

# **Disability inclusive early childhood development and education in humanitarian settings**

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# Inclusive Futures

Promoting disability inclusion

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# 1. Introduction

What is necessary for all children everywhere to ensure they reach their full potential is not only still needed in crisis — it is even more urgently needed in these settings, where children are likely to face greater obstacles to their healthy emotional, psychological and physiological development. (Bouchane *et al.* 2018: 22)

The first years of their life are an essential phase of children's growth and development, influencing their outcomes across their entire life, helping to prepare them for lifelong learning and social integration (Okiyo and Muema 2021). This applies even more to children living in humanitarian crises settings such as refugee camps due to the impact crises have on them (Bouchane *et al.* 2018: 22). For children with disabilities, it is a vital time to ensure access to interventions which can help them reach their full potential (WHO and UNICEF 2012). As a result, a pilot inclusive early child development and education programme was developed under the UK-Aid funded Inclusive Futures' Disability Inclusive Development programme. It aims to ensure children with disabilities will be able to attend pre-schools alongside other children in their communities in Homa Bay County and Kakuma Refugee camp in Kenya by identifying affordable and appropriate inclusive early childhood development education practices.

This review looks at the available evidence on disability inclusion in early childhood development and education in humanitarian settings. It complements a study by Okiyo and Muema (2021) on the *Current practices in early childhood development education in Kenya and other low and middle income countries in sub-Saharan Africa*, which was also developed for the programme.

This rapid review found that little evidence is available relating specifically to the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood education in humanitarian settings, although there are some case studies, including a 2008 one from Thailand that indicated disability inclusion in early childhood development and education is not a new thing in humanitarian settings, despite the current lack of extensive provision. Most of the available evidence comes from grey literature rather than academic literature. The review begins with a general overview of early childhood development

and education in humanitarian settings before moving on to the available case studies relating to disability inclusion in early childhood development and education in humanitarian settings.

## 2. Overview of Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) in humanitarian settings

Conflict, violence and other crises left a record 36.5 million children (0-18) displaced from their homes by the end of 2021 (UN 2022). In 2018, more than 29 million babies were born into conflict-affected areas, where they experience malnourishment, trauma and toxic stress (UNICEF 2019).

Children's first years of life are the most critical for their development, laying the foundation for their lives to come (Bouchane *et al.* 2016: 4). Crises have 'an enormous negative impact on early childhood development' (Dooley and Bassett 2022: 6; see also Myers 2022: 9-10). In crises, the very youngest children are at particular risk of 'physical deprivation, psychological trauma, toxic stress and inadequate cognitive and socioemotional development' (Bouchane *et al.* 2016: 4). Young children affected by crises and displacement are 'particularly vulnerable to the long-lasting effects that prolonged stress has on the developing brain', 'with important consequences for their ability to learn and benefit from future educational opportunities' (Robinson and Stone 2019; Bouchane *et al.* 2018: 3; Dooley and Bassett 2022: 7; Murphy *et al.* 2018: 90). In addition, primary caregivers often are experiencing trauma, deprivation, and stress, contributing to their having fewer resources and less time to provide children with attention and necessary socio-emotional and cognitive stimulation needed for children's healthy development (Ereky-Stevens *et al.* 2022: 2).

Very young children cannot afford to wait to the end of a crisis to learn, play, and receive holistic care but 'access to early childhood development (ECD) services often becomes more challenging where family and social networks have been weakened and social service delivery interrupted' (Bouchane *et al.* 2016: 4; University of Virginia Humanitarian Collaborative 2021: 5). Bouchane *et al.* (2018: 4) and Murphy *et al.* (2018: 91) warn that the effect of experiences of severe, prolonged stress and psychosocial deprivation on children and a lack of early childhood development and education programming can impact 'future generations, reinforce inequities, and threaten the peace and stability of societies around the world'.

Quality and holistic ECDE programmes 'which deliver vital early learning and responsive caregiving along with attention to health, nutrition, safety, and security' can reverse many of the harmful effects of conflict and displacement and offer physiological, psychological, and cognitive protection (Robinson and Stone 2019; University of Virginia Humanitarian Collaborative 2021: 5; Ereky-Stevens *et al.* 2022: 2; Bouchane *et al.* 2018: 4-5; Bouchane *et al.* 2016: 7; Murphy *et al.* 2028: 91). However, there are 'significant gaps in humanitarian response to address the needs of young children' as ECDE programmes are often not prioritised in humanitarian responses and there is a shortage of trained ECDE practitioners and limited resources to support them (University of Virginia Humanitarian Collaborative 2021: 5; Robinson and Stone 2019; Dooley and Bassett 2022: 6; Murphy *et al.* 2018: 90). In 2019, only 2.6 per cent of humanitarian assistance went to education, with just a fraction of that going to early childhood education (University of Virginia Humanitarian Collaborative 2021: 14; Ponguta *et al.* 2022: 139). Lack of funding for early childhood development and education in humanitarian emergencies has 'resulted in limited access to and poor-quality educational opportunities for young children living in crises' (Ponguta *et al.* 2022: 139).

A rigorous review of education in crisis contexts found that little evidence exists on the effects of early childhood development programmes in countries affected by crisis and that more research is needed to understand them (Burde *et al.* 2015: 41-42). A recent systematic review of early childhood education and care programmes for refugee children in low- and middle-income countries also found that 'the research evidence base in this field is still very young, and studies can face significant challenges which affect their methodological rigour' (Ereky-Stevens *et al.* 2022: 2). Ereky-Stevens *et al.* (2022: 28) note that 'high quality research in low-resource- and unstable contexts requires additional time and funding'. Murphy *et al.* (2018: 91) note that for more evidence and learning about ECDE service provision in humanitarian settings there is a need for more systematic monitoring and evaluation and impact evaluations to assess implementation and feed this knowledge back into research and quality improvement.

## Guidance and provision

There is a lack of detailed guidance on supporting the youngest children in humanitarian standards and guidance documents (University of Virginia Humanitarian Collaborative 2021: 8). The various existing documents cover the nurturing care framework<sup>1</sup> domains such as good health, safety and security, adequate nutrition, opportunities for learning, and responsive caregiving but none covered all of them (University of Virginia Humanitarian Collaborative' 2021: 10; WHO *et al.* 2018). Some guidance on nurturing care for children living in humanitarian settings has been provided in a thematic brief written by Solon *et al.* (2020: 4), which also notes that 'no one set of standards provides comprehensive guidance on all of these areas, and there is little attention to responsive caregiving and early learning activities for children, especially those under the age of 3'.

As 'much of the education programming for young children falls outside of formal contexts, this leaves ECD education programming underdeveloped in humanitarian standards and guidance documents' (University of Virginia Humanitarian Collaborative 2021: 39). The systematic review also found that resources for providing ECDE can be extremely limited, and that providing good quality ECDE to refugee families in low-resource contexts can be highly challenging (Ereky-Stevens *et al.* 2022: 2).

The provision of early childhood development and education in humanitarian contexts is often extremely limited and 'humanitarian responses typically omit integrated programming for early childhood development' (Ereky-Stevens *et al.* 2022: 27; Bouchane *et al.* 2018: 12; Bouchane *et al.* 2016: 3). A global survey of Inclusive Early Childhood Development (IECD) and Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) programmes and support services conducted in 2017 found that 119 of the 426

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<sup>1</sup> The Nurturing care framework for early childhood development is a framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential that builds upon state-of-the-art evidence of how child development unfolds. The Framework was developed by WHO, UNICEF, and the World Bank Group, in collaboration with the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health, the Early Childhood Development Action Network and many other partners to provide a roadmap for ensuring attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development 2022). It provides a 'standardized model for inclusive ECD interventions, as it recommends ways for embracing and leveraging nurturing care that is fully inclusive of young children with disabilities' (Myers 2022: 16).



programmes (28 per cent) were implemented in countries affected by humanitarian crises<sup>2</sup> (Vargas-Barón *et al.* 2019: 8). The survey contacted all countries categorised as affected by humanitarian crises, but many did not report any IECD or ECI programmes (Vargas-Barón *et al.* 2019: 32). Respondents in countries affected by humanitarian crises reported a lower percentage of combined ECD and ECI programmes (33 per cent) and programmes providing ‘only or mainly’ ECI services (8 per cent) as compared to countries not affected by humanitarian crises (42 per cent and 13 per cent, respectively) (Vargas-Barón *et al.* 2019: 37). A 2018 analysis of Humanitarian Response Plans also found significant gaps in addressing the needs of young children and that services that can protect young children in crisis were insufficient, underfunded, and mainly focused on health and nutrition, rather than safety and security, education, and responsive care services (University of Virginia Humanitarian Collaborative 2021: 14; Bouchane *et al.* 2018: 9). Of 26 active Humanitarian Response Plans, only 9 per cent had recommended early learning elements (University of Virginia Humanitarian Collaborative 2021: 15). A report for UNICEF noted that this is a particular issue in the acute onset stage of emergencies as there are no existing childcare models available and service delivery is more challenging (Dooley and Bassett 2022: 6). Lack of attention and investment is not only an international issue as early childhood development also falls through the cracks of national responses during emergencies (Solon *et al.* 2020: 4; Ponguta *et al.* 2022: 169). Given the high levels of childhood trauma and developmental delays and disabilities found in young children in countries affected by humanitarian crises, higher levels of early childhood development and education programming are urgently needed in these countries (Vargas-Barón *et al.* 2019: 37).

## Barriers to ECDE in humanitarian settings

However, resources for providing ECDE in humanitarian settings can be extremely limited, and thus providing good quality ECDE to crisis affected and/or refugee

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<sup>2</sup> Sub-Saharan Africa region: respondents provided data on 48 programmes in 11 countries affected by humanitarian crises; Middle East and North Africa (countries = 3; programmes = 5); East Asia and Pacific (countries = 2; programmes = 24); Latin America and the Caribbean (countries = 2; programmes = 19); South Asia (countries = 2; programmes = 13); and Europe and Central Asia (countries = 2; programmes = 10) (Vargas-Barón *et al.* 2019: 32).

families in low-resource contexts can be highly challenging (Ereky-Stevens *et al.* 2022: 27). Studies on ECDE provision in refugee camps described lack of spaces for early learning; environments unfit for play; lack of caregivers, training and incentives; lack of toys and resources for learning; and lack of access to clean water and nutrition (Ereky-Stevens *et al.* 2022: 27; Ponguta *et al.* 2022: 150). In addition, there is 'limited research on the efficacy of ECDE in humanitarian contexts, which is related to low prioritization, limited funding, and few practical actions focused on the urgent needs of younger children' (Ponguta *et al.* 2022: 139).

Several factors are noted to contribute to the lack of investment and prioritisation across organisations and national and international actors of early childhood development programmes including the prioritisation of survival-focused initiatives; short-term funding cycles; lack of readily available programmatic guidance and limited evidence base on young children and their families in crises; lack of integrated programming (all contributing to a lack of attention to the comprehensive, multi-sectoral approaches as outlined in the Nurturing Care Framework); and 'a persistent lack of understanding of the life-saving impacts of early learning opportunities in crisis settings' (Bouchane *et al.* 2018: 10; Ponguta *et al.* 2022: 150). There may also be political barriers (e.g. political instability, hostility toward refugees) that prevent ECDE in emergencies from being prioritised at the national level (Ponguta *et al.* 2022: 150). ECDE is also generally not included in humanitarian appeals and assessments, and organisations' funding proposals (Ponguta *et al.* 2022: 150). The wider context also plays a role with government capacities (human and financial) to provide access to ECDE services (e.g., preschool, birth registration) before and during crises, as well as families' unmet needs and poverty, also putting in place barriers to ECDE.

## Benefits

While limited, the available evidence indicates that early childhood development and education can 'provide safe and engaging spaces that provide children with opportunities for recovery and learning' (Ereky-Stevens *et al.* 2022: 27; Dooley and Bassett 2022: 7). For example, studies which looked at the impact of early childhood development interventions on child wellbeing found strong evidence of improved

wellbeing and reduced violence in Northern Uganda and Bosnia (Burde *et al.* 2015: 46-47). Other studies reported improvements for 'children's early cognitive, literacy and numeracy skills, their language and communication, their physical/motor skills, their hygiene practices, and their behaviour with improvement in their social competence and emotional development' (Ereky-Stevens *et al.* 2022: 27).

In addition, the benefits of childcare offered by children's attendance of early childhood development and education centres extends to parents or other primary caregivers, who receive 'respite from the burden of caring for young children and allow adults time to work, collect food, access shelter or carry out other tasks to support their families and cope with crisis' (Dooley and Bassett 2022: 7). Solon *et al.* (2020: 2) also note that 'Investing in early childhood development programmes in the uncertainty and instability of protracted crises and displacement lays a foundation for life-long success and resilience, social cohesion, and sustainable and peaceful societies'.

## Promising approaches

Murphy *et al.* (2018: 90) suggest that implementation of ECDE programming 'remains sparse, largely due to the lack of evidence of how and why these programmes can improve outcomes in humanitarian settings'. However, other studies note some promising approaches.

The rigorous review noted that a grey literature study in the Democratic Republic of Congo observed that a multi-sector early childhood development approach appears more beneficial for children than a traditional nursery model, which has a narrower focus on cognitive skills (Burde *et al.* 2015: 41). This was supported by the systematic review, which found that play-based opportunities for learning were identified as strengths of provision in many of the studies, and a wider focus on basic needs, as well as a focus on learning of literacy and numeracy skills were identified as characteristics of good practice (Ereky-Stevens *et al.* 2022: 27). It is very important to provide 'stability, safety, normality and support for social and emotional learning' (Ereky-Stevens *et al.* 2022: 27). The systematic review also found that 'training programmes can increase educators' and caregivers' understanding of pedagogy and teaching and learning, and thus improve their practice' (Ereky-

Stevens *et al.* 2022: 27). This is especially important for training on play-based approaches (Ereky-Stevens *et al.* 2022: 27).

BRAC's Humanitarian Play Labs are an example of a play-based approach, that focuses on playing to heal as well as playing to learn (Mariam and Saltmarsh 2019). In the Rohingya refugee camps they were designed in close conjunction with the refugee population, focusing on creating a space that is safe, that nurtures children's natural spontaneity, and ensures that it preserves the Rohingya culture, for example by using traditional chants (Mariam and Saltmarsh 2019).

A paper written for the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report notes that building on existing delivery platforms, including education, health, and other sectors that contribute to early childhood development, to support parents and caregivers' capacity to provide nurturing care and responsive stimulation is likely to be successful (Bouchane *et al.* 2018: 12). Childcare programming can also 'serve as a mechanism for the provision of other services during humanitarian crisis, such as health and nutrition services, WASH facilities and early education, all of which are crucial to early childhood development' (Dooley and Bassett 2022: 7). In addition, 'early learning programmes with an emphasis on the quality of adult-child interactions, playful learning opportunities, and intensive pre- and in-service support of caregiver and teacher workforces are likely to be effective' with conflict and crisis affected populations (Bouchane *et al.* 2018: 12). There may be a need to develop versions of both early learning and nurturing care programmes that are shorter-term for highly mobile families in uncertain contexts (Bouchane *et al.* 2018: 13).

UNICEF notes that there are five elements to achieving high-quality care in humanitarian crises that include: training and mentoring for childcare providers; trauma-informed care; spaces and curricula for play, early learning and social-emotional development; integrated nutrition, wash, health and social protection efforts; and primary caregiver and community support and empowerment initiatives (Dooley and Bassett 2022: 37). It notes that three promising practices in acute emergency setting include mobile childcare crèches, childcare hubs and homebased care (Dooley and Bassett 2022: 37).

Ereky-Stevens *et al.* (2022: 27) found that 'the characteristics of home-based provision were found to support participation in removing many of the common barriers [to ECDE in refugee camps]: accessibility, availability of space, cultural- and language barriers, security concerns, and issues around staffing'.

### 3. Inclusion of children with disabilities in ECDE in humanitarian settings

Children with disabilities are particularly at risk and disproportionately affected in humanitarian situations (WHO and UNICEF 2012: 16; Giraldo 2020: 66; Myers 2022: 6). Caregivers' psychological stress and depression due to the situation they are in can worsen their interactions with their children with disabilities, which can have a negative impact on children's health and wellbeing (WHO and UNICEF WHO 2012: 17). Children with disabilities may experience new impairments, with conflict being a leading cause of disability in children, and they may lose essential medications and assistive devices or access to them, increasing the number of children with disabilities in need of quality early childhood development and education (WHO and UNICEF 2012: 17; Sandall 2016: 6; Giraldo 2020: 68; Myers 2022: 6, 10). Toxic stress also increases the risk for developmental delays and learning disabilities (Bouchane *et al.* 2016: 12). In addition, 'where resources such as food or medicine are limited [children with disabilities] may be considered as a lower priority than children without disabilities' (WHO and UNICEF 2012: 17). Becoming separated from parents or extended family may also increase their risk of violence or abuse (WHO and UNICEF 2012: 17). Stigma and other disability related barriers mean that children with disabilities are often overlooked in needs assessments and subsequent humanitarian responses and the lack of data has hampered efforts to improve the inclusion of children with disabilities (Myers 2022: 8, 14). Mainstream humanitarian interventions aimed at supporting young children may not be accessible to children with disabilities, and investments in early childhood development and education in humanitarian settings do not routinely or intentionally target children with disabilities (Myers 2022: 10, 13). As a result, the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies notes that disability inclusive early child development and education services (see Box 1) in humanitarian emergencies are 'essential to ending preventable deaths of babies and young children, supporting their healthy development, and driving economic recovery and peacebuilding' (Myers 2022: 12).

However, there was very little mention of children with disabilities in the systematic review of early childhood education and care programmes for refugee children in

low- and middle-income countries, while the rigorous review of education in crisis contexts notes that ‘searches returned no studies on children with disabilities conducted in crisis settings or with children affected by crises that met our methodological standards for inclusion’ (Ereky-Stevens *et al.* 2022; Burde *et al.* 2015: vii). Giraldo (2020: 67) also notes that ‘researchers rarely examine the experiences of children with disabilities during disasters, regardless of their type of disability’. A 2022 policy brief by the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) also notes that disability inclusive early childhood development and education programmes in humanitarian contexts currently does not meet needs (Myers 2022: 6). However, examples of good practice exist and are outlined in the guidance and case studies below.

**Box 1: Disability-inclusive early childhood development:**

- is accessible and affordable for all, and promotes equal opportunities for children to attend, learn, and participate in learning and social activities;
- provides for children’s holistic development, ensuring quality and physical access to ECD facilities;
- protects and enables children’s rights as clearly stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;
- ensures transitions from mostly home-based Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) provision to disability-inclusive ECD, and supports continuous monitoring and assessment of children’s development and learning;
- respects and celebrates diversity and differences; all children are valued equally – it does not exclude, stereotype, stigmatize or discriminate against any children on the basis of their differences;
- views diversity as an opportunity for learning and promoting understanding;
- embraces culturally-relevant practices and knowledge of participating families, and supports children’s mother tongue;

- protects children from abuse, neglect, and stress by providing nurturing care and protection; and
- creates strong connections with families and communities as partners in child development and learning, and is attentive to their backgrounds, needs and situations

Source: Myers 2022: 11 (Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0)

## Guidance including children with disabilities in humanitarian ECDE

Specific guidance on including children with disabilities in early childhood development and education in humanitarian settings has been lacking. A review of existing humanitarian standards and guidance documents to assess the extent to which early childhood interventions and the needs of infants, young children, and caregivers are included, found that the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action (2019) does not expressly refer to young children or their needs (University of Virginia Humanitarian Collaborative 2021: 25). This leaves young children with disabilities and their caregivers lacking specific guidance and being under-addressed in humanitarian action (University of Virginia Humanitarian Collaborative 2021: 25). There is no focus on opportunities for early learning in the guidelines (University of Virginia Humanitarian Collaborative 2021: 27). Amongst the other humanitarian standards and guidance documents there is either a low or no focus on care for children with developmental difficulties (University of Virginia Humanitarian Collaborative 2021: 29).

Some more recent child focused humanitarian guidance documents have focused more on inclusion. Those including the Nurturing Care Framework should be inclusive of children with disabilities (Myers 2022: 16-17). The thematic brief on nurturing care for children living in humanitarian settings notes that it is particularly important to focus on children with developmental difficulties and disabilities as 'they are often the least likely to receive appropriate care' (Solon *et al.* 2020: 2). It notes that it is important to ensure spaces, structures, materials and communications are



accessible to young children and families with disabilities, and support staff in relation to disability inclusion (Solon *et al.* 2020: 6, 10; Dooley and Bassett 2022: 26).

UNICEF's recent guide on childcare in humanitarian crises notes that children with disabilities often face greater access barriers and that explicit targeting of them is critical (Dooley and Bassett 2022: 15). Children with disabilities were also mentioned in UNICEF's 2014 guide on Early Childhood Development in Emergencies, which identifies inclusion as one of early childhood development's principles, meaning that 'all young children with disabilities and developmental delays receive quality nurturing care and access to all basic social services, and are provided with a supportive and enabling environment in which to reach their full potential' (UNICEF 2014: 7). UNICEF's *Guidance on Including Children with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action: Education*, also mentions early childhood development and notes that its emergency Early Childhood Development Kit has been reviewed and modified for inclusivity and accessibility and contains a supplementary booklet with practical tips on how activities can be adapted to include children with different disabilities (UNICEF 2017: 34-35).

In December 2022, the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Early Childhood Development Working Group produced a policy brief on opportunities and challenges for disability-inclusive early childhood development in emergencies (Myers 2022). The brief highlights the benefits of disability inclusive early childhood development in emergencies and provides recommendations for governments, donors, and programmers (Myers 2022). The recommendations relate to better data on children with disabilities; improved screening and early identification; disability-inclusion in policy and planning; greater coordination and multi-sectoral collaboration; minimum standards for disability inclusive ECDE interventions grounded in the Nurturing Care Framework; more evidence for scaling up; and advocacy (Myers 2022: 23-28).

Early identification and early interventions are important for the success of disability inclusive early childhood development and education and some tools to do this include the Washington Group Module on Child Functioning and the Malawi Development Assessment Tool, for example (Myers 2022: 6, 17-18).

A Women's Refugee Commission study of people with disabilities experiences in humanitarian contexts also notes that early childhood development and education programmes are a good entry point for referring refugee children with disabilities to other services such as appropriate community-based rehabilitation or health care services (Reilly 2008a: 23).

## A selection of disability inclusive ECDE case studies

### **Thailand**

An older example of disability inclusive early childhood development and education in humanitarian settings was outlined by Reilly (2008a) reporting on the results of a study by Women's Refugee Commission of people with disabilities in displaced and conflict -affected populations. The study found that in refugee camps in Thailand there were 'successful early childhood intervention programmes to identify children with disabilities and help them integrate into mainstream schools' (Reilly 2008b: 9). In Burmese refugee camps in Thailand, a variety of special education services existed, including an early childhood intervention programme run by the Karen Women's Organisation, with the support of World Education (Reilly 2008a: 23). Parents and teachers worked together on early identification of children with disabilities and special education teachers did home visits to support children with disabilities in 'becoming independent at home (e.g., through learning about hygiene and toileting), learning basic numeracy and language and learning to provide support and guidance to their parents' (Reilly 2008a: 23). The children who progressed from the early childhood intervention to mainstream schools were assigned a teacher to assist them at school and tutor them at home (Reilly 2008a: 23). This programme, along with other inclusive education programmes in the camps was found to have changed the perception of children with disabilities in the refugee community and families with children with disabilities were less shunned and stigmatised than they used to be (Reilly 2008a: 25).

### **Uganda**

Sandall (2016) looked at Congolese refugee children with disabilities in Save the Children supported Early Childhood Care and Development centres within western

Ugandan refugee settlements. She found that less than 5 per cent of children with disabilities were in these centres (Sandall 2016: 30). Stigma prevented many children with disabilities from attending the early childhood centres and teachers and parents defined disability in terms of what children could not do (Sandall 2016: 41).

Teachers had had no training on identifying or working with children with disabilities and felt that such training was an urgent need so they could better support children with disabilities (Sandall 2016: 42). They made small adaptations to their teaching methods to more effectively reach and engage with the children with disabilities in their class, although there were no documented individualised plans or assessments of their progress (Sandall 2016: 55). Save the Children staff in one of the settlements were not aware of the numbers of children with disabilities in their centres and inclusive education was not a feature of their donor reports, while staff also lacked disability inclusion training that they could use to support the teachers (Sandall 2016: 42). Disability mainstreaming across the organisation was said to only be in the early stages (Sandall 2016: 43). Disability stigma was also an issue in the ECDE centres, although teachers were trying to challenge it and some parents reported improvements in the behaviour towards their child (Sandall 2016: 57-58). Parents and teachers noted improvements in children with disabilities self-esteem because of increased social interaction and recognition of their achievements by significant adults (Sandall 2016: 58). Attendance at ECDE centres was also felt to restore hope to families for their children with disabilities' future (Sandall 2016: 60). All parents, teachers and Save the Children staff interviewed by Sandall (2016: 53) supported inclusive education principles and felt that children with disabilities should be included in mainstream early childhood development and education centres, although they acknowledged the need for additional support to do this. Parents also felt that the early childhood centres were safe spaces to leave their children in an insecure environment, which enabled them to go out and work (Sandall 2016: 50). This was especially important as many were single parents (Sandall 2016: 54).

Health (including psychosocial support) and nutrition service provision in the settlements is inadequate, affecting children's ability to learn and attend the early childhood centres (Sandall 2016: 47-48). The sanitation in the centres is inadequate, with no soap for example to clean children who have soiled themselves (Sandall

2016: 51). Another problem the centres faced was high teacher to children ratios, which limited their ability to teach the children with disabilities in their class (Sandall 2016: 54).

Despite children with disabilities being in the pre-primary centres, no primary school in the settlements accepted children with disabilities, even with advocacy from the ECDE teachers (Sandall 2016: 53). This results in many older children with disabilities remaining in the pre-primary centres, with one centre reporting 20 children over the age of six (Sandall 2016: 54).

UNICEF also has a pilot programme, Identification of Disabilities in Early Childhood (IDEC), across 5 districts in host and refugee communities in Uganda (Myers 2022: 22). It includes training to identify children with disabilities for frontline village health workers; raising awareness on the importance of inclusion; addressing stigma; and stimulating behaviour change (Myers 2022: 22). Partners, including faith based organisations, are supported to establish disability inclusive early learning spaces at the village level, which has contributed to greater acceptance of, and support for, children with disabilities (Myers 2022: 22).

### **Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Thailand**

Humanity and Inclusion (HI) ran a five-year (2016-2020) disability inclusive early childhood development and education programme called 'Growing Together' in 11 refugee camps and 52 host communities in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Thailand, supported by the IKEA Foundation (Myers 2022: 19). Parents clubs that included parents of children with and without disabilities were set up to reduce disability stigma (Myers 2022: 19). They focused on indoor and outdoor play and early learning activities, and 50 inclusive, outdoor play spaces were set up to stimulate imagination, language, socio-emotional, cooperation, and problem-solving skills (Myers 2022: 19).

In partnership with Bibliothèques Sans Frontières, the project also set up the Ideasbox project, which provides communities with an inclusive multimedia centre, resources, and digital tools (Myers 2022: 20). The activities in the Ideasbox included key messages, such as 'inclusive, positive parenting for parents with children 0-5

years old, child participation, child rights and protection, positive peer relationships, and inclusive disaster risk reduction for children 6-12 years old' (Myers 2022: 20). It uses 'accessible hardware and software, inclusive early learning and pre-literacy materials and toys, sports and games, art activities, and adapted training materials' such as 'lightweight bright coloured balls and dice, low-cost toys made by parents, art materials, puppets, and modelling clay' (Myers 2022: 20).

Parents became more engaged in playgroup activities in Pakistan and Thailand (increasing from 21 per cent to 96 per cent) and recognised the importance of play for learning, social-emotional wellbeing and skills development (Myers 2022: 20). 'Children without disabilities increasingly felt comfortable playing with children with disabilities, and perceived quality of life improved for all children by the end of the project' (Myers 2022: 20). In Bangladesh, those involved in the programme were able to work well together at the multi-sectoral level which helped mainstream inclusive education (Myers 2022: 20).

## **Rwanda**

Barrett *et al.* (2019: 36) looked at inclusive access to early childhood development services for refugee children from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi in Rwanda and noted there were 'concerns about the level of access to these services for children who experience disabilities and for their families'. Parents of children with disabilities were encouraged to send their children to the ECD centre or school but teachers felt unprepared to support them and education partners reported having little knowledge and few skills within their organisations to train teachers on inclusive practices (Barrett *et al.* 2019: 37). Looking specifically at children with communication disabilities, Barrett *et al.* (2019: 37) found that their needs are overlooked in existing services as the services tend to be focused primarily on physical and sensory impairments.

## **Middle East**

A recent example of a disability inclusive early childhood development and education programme is International Rescue Committee's (IRC's) Ahlan Simsim (Arabic for Welcome Sesame) programme for displaced children in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and

Iraq. The programme is a partnership between IRC and Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit educational organisation behind the television series Sesame Street that seeks to support children affected by conflict in the Middle East by delivering early learning and nurturing care to children and caregivers (IRC 2022)<sup>3</sup>. The programme combines a new, locally produced, Arabic-language version of ‘Sesame Street’ designed to support children by strengthening their social-emotional growth, as well as in-person services (IRC 2022; Robinson and Stone 2019). The TV show has recently added a Muppet with disabilities in March 2022 to support children with disabilities and reduce stigma against children with disabilities (IRC 2022; INEE 2022). The Muppet, Ameera, is intended to provide a positive representation of children with disabilities and help children without disabilities learn about children with disabilities (INEE 2022). She has a type of wheelchair that represents the insufficient access to assistive technologies that people living in fragile context experience (INEE 2022). Feedback from families with children with disabilities has been positive (INEE 2022). The character will be used beyond the Middle East and has been dubbed into multiple languages including Ukrainian, Rohingya, Swahili, and many more (INEE 2022).

IRC has trained staff on disability inclusion, created accessible physical spaces, and provided activities and materials tailored to the abilities and needs of all children (IRC 2022). The Ahlan Simsim programme models are being designed and tested to ensure replication and scalability and are reaching over a million children through critical direct services, and many times that through mass media (Robinson and Stone 2019).

NYU Global TIES for Children (NYU TIES) is the programme’s independent evaluation partner, ‘leading the design and execution of impact studies on the programme that will double the existing body of research around what early learning interventions are most effective for children in crisis settings’ and has a particular focus on issues including gender and disability (NYU 2022).

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<sup>3</sup> The programme is supported by MacArthur Foundation and the LEGO Foundation (Robinson and Stone 2019).

To highlight the benefits of this disability inclusive approach, IRC provides an example of a 5-year-old Syrian boy with Down's Syndrome who benefits from attendance at his local IRC early childhood centre, learning new things about hygiene, managing emotions and communication, as well as the support provided to his mother (IRC 2022). It notes the benefits of his attendance for others in the centre too (IRC 2022).

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## Key websites

- [Early Childhood Development Resources | INEE](#)
- [Early Childhood Development Working Group | INEE](#)
- [Moving Minds Alliance](#)
- [Nurturing Care Framework for Early Childhood Development - HOME](#)  
([nurturing-care.org](http://nurturing-care.org))