, as well as relevant actors, confront while implementing humanitarian aid.

Emergency Intervention for Children in Crisis

The theories and observations about NGOs' general challenges also apply to those seeking to provide early childhood interventions. The conditions under which such aid is provided often are wholly inconsistent with those prescribed for best practices: the children receiving aid are in flux, often on the move, may be experiencing PTSD or other effects of trauma, may have lost family members, and are likely living in insecure conditions and suffering from lack of basic daily security and sustenance. Interventions designed to address the negative cognitive and social impacts of such experiences are often called *psychosocial*

¹⁶³ Jeff DeCelles interviewed by author, November 21, 2019.

¹⁶⁴ Decelles, interview.

interventions.¹⁶⁵ This umbrella term includes mental health, child protection, and educational components aimed at decreasing risk factors, promoting community cohesion, and developing the well-being of young children.¹⁶⁶ In crisis, psychosocial support involves institutionalizing specialized tools that neutralize compromising environmental stimuli and dilute cycles of trauma and stress. This section delineates key guidelines and components when developing psychosocial programming for children in crisis. Next, this section argues that, for optimal implementation and success, psychosocial programs should align with the MEL4AM model. Ultimately, we conclude that humanitarian organizations with a specialized and deliberate emphasis on early childhood prove most effective in achieving this niche aid objective.

Emergency humanitarian assistance often refers to short term relief which stabilizes the crisis and prevents further catastrophe.¹⁶⁷ This type of assistance delivers essential survival materials such as food supplies and medical provisions to relieve the population of dire circumstances. Subsequent to emergency assistance is development programming, frequently framed as long-term activities in capacity building and human capital investments intended for economic and political reconstruction.¹⁶⁸ Where educational initiatives have been historically characterized

¹⁶⁵ Maryanne Loughry, Carola Eyber, National Research Council Committee on Population, and Program on Forced Migration and Health at the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, *Psychosocial Concepts in Humanitarian Work with Children: A Review of the Concepts and Related Literature* (Washington D.C.: National Academies Press, 2013), 13.

¹⁶⁶ Global Education Monitoring Report Team, *Education as healing: addressing the trauma of displacement through social and emotional learning, Policy paper 38* (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), April 2019), 6.
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000367812>.

¹⁶⁷ Harvey Langholtz, *The Psychology of Peacekeeping* (Praeger, 1998), 134.

¹⁶⁸ Langholtz, *The Psychology of Peacekeeping*, 134.

as developmental programming, early childhood interventions defy dichotomies between emergency and development circumstances.

While early childhood interventions are less concrete when compared to other emergency aid provisions such as nutrition, shelter, and health supplies, the delivery of early childhood programming targets comparable geographic areas and populations surviving in life-threatening circumstances. The experience of a migrant child often includes loss, trauma, insecurity, displacement, disturbed relationships, and, often events that redefine family structures and require social adaptation. As discussed previously, such adverse experiences alter children's physiological equilibrium, disrupting cognitive and emotional adaptations. Therefore, where children are susceptible to acute cognitive shifts that alter their developmental trajectory, early childhood interventions exist as a pressing emergency aid intervention that, similar to nutrition, shelter and health provisions, can provide the necessary means for individual betterment and the basis for future success in long-term development policies.

Early childhood interventions are proven to stimulate resiliency, nurture cognitive and emotional development, and help communities heal trauma to encourage social cohesion, reconciliation, and peacebuilding by investing in the younger generation.¹⁶⁹ Broadly, four themes define psychosocial interventions for children in crisis. Programs can successfully emphasize one theme or chose to integrate a multitude for holistic interventions. The themes include:

¹⁶⁹ Global Education Monitoring Report Team, *Education as healing*, 2.

- 1) Cultivating creative expression through art, music, or drama.
- 2) Promoting executive functioning by stimulating memory, emotion, and motor movement functions
- 3) Developing mind-body awareness through breathing, emotion regulation, and stress management exercises.
- 4) Building social support systems through interactive activities between children and the larger community¹⁷⁰

Together the themes encompass psychosocial intervention, and when translated into effective programming, can positively shift the developmental trajectory of children. However, selecting a theme from which to design a program hardly suffices as step one.

Combining NGO programmatic considerations outlined by Roberta Apfel and Bennet Simo, as well as Maryanne Loughry and Carola Eyber, this paper provides eight comprehensive considerations – grounded in cognitive science and child development theory – that are necessary when systematically intervening in areas of crisis. Programs must:

- 1) Develop risk indices of the program, understand how each index relates to a child’s environment, external stressor, and existing protective factor¹⁷¹
- 2) Equalize access to program components to obtain greatest impact¹⁷²
- 3) Acknowledge baseline intellectual ability, distractibility, stimulation threshold, response to novel stimuli, coping strategies, and internal locus of control of the program participants and how does the program allow for growth in these domains¹⁷³
- 4) Understand the compounding nature of early childhood protections; if programs safeguard children against developmental delays, those children become less of a cost

¹⁷⁰ Global Education Monitoring Report Team, *Education as healing*.

¹⁷¹ Loughry et al., *Psychosocial Concepts*, 21.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

to society. Therefore, reaching the most endangered children must be a priority¹⁷⁴

- 5) Comprehend that programs cannot inoculate children against failure but help develop necessary skillsets to thrive later in life¹⁷⁵
- 6) Recognize that interventions later in life are not as effective as programs that start early on¹⁷⁶
- 7) Coordinate between implementing partners while mitigating cumulative risk factors¹⁷⁷
- 8) Collaborate with caregivers. Their involvement can counterbalance the effects of trauma and strengthen children's psychosocial wellbeing¹⁷⁸¹⁷⁹
- 9) Employ well-trained professionals with unique skill sets that reflect cultural considerations¹⁸⁰

The framework above underscores realistic expectations of early childhood emergency aid while simultaneously providing the necessary context to foster safe, nurturing, and productive interventions.

For donors, NGOs, and recipients to agree upon the most effective early childhood program theme, while taking into account the child-appropriate programmatic considerations, the MEL4AM model proves advantageous for intervention design, ensuring stakeholder happiness, and producing beneficial humanitarian outcomes for children in crisis. The first premise – diagnose and collaboration – provides a platform for conventional humanitarian actors (donors, NGOs, and aid recipients) in addition to early childhood specialists (psychotherapists, child development researchers, and technically trained early

¹⁷⁴ Roberta Apfel and Bennett Simon, *Minefields in Their Hearts: The Mental Health of Children in War and Communal Violence* (Yale University Press, 1996), 48.

¹⁷⁵ Apfel and Simon, *Minefields*, 48.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Loughry et al., *Psychosocial Concepts*, 21.

¹⁷⁹ Apfel and Simon, *Minefields*, 48.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

learning professionals) to fuse ideas and expertise. Integrating the perspectives and skills of each actor enhances content creation to 1) accurately reflect childhood development science and the needs of children; 2) delineate provisions necessary for adaptive childcare; 3) identify risk indices; and 4) determine the professional skills necessary when involving the lives of children and their community at large.¹⁸¹

This safeguards against culturally inconsiderate and opaque programming. Where other humanitarian assistance programs experience power asymmetries between donors and aid recipients, early childhood interventions often confront information asymmetries between the Western Ph.Ds. and recipient communities: Eurocentric cognitive findings are superimposed onto impoverished communities without contextual or cultural considerations.¹⁸² Abiding by MEL4AM's first premise ensures collaboration between these actors, leading to outside assistance that does not marginalize intrinsic local processes or community values pertaining to childcare. It emphasizes a community-based approach that respects local culture from program inception by integrating exceptional elements of Western science with local approaches.¹⁸³

Premise two – implementing, tracking, and scaling – studies the myriad of variables in an early childhood intervention. Establishing organizational infrastructure to compare and evaluate what works, with whom, and how, prioritizes intervention outcomes, and therefore, child wellbeing. Additionally,

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Langholtz, *The Psychology of Peacekeeping*, 137.

¹⁸³ Langholtz, 143.

evaluation agencies maintain an ethical imperative to responsibly evaluate program outcomes honestly given these interventions intercede themselves in children's lives.¹⁸⁴ Adopting a bottom-up, independent, short- and long-term evaluation strategy in early childhood interventions creates a sustaining participatory research environment where aid communities affect hypothesis testing and data collection instruments.¹⁸⁵ This research structure builds trust between evaluating agencies and recipients, legitimizing the voice of aid communities and providing researchers access to critical information and site access. Providing long-term evaluation looks like tracking children beyond intervention touchpoints to determine the program's longitudinal psychosocial shifts. Quasi-experimental evaluations of invention programs must conduct a baseline evaluation of risk indices, environmental conditions, and development performance before intervention implementation.¹⁸⁶ Without pre-intervention data, making post-intervention assessments of the target population is a worthless scientific conclusion. Although pre-post data does not establish intervention effectiveness, meeting this tracking condition validates addition indices research strategies related to children's outcomes.

The purpose of the MEL4AM model is to forge a coalition between donors, NGOS, governments, early childhood specialists, independent evaluation agencies, and recipients which allows for collective investment and action when addressing programmatic problems. The final premise – adapting – underscores the feedback loop between relevant implementation actors and their ability to use data to re-

¹⁸⁴ Apfel and Simon, *Minefields*, 212.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 207.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 210.

inform program design and service delivery. The transparent flow of communication between actors will make interventions more uniquely adequate for children's needs as the reimplementation, reevaluation, and adaptation cycle augments successful outcomes and readjusts for failures.

The MEL4AM is not easy to execute. This framework demands psychosocial programs develop from accredited cognitive research and cultural considerations, employ local resources and sound methodology, and a collective commitment to malleable practical implementation for children affected by crisis. Regardless of achievement obstacles, this framework serves as the gold-standard as it integrates necessary actors to eliminate power and information asymmetries, provides action-oriented research designs, maintains cultural sensitivities, and, most importantly, remains unendingly children centric. Notably, humanitarian organizations that maintain a broader mandate to improving conditions in crisis are less likely to follow the MEL4AM model, whereas organizations with a focus on early childhood have the expertise in this niche emergency aid profile to necessitate such a design and implementation culture from their partners. Hence, specialized NGOs with a niche aid objective prove most effective in outcome achievement.

In the following chapters, this paper will evaluate the psychosocial interventions of Sesame Workshop in the Middle East for Syrian refugees and of UNICEF's programming in Matamoros Mexico for migrant children at the US-Mexico border. How do these two specific programs follow the MEL4AM to mitigate NGO coordination, accountability, and legitimacy failure? How are programs derived from child development science and to what degree is science

considered within local cultural factors? Does the programmatic implementation involve an evaluation protocol? And, importantly, how are children responding to intervention and what success – or failure – are programs experiencing?

Chapter III: Sesame Workshop's Intervention for Syrian Refugees

Programmatic Overview

Sesame Workshop is the media and educational non-governmental organization orchestrating the international presence of Sesame Street.¹⁸⁷ Over the last 50 years, Sesame Workshop revolutionized children's television programming as a means of humanitarian intervention. Now, through an integrated approach using media platforms, formal schooling and social impact programs, Sesame Workshop helps the most vulnerable children around the world develop cognitively, socially, and intellectually. The media content primarily serve low- and middle- income countries (LMICs) – defined by the World Bank Group as countries making less than \$3,955 gross national income (GNI) per capita¹⁸⁸ - to mitigate the adverse effects of crisis in areas of displacement, instability, and war.¹⁸⁹ This chapter evaluates Sesame Workshop's approach to psychosocial programming for children given the previously discussed scientific and theoretical frameworks. Then this chapter investigates how Sesame translated its approach to designing their intervention for Syrian refugees, as well as program effectiveness to date.

¹⁸⁷ Sesame Street is a children's television show which started broadcasting in the United States 1969. Since its inception, the show has employed a comprehensive education curriculum to impact early development and prepare young children for school. Today, Sesame Street remains committed to using media to captures children's attention, education them to help them reach their fullest potential.

¹⁸⁸ Patricio Marquez, *Mental Health Among Displaced People and Refugees: Making the Case for Action at the World Bank Group* (The World Bank Group, 2019), 7.

¹⁸⁹ Charlotte Cole and June Lee, *The Sesame Effect: The Global Impact of the Longest Street in the World* (Routledge, 2019), 9.

Sesame Workshop programs elevate early childhood as a humanitarian response priority to set vulnerable children on the path towards healthy growth and development. They target at risk children and families plagued by circumstances that include stressful environments, the realities of refugee camps, poor hygienic conditions, financial disempowerment, and gender inequality. By reaching children who confront circumstances of international crisis early and often, Sesame Workshop programming offsets the developmental impacts of such adversity.

Though the educational underpinnings of Sesame Workshop programming remain consistent across the global – the use of Muppets, cognitive science, and the power of play – differences do exist between program content and presentation. *Sisimpur* in Bangladesh targets children ages 3-8 and emphasizes socioemotional skills, literacy and language, and disaster preparedness.¹⁹⁰ This show also demonstrates to families the importance of building mutual respect between people of identity differences; this is an implicit message directed at the Rohingya refugee crisis.¹⁹¹ In India, *Galli Galli Sim Sim* employs Elmo and his new friend Chamki to promote gender equality.¹⁹² In a location where 40% of girls do not attend secondary school, Chamki inspires young women to follow their educational dreams.¹⁹³ These two programs represent a greater organizational characteristic of Sesame Workshop: they dismiss a universal approach to creating and implementing aid.

¹⁹⁰ “Sisimpur,” Shows, Sesame Workshop, <https://www.sesameworkshop.org/what-we-do/shows/sisimpur>.

¹⁹¹ “Sisimpur.”

¹⁹² “Galli Galli Sim Sim,” Shows, Sesame Workshop, <https://www.sesameworkshop.org/what-we-do/shows/galli-galli-sim-sim>.

¹⁹³ “Galli Galli Sim Sim.”

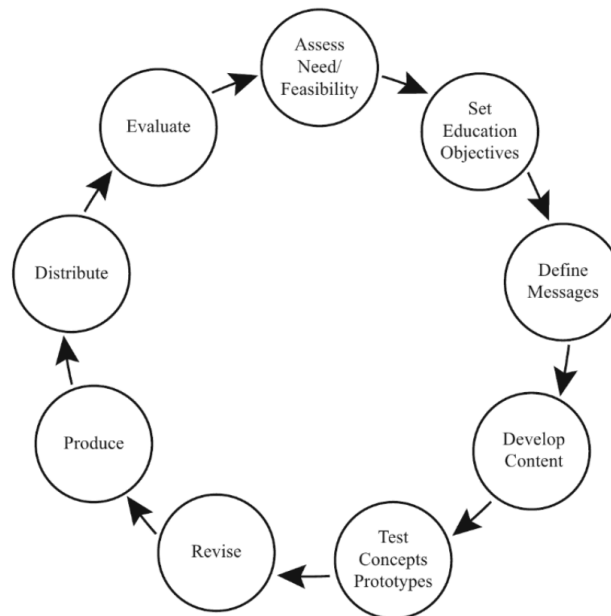
Instead, Sesame grounds each program in rigorous, culturally-specific research to reflect local customs and provision needs.

Curriculum development at Sesame Workshop starts with identifying the need and feasibility of program implementation. Next, the creative team builds a comprehensive educational curriculum that – through lens of cultural contexts and expert sensibilities – shapes the deliverables.¹⁹⁴ These research tools advise the product process as they inform a topic, gauge target audiences, help determine production aspects such as setting, characters, and messaging, and provide a plan for how to develop a measurement strategy for evaluation and scaling. Similar to the fundamentals of the MEL4AM model, Sesame Streets’ cyclical model for program development (see Figure 5) allows for the adaptive flexibility to shift specific objectives or overall program goals.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Cole and Lee, *The Sesame Effect*, 23.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 31.

Figure 5: The Sesame Workshop Production Process



Source: Charlotte F. Cole., *The Sesame Effect: The Global Impact of the Longest Street in the World*, (Taylor and Francis Group, 2016)

In an interview with Shanna Kohn, a Senior Education Manager for Humanitarian Programs at Sesame Workshop, she characterized this *Sesame Process* as a research based approach merging needs assessments, local stakeholders, funding actors, therapists, trauma specialists, creatives, music makers, and media professionals through program specific content seminars.¹⁹⁶ She provided contextual details, sharing that each project refers to an *educational framework document*: a research record comprised of literature, research, as well as previous seminars that set the agenda for each aspect of the program.¹⁹⁷ This

¹⁹⁶ Shanna Kohn, interviewed by author, February 7, 2020.

¹⁹⁷ Kohn, interview.

framework document eventually morphs into the program's *objectives agenda* which outlines programmatic ambitions. Once the seminar collaborators agree on the agenda, it is sent to producers to develop Sesame sponsored media content that animates the identified programmatic narrative and goals.¹⁹⁸ Throughout media production, Kohn noted Sesame employs formative research methods to test each aspect of the objectives agenda to ensure programmatic aims are attainable through the devised curriculum.¹⁹⁹ She emphasized the malleability of Sesame programs, stating both objectives and media content are consistently changed until the final and holistic product passes an impact research assessment prior to distribution.²⁰⁰

The nature of Sesame Workshop's program development is experimental, where the production process advocates for trial and error, innovation, and creativity. Congruent with the premises of the MEL4AM model, this Sesame Process serves as a best practice when incorporating the requirements for child development programming. Sesame Workshop's first step – assess needs and feasibility – establishes a recipient-oriented ethos to guide subsequent steps of program development. Next, pooling together a diversity of specialists to collaborate on the educational framework document and the objective's agenda suggests a commitment to the substantial range of early childhood programmatic variables and considerations. Expertise offered throughout Sesame's content seminars distinguishes which of the four early childhood themes will contextualize a specific program and further, the associated risk indices, content requirements,

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

and child sensitive media material. The initial steps of the Sesame Process exemplify the MEL4AM model's first premise by integrating all stakeholder perspectives, maintaining collective information transparency, and adapting programming measures to the culturally specific needs of certain children in crisis.

Where the MEL4AM model's second premise would naturally follow, it is important to note the Sesame Process deviates from this theoretical framework. Prior to implementation, the Sesame Process includes mechanisms for adaptability through prototype testing, revision, and reproduction. Through the research methods Kohn described, Sesame content undergoes program evaluation well before implementation to ensure the intervention adequately targets audience concerns, reaches program objectives, and improves the conditions of beneficiaries.²⁰¹This type of preemptive adaption step exceeds MEL4AM model expectation and enhances program specifics and overall uniqueness, therefore transforming the Sesame Process into a best practice.

Sesame's production process also exemplifies both the second and third premises of the MEL4AM model. The implementation and distributive component of Sesame programming is possible given its success in the previous steps, which ensure cultural appropriateness and scalability. The production teams collaborate with local media and radio professionals in geographic area of concern, building distributive capacity for all subsequent broadcastings. Adapting the Sesame curriculum after implementation and evaluation protocols, Kohn asserted, is crucial

²⁰¹ Kohn, interview.

throughout the Sesame Process.²⁰² Monitoring and evaluation reports are always performed by third party actors such as Educational Testing Services and NYU's Global TIES for Children.

Walking through the MEL4AM premises demonstrates the superb nature of Sesame Workshop's program development model. Their ability to streamline local needs, expertise, production revisions, and evaluation mechanisms enables interventions to most effectively address the issues children face in crisis. Superseding model expectations by including the prototype evaluation step particularly highlights the culturally specific, child-centric ethos driving Sesame Workshop's interventions. Devising steps in curriculum development that give space for creative experimentation prior to implementation also ensures children are less likely to be developmentally compromised by the intervention.

Sesame's success abiding by the processes' guidelines has piqued the interest of other international actors. The World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, the Center for Universal Learning at the Brookings Institution, the Association for Childhood Education International, and the Moving Minds Alliance have partnered with Sesame Workshop to devise international guidelines and expectations that underscore the quality and impact of interventions for children.²⁰³

²⁰² Kohn, interview.

²⁰³ Cole and Lee, *The Sesame Effect*, 64.

Ahlan Simsim

Sesame Workshop, through a \$100 million grant awarded by the MacArthur Foundation in 2017 and in collaboration with the IRC, aims to bring hope, education, and happiness to a generation of Syrian refugee children. This collaboration serves as the largest investment in early childhood abroad to date – exceeding the scope of any other Sesame Workshop interventions – and works to strengthen child resiliency and soften the toxic and traumatic experiences of refugee camps.²⁰⁴ Following the Sesame Process for program development, the Workshop and the IRC created a three-pronged approach targeted at 3-6-year-old children and their caregivers who fled to Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.²⁰⁵

The first aspect of this project includes widely dispersed educational content. Using a multimedia approach – television, phones, digital platforms, and direct services in homes and centers – Syrian refugees will interact with *Ahlan Simsim*, or “Welcome Sesame.”²⁰⁶ Estimated to provide 9.4 million young children with language, reading, math, and social skills, Ahlan Simsim will prepare refugees for later schooling and life.²⁰⁷ The key: culturally-specific messages to promote emotional responsibility and identification, inclusion, and gender equality.

The creative team designed three culturally specific Muppets to star in Ahlan Simsim. First, Basma, is the six-year-old Muppet who is unafraid of new

²⁰⁴ “Refugee Response,” What We Do, Sesame Workshop, <https://www.sesameworkshop.org/what-we-do/refugee-response>.

²⁰⁵ Sherrie Westin, “When Elmo and Big Bird Talk to Refugees,” interviewed by Elizabeth Blair, *Social Entrepreneurs, Taking on World Problems*, NPR, May 5, 2017, audio, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/05/05/526775562/when-elmo-and-big-bird-talk-to-refugees>.

²⁰⁶ “Refugee Response.”

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

experiences.²⁰⁸ Described as a “broad performer who loves to sing and dance,” the purple fur Basma connects through creating and sharing music (see image of Basma below).²⁰⁹ The second character is Jad. New to the refugee neighborhood, Jad immediately connects with Basma. He uses visual arts, such as drawing and painting, to express himself, and uses his grandfather’s paintbrush carried from where he used to live (see image of Jad below).²¹⁰ Jad and Basma are always accompanied by Ma’zooza, the baby goat. Often causing chaos throughout the show, Ma’zooza’s presence offers dynamic interactions between the characters (see image of Ma’zooza below).²¹¹



Source: The MacArthur Foundation., *Meet the New Muppets of Ahlan Simsim!*, (2019)

The second aspect of the approach includes home visits conducted by the IRC and locally trained professionals to reinforce digital content. Modeled after the “Reach Up and Learn” program, the IRC is building local capacity for early childhood parenting.²¹² These professionals work to support up to 800,000

²⁰⁸ Scott Cameron, “Meet the New Muppets of Ahlan Simsim!” *Medium*, November 17, 2019, <https://medium.com/@ahlansimsim2019/meet-the-new-muppets-of-ahlan-simsim-fa21583cc87e>.

²⁰⁹ Cameron, “Meet the New Muppets.”

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² “About,” Reach up and Learn, <https://reachupandlearn.com/about>.

caregivers throughout the refugee camps and reinforce principles such as caregiver responsiveness, early stimulation, maternal mental health, and family resiliency.²¹³ The second prong overcomes an “oh crap threshold,” as Kohn described. When applying for the MacArthur Grant, Sesame Workshop learned the limitations associated with media as an exclusive intervention technique for refugee children.²¹⁴ While socio-emotional content can be broadcasted, it is important to recognize the content might be a child’s first exposure to processing grief, loss, or other overwhelming feelings. The collaboration with the IRC proved imperative, not only to overcome this limitation, but to ensure children and families received adequate support following Ahlan Simsim episodes.²¹⁵ The IRC developed protocol to mediate environments with trained professionals to help families deconstruct and digest the meaningful content and reinforce the lessons learned. Hoping to reach over 1.5 million children, this IRC caregiver mentorship program is a necessary additive to Ahlan Simsim.²¹⁶

And third, the grant will also establish development centers throughout refugee camps to create formal school and nurturing centers equipped with play-based learning materials such as puzzles, storybooks, and other games. While the IRC will manage the development centers, the curriculum is designed by Sesame Workshop. Play-based learning, a relatively new concept within the humanitarian programming field, serves as an outlet for children to just be kids. John Goodwin,

²¹³ “Ahlan Simsim,” Sesame Workshop, <https://www.sesameworkshop.org/what-we-do/shows/ahlan-simsim>.

²¹⁴ Kohn, interview.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ “Ahlan Simsim”

the CEO of the Lego Foundation, an internationally active organization promoting play for kids in crisis globally states,

Research shows that not only is play vital for children's psychological, emotional and cognitive health, and development, but it also hones the resilience they need to overcome adversity and build their futures. Early adverse experiences negatively affect the development of brain architecture, which provides the foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health. By providing play-based learning to children in crisis, we can help mitigate the detrimental, long term effects of displacement and trauma, ultimately giving a generation of refugee children a path forward.²¹⁷

Not only it is clear that play-based learning offers the appropriate structure for child to develop, it also counteracts the effects of trauma and adversity this migrate child experience. Therefore, the IRC and Sesame Street centers will serve as a safe haven and developmental goldmine for children of all ages.

The three-pronged approach is targeting many facets of refugee life to address the needs of families and prevent the development of hurtful psychopathological tendencies in children and caregivers. The television series hopes to explain to children how displacement affects their caregivers.²¹⁸ Putting Basma, Jad, and other Muppets in conversation with adults who can plainly express their feelings of insecurity, disempowerment, and confusion, children are able to recognize emotional circumstances that might similarly affect their caregivers. As discussed previously, cognitive science demonstrates that the quality of repeated

²¹⁷ Flavia Draganus, "The LEGO Foundation awards \$100 million to Sesame Workshop to bring the power of learning through play to children affected by the Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises," *The International Rescue Committee*, December 5, 2018, <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/lego-foundation-awards-100-million-sesame-workshop-bring-power-learning-through-play>.

²¹⁸ Westin, "When Elmo and Big Bird Talk to Refugees."

social exposures imprints lasting neuropathways that dictate a child’s future social behaviors. Children who witness interpersonal interactions that exemplify empathy and open communication are, therefore, more likely to internalize those characteristics as best social practices. Establishing a nurturing and empathetic relationship between Ahlan Simsim Muppets and adult characters is an effort to provide Syrian refugee children the opportunity to witness, and manifest for themselves, effective coping skills when faced with emotional uncertainty and adversity.

In addition to teaching children to empathize with adults, Ahlan Simsim is helping children manage their own feelings. Transcending the basics, like the alphabet and numbers, Sesame Workshop emphasizes social and emotional development to counter the effects of migration and toxic stress.²¹⁹ The Muppets present the *Emotional ABC’s*, which is a subprogram in Ahlan Simsim that has the Muppets demonstrating self-regulatory strategies to help children identify and manage overwhelming feelings.²²⁰ The main tactics associated with the Emotional ABC’s are counting, “drawing it out,” and belly breathing.²²¹ Ahlan Simsim developed belly breathing as a tactic specifically for children throughout the refugee camps. The tactic involves placing your hand on your stomach, taking a deep breath in, and exhaling.²²² Jad and Basma say this activity helps your muscles

²¹⁹ Karen Zraick, “LEGO Foundation and Sesame Street Team Up to Help Refugee Children,” *The New York Times*, December 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/05/world/lego-sesame-street-refugees.html>.

²²⁰ “Ahlan Simsim”

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

and mind relax, as a child targets their focus on their stomach.²²³ The producers developed a song as well, to accompany movement when the Muppets practice belly breathing: “when you have a strong emotion, and you don’t know what’s wrong, I have a way to help you feel calmer. Put your hands on your belly, take a deep breath, inhale, take a deep breath, inhale exhale, inhale”²²⁴ This song plays to normalize the action of belly breathing, which serves as a larger metaphor for identifying an emotional state, regulating those emotions, and mitigating the onset of stress.

Linking back to the cognitive science discussed before, belly breathing offers an effective tactic to limit the constant activation of the stress response system that can negatively impact the developing neurological pathways in young children. The fight or flight mentality is met with an adaptive and soothing tactic which hopes to dilute the effects of a perpetually activated stress response system. Not only does belly breathing decrease neurological damage assumed from toxic stress, but it also helps develop a child’s self-regulatory capabilities. The tactic involves identifying an emotion and adapting to situational inputs triggering the stressful reaction. As Jad or Basma experience then cope with a stressful situation, they showcase to child refugees how to regulate extreme emotions and respond accordingly. Where conventional science underscores the role of caregivers to instill such a coping mechanism, Ahlan Simsim characters serve as a placeholder when caregivers might be emotionally preoccupied or strained.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid.

Additionally, Ahlan Simsim provides children with adequate linguistic exposure to interpret positive social interactions. Kohn disclosed a main point of contention during the Ahlan Simsim production process: which language should the program be broadcasted in?²²⁵ The cultural, linguistic, and dialectic variations across the region lend itself to “messy deliberations” around language learning and Sesame Workshop best practices.²²⁶ After weeks of collaboration with language specialists, 28 out of 29 experts agreed that Arabic was the prototype program most apt for distribution.²²⁷ Sesame’s preoccupation with the broadcasting language reflects an organizational attentiveness to the linguistic development of its viewership. Consistent with other Sesame Street programs, Ahlan Simsim incorporates features of call and response, auditory fill in the blanks, and timed vocabulary exercises that create a linguistically interactive experience for young refugee children. Misidentifying and broadcasting Ahlan Simsim in an unrepresentative language would hold grave consequences for organizational legitimacy and the developmental outcomes of its audience. Instead, the preemptive prototype research ensured children receive stimulated, culturally appropriate, and accessible linguistic reciprocity when engaging with the program to expand their communication capabilities.

The IRC’s caregiver mentorship program seeks to involve a child’s community to promote sustainable development and continued learning. Science underscores the importance of responsive, present, and active caregivers to combat

²²⁵ Kohn, interviewed.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

the negative effects of stressful environments. However, when refugee caregivers confront emotions of confusion, helplessness, and uncertainty alongside their children, providing an engaging and interactive response to a child's every need becomes increasingly difficult. To buffer against caregiver neglect, the "Reach Up and Learn" program trains volunteers and IRC professional staff through 38 sessions, covering methods of early childhood parenting, associated activities for learning, at-home toy making seminars, as well as home-visiting practice.²²⁸ Sesame Workshop also conducts additional training to ensure the home-visiting staff is familiar with Ahlan Simsim media content and equipped with additional lessons. The goal of IRC's home visiting component includes: first, to mediate caregiver anxiety and consequential child stress through professional interventions that nourish the family-unit, promote caregiver wellbeing and a child's positive developmental trajectory; second, to support continual learning of the Ahlan Simsim curriculum.²²⁹ Training prepares home-visiting staff to create a stimulating environment for families, improve child-caregiver facilitated learning, and identify signs of maternal depression or child abuse.²³⁰ The widespread commitment to caregiving is congruent with cognitive science principles that underscore the importance of caregiver support and communal attentiveness to children's needs to decrease neglect, prolonged stress, and symptoms of caregiver depression.

²²⁸ "Sesame Street and the IRC are helping refugee children overcome trauma," *The International Rescue Committee*, February 2, 2020, <https://www.rescue.org/article/sesame-street-and-irc-are-helping-refugee-children-overcome-trauma>.

²²⁹ "Sesame Street and the IRC."

²³⁰ Ibid.

The final prong of the Sesame and IRC collaboration establishes development centers through refugee settlements in the region. The centers are also designed to reduce the repeated activation of the stress response system – thereby reducing neurological damage – by creating an immovable safe, stable, and nurturing environment for children to play.²³¹ Early childhood research indicates play offers a pathway to learn and develop necessary imagination, language, problem solving, interpersonal, and communication skills.²³² Designating a vibrant and colorful space in the refugee settlements for children to call their own allows these children to just be kids (see image below).



Source: Tara Todras, *Meet some of the young Syrian lives the IRC and Sesame Street will Change*, (International Rescue Committee, 2017).

An additional component of the development centers incorporates caregivers into the curriculum, where similar to the IRC’s home-visiting program, families can interact through play-based learning aspects to better engage with each other. In the words of Jeffrey D. Dunn, President and CEO of Sesame Workshop, “we have an

²³¹ Draganus, “The LEGO Foundation.”

²³² Draganus, “The LEGO Foundation.”

unprecedented opportunity to reach and teach some of the world’s most vulnerable children by harnessing the power of learning through play.”²³³

Evaluation of Ahlan Simsim

NYU Global TIES for Children will independently evaluate the success of this three part-program.²³⁴ This research center – designed specifically to evaluate programming for children – promotes holistic development for children and caregivers. The evaluation protocol specific to the Sesame and IRC collaboration will provide evidence-based reports around play-based interventions during early childhood for those affected by humanitarian crisis.²³⁵ When examining this intervention, TIES for Children is specifically looking at the key drivers of child’s well-being when faced with such adversity, how stakeholders across the globe can digest the research in hopes of continuing effective interventions and scaling the program, as well as building the practice of early childhood science within the local community to ensure long-term outcomes for these kids.²³⁶

Sesame Workshop’s 2018: Year One Annual Report Executive Summary, provided by Kohn, detailed the five randomized control trials that NYU’s Global TIES for Children will run in years two and three of implementation.²³⁷ In an interview with Joyce Rafla, Associate Research Scientist for Ahlan Simsim at NYU

²³³ Draganus, “The LEGO Foundation.”

²³⁴ “Refugee Response.”

²³⁵ Draganus, “The LEGO Foundation.”

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Rene Celaya, “Our First Year of 100&Change: Successes, Challenges, and Learnings from Ahlan Simsim,” *The MacArthur Foundation*, July 30, 2019, <https://www.macfound.org/press/perspectives/our-first-year-100change-successes-challenges-and-learnings-ahlan-simsim/>.

Global TIES for Children, she provided details on evaluation creation protocol. The framework for these RCTs stem from a theory of change – a type of research methodology for planning, executing, and evaluating programs for social impact – developed by Sesame and the IRC which includes intervention hypotheses and objectives.²³⁸ Based on the theory of change for a specific intervention outcome, NYU’s Global TIES for Children creates an evaluation and measurement scale that enables a baseline and endline data collection to measure the impact of the intervention on the target population based on the stated objectives.²³⁹ Using pilot evaluations, NYU’s Global TIES for Children tests measurement tools in regional circumstances to establish accurate and reflective psychometrics.²⁴⁰ Following the outcome of evaluation prototypes, NYU’s Global TIES for Children adapts and executes more representative evaluation systems throughout the refugee camps.²⁴¹ However, information detailing the exact evaluation measures still remains unavailable.

Rafla did comment that the monitoring and evaluation protocol rigorously considers benchmarks in psychosocial learning and cognitive development.²⁴² However, she recognized the barriers associated with devising evaluations for childhood development when historic literature in the domain exists predominately on a WEIRD population.²⁴³ She drew the stark parallel between conducting a study

²³⁸ Joyce Rafla, interviewed by author, April 27, 2020.

²³⁹ Rafla, interviewed.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

in a stabilized, control, experimental laboratory versus a dynamic, noisy, insecure refugee temporary shelter.²⁴⁴ Proceeding with caution when contextualizing Ahlan Simsim evaluations with existing literature is necessary, and is why the prototype evaluation mechanism proves most effective. Additionally, Rafla states NYU's Global TIES for Children overcomes these research limitations and WEIRD biases through regional expert collaboration, critical thinking, and adaptability when examining novel participation samples.²⁴⁵

Where NYU Global TIES for Children considers productive developmental science as described previously, it remains unclear how Sesame Workshop and the IRC prioritize development benchmarks when drafting their theories of change. Kohn did disclose the difficulty associated with monitoring the impact of the direct service programming alongside the Ahlan Simsim TV show, and how TIES for Children is attempting to develop mechanisms to measure the impacts of both simultaneously but independently.²⁴⁶ Finally, we do not know what influence the MacArthur Foundation exerts on the evaluation protocol, or what information the Foundation expects from the data. Though, given the ongoing nature of this intervention, the lack of detailed information is unsurprising.

The 2018 Report shed light on additional research and advocacy measures the collaboration institutionalized. Most notably, Sesame Workshop and the IRC launched an Ahlan Simsim research community pulling together families in Iraq,

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Kohn, interviewed.

Jordan, and Lebanon.²⁴⁷ These regional focus groups informed the content of the three-pronged approach and sharpened the culturally specific components of Ahlan Simsim. As an extension of these focus groups, Sesame also conducted four in-region “reach out” surveys to poll the public on brand awareness, possible Muppet character traits, and media strategies.²⁴⁸ These focus groups and surveys occurred prior to the Ahlan Simsim premier in February 2020.²⁴⁹ Since the show’s inception, Kohn shared that Sesame and the TV provider pan-Arab Television are together measuring viewership across the Middle East.²⁵⁰

These collaborative advocacy measures, in addition to TIES for Children’s evaluation, contribute to global knowledge around evidence-based and large-scale implementations of ECD programs. In collaboration with Sesame Workshop, the Brookings Institute’s Center for Global Education compiled research on how such a comprehensive ECD response and evaluation sets a new precedent in emergency programming for children. First, this program pivots away from scaling intervention as the expansion of a singular program and moves towards scaling an intervention that promotes sustained impact for children so that the access to early childhood education and development services are locally available and nationally accepted.²⁵¹ The implementation of Ahlan Simsim transcends the mere goal of expanding the broadcasting radius, and seeks the ideal that through the media’s

²⁴⁷ Celaya, “Our First Year.”

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Kohn, interviewed.

²⁵¹ Jenny Perlman Robinson and Marianne Stone, “Ahlan Simsim: A large scale early childhood intervention for Syria’s refugees and host communities,” *Brookings Institution*, June 19, 2019.

presence, early childhood development will rise as a national priority alongside an embedded system to benefit children in years to come.²⁵² In sum, the program's influence extends throughout of the lifespan of a child.

Second, Brookings notes that Sesame Street involves a diverse set of actors – government officials, financial stakeholders, therapists, education specialists, NGO officers, and refugee's themselves – to develop, implement, and regulate the initiative.²⁵³ Given the intersectionality of early childhood services across sector representatives, the program ensures maximum outreach and accountability.

Third, Brookings emphasized Sesame Street and the IRC's attention to the political economies of Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. As a general principle of macroeconomics, supply and demand are the most influential market factors. Through this lens, the lack of early childhood services and at-risk children demonstrate a demand for Ahlan Simsim programming, and the developed product and its accessibility serves as the supplied intervention. Therefore, just as any other economic good or service, it is of utmost importance to consider how factors influence the implementation and scalability of a program. The IRC, specifically, is building a network of relevant economic and political actors to help understand the political economy of refugee host-countries.²⁵⁴ This approach, the Social Network Analysis, will then help monitor economic and political externalities effecting Ahlan Simsim execution.²⁵⁵

²⁵² Robinson and Stone, "Ahlan Simsim."

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

And finally, the collaboration between Sesame Workshop and the IRC demonstrates to the greater humanitarian community the effectiveness of working within an innovative and scalable program development model. These organizations do not maintain a constant, static, and linear implementation plan. Instead, the teams anticipate opportunities for growth and foreseeable challenges.²⁵⁶ Brookings hopes the success of this program will incentivize other early childhood interventions to follow suit throughout their designing, testing, implementing and evaluating processes.²⁵⁷

These four programmatic components are hopeful indicators of forthcoming programmatic success, and the preliminary data from Sesame and the IRC's first year of implementation reinforce Brookings' projections. In subsequent years, NYU Global TIES for Children's evaluation will prove critical in corroborating these early and favorable findings.

Arguably, Sesame Workshop's ability to secure such comprehensive funding was a function of their outstanding programming. The MacArthur Foundation's *100&Change* competition rigorously vets proposal submissions before involving them in an applicant-to-applicant proposal exchange and external evaluation performed by specialists who match the project's expertise. During each phase of the year and a half long competition, proposals were assessed based on four criteria: impact, evidence-based, feasibility, and durability.²⁵⁸ Within our

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ "Announcing the Top 100 Proposals for \$100 Million Grant," *The MacArthur Foundation*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.macfound.org/press/press-releases/announcing-top-100-proposals-100-million-grant/>.

theoretical paradigm, these criteria help identify an organization that meets expectations of legitimacy, accountability, transparency, and coordination as outlined in previous chapters. The MacArthur Foundation's assessment demonstrates that Sesame Workshop plans met or exceeded these expectations. An consequently, Sesame now operates with a vast budget and incredible discretion on how to allocate that \$100 million reward.

NGO functional theory also assumes securing financial means to support an intervention is a great obstacle to overcome during the design, and a failure to do so can exacerbate dynamics throughout an implementation. Sesame Workshop overcame this theoretical barrier by proving organizational competency and garnering the 100&Change grant. Moving forward in their implementation with organizational autonomy over the funds promotes transparency of deliverables due to the early establishment of programmatic expectations between the principal (the MacArthur Foundation) and the agent (Sesame Workshop). The 100&Change competition served as a platform for these two actors to succeed in the MEL4AM's premise one, resulting in Sesame's preliminary success throughout premise two. In fact, Sesame Workshop's early accomplishments across model premises resulted in an additional \$100 million grant from the LEGO Foundation in 2018,²⁵⁹ which has allowed the collaboration to expand the Ahlan Simsim programs and awareness for ECD in humanitarian settings.

²⁵⁹ Celaya, "Our First Year."

In the interview with Kohn, she spoke to organizational accountability. Sesame Workshop upholds accountability standards superimposed by MacArthur Foundation, the impact objectives, their board, as well as the thousands of children who engage with Ahlan Simsim programming.²⁶⁰ Kohn also shed light on the MacArthur Foundation's recipient structure: Sesame Workshop exists as the prime recipient, where the IRC exists as a secondary implementing partner.²⁶¹ Therefore, Sesame Workshop maintains control over all project management and operation. Kohn noted the Workshop views the grant as a partnership, which however, proves difficult during decision making.²⁶² She provided no additional information on the organizational dynamics between Sesame Street and the IRC; therefore, no further conclusions can be drawn with respect to principal-agent frameworks.

Kohn also discussed how the recent research boom in early childhood development coincidentally aligned – and proved advantageous – with the timing of the 100&Change competition and Sesame's proposal.²⁶³ The novel research on child-caregiver interactions, the consequences of early trauma, and the long-term hope early childhood interventions bring to communities in crisis drew attention to Sesame's 40 years of experience in the field. She mentioned that their proposal emphasized sustainability, which Sesame generally approaches through one of two lenses – both long-term project sustainment and development of a certain set of reusable skills – and that the Ahlan Simsim intervention hopes to accomplish both.²⁶⁴

²⁶⁰ Kohn, interviewed.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

The Workshop wants to complete the requirements of the five-year contract under the MacArthur Foundation, while increasing sustained local access to quality early childhood services by engraining these educational and caregiver support systems into the refugee culture and promoting early childhood as a public health issue throughout the Middle East.²⁶⁵

Sesame Workshop, as a niche early childhood-oriented NGO, overcomes organizational barriers, exemplifies programmatic best practices, and accurately incorporates developmental science research throughout content production. The Ahlan Simsim curriculum and success in early implementation exemplifies Sesame Workshop's culturally sensitive production process. The organizational capacity to triage expertise of relevant humanitarian actors, preemptively test prototype programming, implement and scale interventions, and then evaluate through independent contractors exceeds MEL4AM model expectations. Additionally, the nature of the 100&Change grant overcomes theoretical barriers NGOs often confront. Sesame's ability to secure this type of funding demonstrated an internal integrity and external aptitude to confront the humanitarian crisis afflicting Syrian child refugees throughout the Middle East. While precise evaluation metrics remain forthcoming, Sesame Workshop's concentration in early childhood interventions has elevated the needs of Syrian refugees to the forefront of the humanitarian community.

²⁶⁵ Robinson and Stone, "Ahlan Simsim."

Chapter IV: UNICEF’s Intervention for Children at the US-Mexico Border

Programmatic Overview

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) is a subsidiary agency of the United Nations, working to protect the rights of the world’s most disadvantaged children. With programming in over 190 countries, seven international regional offices, and a comprehensive field staff, UNICEF is an expansive operation.²⁶⁶ UNICEF’s major intervention themes include vaccination, nutrition, water and sanitation, HIV prevention and treatment, as well as education.²⁶⁷ Program development across these intervention themes follow strategies and guides devised by UNICEF headquarters, and are most frequently available to the public in the form of programmatic manuals. In recent years, UNICEF has adopted an interest in early childhood development programming for youth-facing humanitarian crises. Its 2019 Early Childhood Development in Emergencies: Integrated Program Guide

²⁶⁶ “What we do,” UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/what-we-do>.

²⁶⁷ Susana Sottoli, *UNICEF Programming Priorities* (UNICEF, January 2018): 3.

serves as the foremost literature guiding UNICEF programming through this new frontier.

The ethos underlying the program guide is a child's right to life and development with specific emphasis on UNICEF's responsibility to protect, promote, and uphold those rights.²⁶⁸ Underscoring the irreplaceable value of a child's first eight years, the guide outlines the rapid brain development, acquisition of competencies, and foundational skills learned through this age span. As the title suggests, UNICEF's approach to program development for children in crisis is *integrated*: relying on senior management investment, extensive human capital, ECD resources, and continued advocacy for children's needs across UNICEF's sectoral responses.²⁶⁹ The final aspect of the integrated approach, and perhaps the most salient, captures how UNICEF attaches early childhood programming onto existing interventions in its traditional domains: vaccination, nutrition, water and sanitation, HIV prevention and treatment, and education.²⁷⁰ Currently, the organization does not have the bandwidth for isolated and independent ECD intervention systems. Therefore, during all phases of an emergency, across all robust intervention themes, UNICEF integrates ECD into a comprehensive and coordinated response to provide quality services for children in crisis.²⁷¹ In order

²⁶⁸ Vidur Chopra and Cassie Landers, *Early Childhood Development in Emergencies: Integrated Programme Guide* (UNICEF, January 2019): 3.

https://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/files/Programme_Guide_ECDiE.pdf.

²⁶⁹ Chopra and Landers, "Early Childhood Development," 3.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

to develop a programmatic additive in early childhood, UNICEF outlines four steps:

- 1) Collect early childhood development specific information
- 2) Include information outlining the needs of young children and associated risks across all sectors
- 3) Consider risks throughout curriculum and activity development
- 4) With regards to sector specifics, coordination mechanism, and information management, integrate early childhood development programming into response protocol²⁷²

Throughout the four components, UNICEF incorporates the expertise from early childhood experts to fill informational gaps when adapting traditional humanitarian responses to include elements of child-centric aid. Not only are experts staffed as program consultants, but also as deployable personnel ready to position early childhood recreational materials and designate safe spaces for children throughout crisis areas.²⁷³ UNICEF's early childhood site-level presence ensures situational cooperation with main sector clusters and strong advocacy for a holistic ECD response.

The coordinated response protocol underscores rapid needs assessments, followed by a harmonized intervention considerate of stakeholder analyses, ECD expertise, site-level implementing capacity, resource allocation, cultural norms, and major risk indices. This collaboration – founded on the principle that no single sector can effectively respond to the needs of vulnerable children – creates maximum relief for children, given the infancy of UNICEF's early childhood

²⁷² Ibid, 9.

²⁷³ Ibid, 11.

strategy.²⁷⁴ For the purposes of this thesis, the integration of ECD programming into UNICEF’s health and education sectors proves most relevant for evaluating how this technique serves the developmental needs of children.

Where early childhood is marked by physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development, crises can cause developmental delays and increased risk of mortality. UNICEF’s health interventions for early childhood are designed to buffer these consequences by involving caregivers and communities. UNICEF health specialists promote safe motherhood by identifying signs of maternal²⁷⁵ depression and educating caregivers on positive care interactions through home visits.²⁷⁶ Figure 6, the table below, outlines UNICEF’s health services curriculum in ECD for primary responders in the healthcare field.

Figure 6: UNICEF’s Positive Care Interactions

Children from 0-3	Children from 3-6	Maternal Depression
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look into a child’s eyes while talking, breastfeeding, and playing • Maintain skin contact with the child through cuddling or gently moving their limbs. • Communicate lovingly with the child through smiling and copying the child’s gestures. • Provide visual and auditory stimulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Praise children when discovering new skills • Continue to maintain eye contact with the child • Communicate lovingly while reading books, singing, and talking with the child • Play with children that allows for physical development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for signs of mood instability, disinterest in the baby, feelings of inadequacy or guilt. • Destigmatize referrals and encourage communities to support women in clinical services • Encourage mothers to hold their child and

²⁷⁴ Ibid, 9.

²⁷⁵ UNICEF language throughout the ECD program guide emphasizes mothers as responsible or child development upbringing responsibilities.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 6.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide child safe objects that promote motor skill development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expose children to new sounds, sights, and smells 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • form attachment bonds
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Source: Condensed by Martha Baker, from UNICEF, *Early Childhood Development in Emergencies: Integrated Program Guide*, (2019).

Counseling mothers, fathers, and other caregivers in the areas above both immediately after birth and throughout early childhood helps preserve the integrity of a child’s most formative years. This type of in-facility and home visit support is attached to the UNICEF health centers providing services in labor preparation and delivery, breastfeeding, birth registration, and nutritional surveillance.²⁷⁷ Integrating early childhood domains into the health sector is intended to magnify the impact of both intervention domains.

UNICEF’s educational programs recognize that adverse experiences and extreme stress throughout early childhood can cause emotional and behavioral difficulties. Children overcome with aggressive, irrational, and emotional responses to circumstances are often those who drop out of school or experience academic failure. Therefore, UNICEF approaches education from a holistic school-readiness perspective, attempting to develop both the concrete skills of reading and writing, as well as emotional skills such as empathy, compassion, and conflict-resolution.²⁷⁸ UNICEF education centers throughout crisis areas are *safe*, where children are protected from harm; *secure*, where the space itself is not externally threatened, and *stable*, where defined boundaries characterize the purpose of the

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 20.

²⁷⁸ Education Team, *Every Child Learns* (UNICEF, 2019): 29.

<https://www.unicef.org/media/59856/file/UNICEF-education-strategy-2019-2030.pdf>

space to the greater community.²⁷⁹ Moreover, these spaces are staffed with trained teachers and support personnel tasked with educating children and monitoring behavior.²⁸⁰

UNICEF education frameworks are easily adapted to serve early childhood needs. This sector integration shifts curriculum to promote ECD learning activities centered around cognitive, language, and socioemotional development through pre-math, early literacy, music, art, and group-based dance. The education centers also structure free play into the educational agendas, empowering younger children to explore and create without external confines.²⁸¹ Parents and caregivers are incorporated into the lessons to teach them how to cultivate a stimulating early-learning environment back home.²⁸² The ECD curriculum underscores creating routine for children in crisis with the goal of limiting the frequency at which a child's stress response mechanism is triggered.²⁸³ UNICEF believes its investment in early childhood education will translate to accumulated success in the organization's subsequent education programs.²⁸⁴ Through social interactions, early stimulation, and an abundance of play, UNICEF provides a space for children to thrive despite their circumstances.

Across most of its intervention domains, UNICEF collaborates with grassroots organizations as implementing partners. In the interview with Aditi

²⁷⁹ Chopra and Landers, "Early Childhood Development," 32.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid, 26.

²⁸² Ibid, 27.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Chopra, *Peacekeeping Building*, 11.

Shrikhande, she commented on the importance of UNICEF’s site-level partnerships, as they often ensure programming is specific to that region and community.²⁸⁵ Collaborating with local organizations increases program customization as UNICEF themes and models often present high-level frameworks that encourage site-level adaptations to reflect risk indices and needs assessments. Shrikhande notes this type of grassroots partnership proves vital in ECD programming given UNICEF’s prior inexperience in this intervention realm.²⁸⁶

Evaluation of UNICEF’s integrated approach to ECD programming maintains standardized humanitarian performance management indicators (HPM).²⁸⁷ However, within the HPM indicator guide, only evaluation benchmarks for UNICEF’s established intervention techniques were available.²⁸⁸ It remains unclear if this indicator guide is outdated, generally fails to account for ECD integrated aspects, or ambiguously assumes ECD additives within other evaluation benchmarks.

In addition to the HPM indicators, UNICEF developed *Monitoring Results for Equity System* (MoRES) as a new approach for strategic implementation and evaluation of programming for children in crisis.²⁸⁹ The system’s *determinant frameworks* identify critical bottlenecks and barriers when intervening for children

²⁸⁵ Shrikhande, interview.

²⁸⁶ Shrikhande, interview.

²⁸⁷ Chopra and Landers, “Early Childhood Development,” 14.

²⁸⁸ “Humanitarian Performance Monitoring (PM) Toolkit,” CCC Resource UNICEF, 2018, <http://www.unicef.in/emergencies.com/downloads/eresource/HPM.html>.

²⁸⁹ Chopra and Landers, “Early Childhood Development,” 15.

and achieving long-lasting outcomes.²⁹⁰ As showcased in Figure 7, the table below, ten determinants of MoRES fit into four categories:

Figure 7: Possible Indicators for MoRES Analysis for Integrated ECD Services in Emergencies

Enabling Environments	Supply	Demand	Quality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social norms • Legislation policy • Expenditures • Management and coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of essential materials • Access to adequately staffed services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial access • Cultural practices and beliefs • Continuity of use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of services

Source: UNICEF., *Early Childhood Development in Emergencies: Integrated Program Guide*, (2019).

“Enabling environments” encompasses the social, political, and institutional determinants at play during implementation.²⁹¹ “Supply” underscores the operational capacity of UNICEF and relevant actors during service delivery.²⁹² “Demand” reflects cultural considerations of the target audience.²⁹³ And “quality” refers to the program’s compliance with minimum, holistically defined standards of ECD programming.²⁹⁴ UNICEF underscores the variability of these determinants as each intervention confronts new barriers to implementation and the need to respond with tailored intervention services.

Moreover, the integrated program guide outlines data collection for ECD program additives in terms of *participation by percentage*.²⁹⁵ This includes

²⁹⁰ Ibid.
²⁹¹ Ibid.
²⁹² Ibid.
²⁹³ Ibid.
²⁹⁴ Ibid.
²⁹⁵ Ibid, 38.

estimates on the number of children accessing nonformal education services (UNICEFs temporary learning spaces), the number of children within access of these nonformal spaces, the number of children accessing healthcare and hygiene facilities (UNICEFs temporary health centers), and the number of children within access to healthcare and hygiene facilities.²⁹⁶ The term “within access” was not quantified, so it is unknown what the margin of geographic proximity UNICEF uses as the access limit. In the interview with Shrikhande, she was transparent about the struggles associated with disaggregating data for ECD programming in humanitarian setting,²⁹⁷ particularly when those ECD interventions are subcomponents of larger aid packages.²⁹⁸

Success in UNICEF’s ECD programmatic model is contingent upon cross-sectoral coordination. Therefore, UNICEF upholds premise one of the MEL4AM framework – diagnosing and designing through stakeholder perspectives – because ECD as a sectoral additive demands collaboration from the onset. Integrating early childhood specialists, grassroots partners, senior management, and traditional intervention domains creates coordination systems among UNICEF’s assistance components to target the needs of young children in emergencies. Without this initial coordination across actors, ECD as a UNICEF program would not exist, given this current programmatic design.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Extenuating circumstances associated with COVID-19 precluded follow-up interviews. Future research is needed to uncover programming specifics.

²⁹⁸ Shrikhande, interviewed.

However, UNICEF's performance in premise one misleads expectations for success in premises two and three. The program's design makes the organization's ability to implement and scale early childhood programming a function of implementing and scaling the overarching intervention. Where UNICEF has accomplished premise two in traditional intervention domains, it is unclear whether ECD components are lost in the expansion. Despite stating early childhood specialists exist as site-level staff, it is dubious the effectivity of their advocacy when confronted with structural challenges or pressing variables more relevant to the traditional intervention theme. The novelty of ECD additives also contributes to this uncertainty when fulfilling implementation and scaling goals. Moreover, there is no evidence suggesting UNICEF developed a pilot prototype of an intervention including ECD additives, further corroborating the unpredictability associated with this type of program design.

HMP indicators and MoRES reflect attention to monitoring ECD interventions, however it remains unclear how these protocols align with early cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development benchmarks. The quality component of the MoRES system offers slight insight into how UNICEF reflects developmental science into interventions, simply by stating programs must fulfill *minimum* ECD standards. However, minimum remains undefined. Additionally, UNICEF's transparency around the struggles with disaggregating ECD data from larger intervention might also undermine the purpose of the intervention itself: without tracking programmatic impact and associated shifts in childhood well-being, these program components cannot be deemed effective. Therefore, when

comparing the UNICEF model to premise two, the seemingly comprehensive evaluation umbrella does not conclusively fulfill standards of implementing, scaling, and tracking.

Premise three – adapt – becomes unachievable without sound monitoring and evaluation data to direct programmatic transformations. There is no evidence of a feedback loop between the myriad of UNICEF ECD stakeholders involved in premise one. Without this transparent flow of information, interventions become less likely to adapt necessary provisions to children’s needs. Within this additive model, evidence is also lacking on how ECD program components are susceptible to change once attached to larger interventions. If not culturally relevant or reflective of cognitive research, ECD programmatic change might be stifled due to the integrated design.

UNICEF’s decentralized ECD components look to maximize coordination systems across the levels and themes of existing humanitarian assistance realms to provide services for children in emergencies. However, evaluating this program design within the MEL4AM model demonstrates a misalignment between the additive nature and standards of excellence. Fulfilling premise one through stakeholder collaboration establishes the necessary foundation for success in subsequent premises, however, information gaps and programmatic design discredit the functionality of UNICEF’s ECD implementation, scaling, tracking, and adapting mechanisms. Forthright regarding the unfamiliarity of this new intervention domain, both Shrikhande and the program guide underscore the ongoing development of a UNICEF ECD Task Force to assume leadership in

resource mobilization, capacity building, networking, and advocating to increase ECD integrated interventions, and later establish ECD interventions as an independent UNICEF sectoral theme.²⁹⁹

UNICEF in Matamoros

Within migrant camps, a variety of factors contribute to or exacerbate children's developmental challenges: loss of control, enforced separation, environmental instability, the lack of social relationships, and the absence of a cohesive sense of familial support that proves crucial during development.³⁰⁰ Moreover, the more time a family unit spends awaiting asylum determination, the more likely it is to deteriorate.³⁰¹ This decaying family unit is detrimental for both the child and caregiver's mental health; as caregivers become increasingly disempowered, they compromise their capacity to care for their child.³⁰² Without protections for the family unit throughout the asylum-seeking processes, research shows that stressed, abandoned, or separated children can sustain delays, even regressions, in development that lead to long-term and detrimental effects.³⁰³

Matamoros, Mexico is no exception. 2,500 Latin American migrants seeking asylum in the United States await status determination just south of

²⁹⁹ Shrikhande, interviewed.

³⁰⁰ David Corlett and The International Detention Coalition, *Capture Childhood: Introducing a new model to ensure the rights and liberty of refugee, asylum seeker and irregular migrant children affected by immigration detention* (International Detention Coalition, 2012), 47, <https://idcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Captured-Childhood-FINAL-June-2012.pdf>.

³⁰¹ Corlett, *Captured Childhood*, 48.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Julia Huemer, Niranjan Karnik, and Hans Steiner, "Unaccompanied refugee children," *The Lancet* 373, no. 9664, (March 2009): 613. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(09\)60380-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(09)60380-9).

Brownsville, Texas. 700 of these migrants are children in need of humanitarian assistance.³⁰⁴ Tents and makeshift tarp shelters line the Rio Grande. Alberca Chavez – an old gymnasium complex – serves as an additional temporary shelter for migrant families.³⁰⁵ A recent UNICEF Mexico study found that children in Matamoros experience high levels of stress and fear of abandonment.³⁰⁶ Primary caregivers leave their children unattended or in the company of strangers, in hopes of securing work or expedited court appearances.³⁰⁷ Families also self-separate and send their children across the border alone, assuming an *unaccompanied* child will gain access to the United States more quickly.³⁰⁸ The caregiver absence and compounding stress experienced by children has resulted in increased violence and disputes among adolescents throughout the camp.³⁰⁹ Additionally, the presence of organized crime further destabilizes the environment and has corrupted the conventional school systems.³¹⁰

Cognizant of these dynamics that children and families endure in these conditions, UNICEF expanded its presence in 2018 to accommodate this community's increasing demand for humanitarian intervention. Now, the organization operates out of a newly instated field office to provide WASH

³⁰⁴ UNICEF Mexico, *Mexico – Matamoros: Humanitarian Situation Report No. 1* (UNICEF Mexico, February 2020), 1.

³⁰⁵ UNICEF Mexico, *Mexico – Matamoros*, 1.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

³¹⁰ Gema Jimenez, interviewed by author, February 27, 2020.

infrastructure, child protection services, and associated psychosocial support for families and children.³¹¹

WASH interventions in crisis mitigate circumstantial public health risks by promoting good hygiene, providing infrastructure for sanitation services and drinking water, as well as reducing environmental risks of water borne diseases.³¹² Throughout Matamoros, UNICEF established hygiene stations – equipped with handwashing and sanitation facilities – in addition to distributing 150 hygiene kits for families in Alberca Chavez.³¹³ These provisions ensure the minimum standards of sanitation and cleanliness across the migrant camp.

The child protection component of the Matamoros intervention maintains two objectives: implement the *alternative care model for migrant children* and targeted psychosocial support for children and families.³¹⁴ UNICEF Mexico adopted these objectives from a successful UNICEF Italy program – Children on the Move – designed to advocate for and protect the legal, cultural, and educational rights of migrant children crossing Italian and Greek borders.³¹⁵ The alternative care component creates environmental stability through kinship care, family-based interventions, and supervised independent living arrangements to promote a child’s

³¹¹ In Matamoros, WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) is the principle intervention domain. ECD programming and psychosocial support accompany this type of programming through the help of UNICEF’s implementing partner, La Jugarreta.

³¹² Chopra and Landers, “Early Childhood Development,” 29.

³¹³ UNICEF Mexico, *Mexico – Matamoros*, 1.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ REACH, *Children on the Move in Italy and Greece: Report* (UNICEF and Reach, June 2017), 11-12. https://www.unicef.org/eca/sites/unicef.org/eca/files/2017-10/REACH_ITA_GRC_Report_Children_on_the_Move_in_Italy_and_Greece_June_2017.pdf.

well-being.³¹⁶ The Alberca Chavez complex serves as the predominate location the alternative care interventions, as it is specifically designated for migrant families.³¹⁷ The components are proctored by UNICEF personnel, in conjunction with their implementing partner, La Jugarreta.

The second objective of the program adaptation provides targeted psychosocial support and ECD recreational activities to mitigate stress.³¹⁸ La Jugarreta developed games to promote literacy and allow children to express emotions about their migrant experience and community interactions.³¹⁹ To date, UNICEF has provided psychosocial support and early childhood interventions to approximately 88 children in Alberca Chavez and 600 throughout the main camp.³²⁰

Despite UNICEF's successful outreach, coordination failures obstruct UNICEF's implementation of psychosocial support and ECD recreational activities. In an interview with Isabel Velasco Luna, a consultant with UNICEF Mexico, she detailed the absence of inter-camp collaboration amongst the countless actors – local government, national authorities, US NGOs, and UN agencies – attempting to intervene and provide humanitarian assistance.³²¹ She recounted an experience from a site-visit where other NGOs enticed children participating in La

³¹⁶ Louise Melville Fulford and Rebecca Smith, *Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit* (UNICEF and Save the Children, 2013), 19, https://www.unicef.org/protection/files/ace_toolkit_.pdf.

³¹⁷ Jimenez, interviewed February.

³¹⁸ Due to COVID-19, additional primary interviews with UNICEF and La Jugarreta regarding the development and implementation of psychosocial programming content have been postponed. Therefore, at this time, this thesis cannot accurately evaluate the intervention given scientific frameworks.

³¹⁹ Jimenez, interviewed February.

³²⁰ UNICEF Mexico, *Mexico – Matamoros*, 2.

³²¹ Isabel Velasco Luna, interviewed by author, March 12, 2020.

Jugarreta curriculum with other unplanned activities.³²² The competition between NGOs for participants, Luna notes, occurs throughout the camp.³²³ She explains that this competition further confuses children and counteracts the alternative care model, undermining stability, daily routine, and relationship-building between trained staff and target recipients.³²⁴

In another interview with Gema Jimenez, a Child Protection Officer with UNICEF Mexico, she corroborated Isabel's comments and argued that the competition for intervention participation between NGOs is exacerbated by the Mexican National Migration Authority.³²⁵ The lack of governmental oversight, combined with simultaneous implementation restrictions hinders NGO functionality, and instead, aggravates an implementation culture contingent on competition for access to aid supplies, Alberca Chavez, and high-level government personnel.³²⁶ Gema notes, considering the presence of accredited organizations such as Global Response Management, Doctors without Borders, Are We There Yet, Resource Center, and various Christian Organizations, that she would expect a more coordinated inter-agency response protocol.³²⁷

The failure to coordinate between relevant actors amplifies obstacles to implementation. Moreover, the lack of coordination efforts suppresses the prioritization of the needs of aid recipients, where instead of enhancing the

³²² Luna, interviewed.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Gema Jimenez, interviewed by author, April 9, 2020.

³²⁶ Jimenez, interviewed.

³²⁷ Ibid.

environmental and experimental of children and families throughout the camp, NGOs are preoccupied with internal success of program implementation and participation. As discussed before, NGO functional theory cautions against such dynamics and, unfortunately given Luna and Jimenez’s insights, the Matamoros intervention exemplifies one outcome of inadequate coordination.

To overcome implementation challenges and move forward in psychosocial and ECD program intervention for children at the Matamoros/Brownsville border, UNICEF Mexico estimates \$500,000 is needed for the response.³²⁸ Administrators budget \$370,000 for children protection services, and \$125,000 for WASH support.³²⁹ As of February 2020, UNICEF Mexico had received no funds fulfilling these budgetary estimates.³³⁰ It remains unclear whether UNICEF USA, UNICEF Mexico, or La Jugarreta is responsible for fundraising efforts. Additionally, it is not clear whether UNICEF Mexico is searching for contractual funding, unconditional donations, or other funding channels.³³¹ UNICEF’s current the lack of financial support and persistent pressure to secure funding inherently hinders UNICEF’s ability to address the needs of migrant children.

Evaluation of Matamoros Intervention

³²⁸ UNICEF Mexico, *Mexico – Matamoros*, 1.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Again, extenuating circumstances associated with COVID-19 precluded follow up interviews. Future research is needed to uncover funding specifics, and these details would shed greater light on organizational and intervention legitimacy, accountability, and transparency.

As of February 2020, UNICEF plans to coordinate with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization of Migration (IOM) to monitor the strength and effectiveness of psychosocial interventions.³³² Jimenez attested that the monitoring would occur every two weeks.³³³ To date, it remains unclear if the strategy reflects the monitoring and evaluation protocol outlined in UNICEF's integrated program guide or employs a different model more aligned with the evaluator strategy. Regardless, further research would be necessary to identify how the evaluation strategy is developed, what scientific principles serve as evaluation benchmarks, and what expectations guide evaluation results. However, given the novelty of ECD programming as a UNICEF component, the underdeveloped evaluation strategy is unsurprising.

The infancy of a comprehensive evaluation strategy and lack of robust funding mechanisms raise questions regarding UNICEF Mexico organizational accountability. The theoretical paradigm of NGO functionality underscores the two relevant mechanisms for accountability: first, where standards are generally superimposed by principles to clarify specific outcomes and benchmarks; and second, where monitoring and evaluation protocols exist to hold NGOs accountable to beneficiaries and to capture program efficacy. Without superior stakeholder guidance from donors and significant involvement from UNICEF headquarters' (principles),³³⁴ UNICEF Mexico and La Jugarreta (agents) could be left to design and implement without external oversight and accountability practices.

³³² UNICEF Mexico, *Mexico – Matamoros*, 3.

³³³ Jimenez, interviewed April.

³³⁴ Shrikhande, interview.

UNICEF, as an expansive international development and humanitarian NGO, falls short of standards in programmatic development and succumbs to implementation barriers. First, UNICEF ECD intervention framework is misaligned with the model premises of MEL4AM. While the organization recognizes the importance of early childhood development and associated scientific phenomena, it is not immediately transparent as to whether and how those principles direct programmatic objectives. Due to the additive nature of ECD components and research limitations, this thesis cannot speak to whether and how psychosocial programming for migrant children in Matamoros is culturally considerate. Second, UNICEF's organizational inability to coordinate between other NGOs throughout site-level implementation in Matamoros also hinders program effectiveness. And finally, funding insecurities exacerbate theoretical functions. The failure to secure financial means may not only impede future programming abilities and effectiveness in Matamoros but exacerbate previously discussed implementation dynamics. At this time, it remains to be seen whether UNICEF Mexico ECD interventions will embody with model principles.

Conclusion

Instrumentalization of humanitarian aid to address early childhood development must include the cultural context and cognitive science principles. The MEL4AM model offers an intervention framework to coordinate all relevant implementation actors, while simultaneously incorporating necessary components of early childhood research: child-caregiver interactions, stress response management, and the compounding repercussions of early trauma and adversity. Model success, as demonstrated by the case studies, favors niche humanitarian NGOs that prioritize interventions in early childhood development.

For the purposes of this thesis, the MEL4AM model was only used within the context of international aid interventions for early childhood development. When applied to Sesame Workshop, the organization exemplifies, and exceeds, model premises. Moreover, when applied to UNICEF, organizational (and consequently, implementation) shortcomings exist. To the understanding of this

research, both organizations act without deliberate awareness of model principles. Therefore, further research would explore organization recognition of the MEL4AM model as a best practice, and possible structural shifts that would align intervention tactics with model premises.

Specialized NGO interventions for children in crisis that employ the MEL4AM framework both mitigate the neurological and behavioral effects associated with early adversity, but also precipitate lifelong mechanisms necessary for individuals to adapt, cope, communicate, and empathize. Unlocking the developmental capability of at-risk children through aid programming proactively addresses the long-standing implications of early hardship and avoids associated societal costs. To increase the effectiveness of interventions, the international NGO community must invest in rigorous studies on the developmental nuances of children in crisis.

Throughout this analysis, the persistent bias equating caregiver to mother demonstrates the tendency of both researchers and NGOs to establish fundamentals from a WEIRD perspective. In some cultures, mothers might burden child-rearing responsibilities, however, a culture emphasizing paternal or non-parental caregiving of children could shape developmental trajectories differently. Therefore, where WEIRD biases dilute the validity of generalizable findings in early cognitive development, scientists and humanitarians must support research diversification and representative theories.

Ultimately, tailored humanitarian programming for children in crisis will continue to be crucial, as millions face unimaginable and unstable circumstances.

Early interventions absolutely have the potential to impact an individual life; yet, when done well and to scale, they also hold the promise to change the course of development for global communities in crisis.

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