

ARNEC CONNECTIONS

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Photo by Save the Children.

Playful parenting in a pandemic: pathways to scale for global programs

Playful parenting in a pandemic: pathways to scale for global programs

THE LEGO FOUNDATION

The LEGO Foundation also shared this resource to the public through the Early Childhood Development Action Network.
Available in <https://ecdan.org/playful-parenting-in-a-pandemic-pathways-to-scale-for-global-programs/>.



*Mother and child after a group session in Wangdue, Bhutan.
Photo by Save the Children.*

In a time when COVID-19 has transformed the way we work, live, play, and parent, early childhood development (ECD) programs have been asked to reimagine how they deliver services as well. Now more than ever, parents worldwide need support to tackle the distinct challenges presented by the pandemic and provide their children holistic nurturing care.

In Bhutan, Guatemala, Rwanda, Serbia, and Zambia, the LEGO Foundation Playful Parenting Initiative partners navigate operational climates deeply altered by the pandemic to offer parents this type of support at scale. While play lends itself to three of the five components of nurturing care outlined in the Nurturing Care Framework (responsive caregiving, opportunities for early learning, and safety & security), the humanitarian crisis triggered by COVID-19, in some cases, increased pressure to emphasize health and nutrition. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the need for playful parenting more than ever before, and in many countries, we have seen an increase in parents' demand for information and support for parenting during the pandemic.

In the face of these new realities, the Playful Parenting learning community, facilitated by FHI 360, centred scalability discussions on elevating priority for playful parenting programs across countries. After over a year of implementation during a global pandemic, we came together to discuss how COVID-19 has affected pathways to scale, and what we could do to respond.

Check out how parenting programs across these five country contexts are implementing during the pandemic to strengthen local and national buy-in for playful parenting and meet the increasingly urgent need for scaled up services to parents.



Mother and child during a group session in Punakha, Bhutan. Photo by Save the Children.

Bhutan: Save the Children's Prescription to Play

In Bhutan, Save the Children, in partnership with the Ministry of Health, leads a multiyear project targeting 0–3-year-old children, with a goal to improve playful parenting practices of caregivers and enable them to support their children's maximum development. This is done through

training Health Workers to (i) deliver 12 group sessions at health centres on playful parenting, breastfeeding and complementary feeding, caregiver well-being, positive parenting, and responsive caregiving, and (ii) screen children for developmental delays and provide intervention ideas and referral services.

The effort has prioritised integration into local systems to facilitate uptake by embedding playful parenting into existing training. For example, playful parenting is being integrated into the pre-service health assistants' training program at the Khesar Gyelpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan (KGUMSB). Working with the university provides an opportunity to ensure future Health Workers will be trained to deliver the playful parenting sessions and conduct children developmental milestone screening as part of their regular Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (IMNCI) program.

PROGRAMMING DURING THE PANDEMIC

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Save the Children and Ministry of Health have shifted some of these training from face-to-face to virtual modalities. For example, a learning event for health assistants was changed to virtual sessions to allow health assistants and district health officers to more consistently engage in the quality improvement process to improve the delivery of playful parenting sessions, regardless of future pandemic restrictions on face-to-face meetings.

Guatemala: ChildFund's Juega Conmigo

The launch of the national early years program *Acompañame a Crecer* (Accompany Me to Grow) by the Government of Guatemala in 2019 marked a pivotal moment for early childhood development in the country. It provided an opportunity for ChildFund to present *Juega Conmigo* (Come Play with Me), a programmatic strategy to reach families with children aged 0-4 through playful parenting and scale up early childhood interventions among rural Indigenous communities in Guatemala. With the current government stepping in in early 2020, ChildFund has been engaging with the Ministry of Education (Mineduc) at the department and the national level to support the new initiative with the new representatives.

PROGRAMMING DURING THE PANDEMIC

As the onset of the pandemic brought new immediate needs for communities and additional tasks for the government, ChildFund stepped in and developed radio messages on playful parenting to reach caregivers as all in-person early childhood development programs were interrupted. By the end of 2020, the intervention reached 12,308 children and their families. At the same time, the Ministry of Education developed activities and guidelines for *Acompañame a Crecer*, and began providing training to organisations and community managers on the national ECD program. ChildFund signed a memorandum of understanding to implement *Acompañame a Crecer* complementing it with best practices and lessons learned from ChildFund's earlier ECD program *Nuestros Niños Sanos y Listos* (Our children healthy and smart, NNSL in Spanish). As in-person gatherings continue to be on pause as of June 2021, ChildFund is now in discussion with the Ministry of Education to build upon last year's experience using radio to foster playful parenting, and pilot *Acompañame a Crecer* through this technology, complementing it with the experience and lessons learnt from NNSL.

Rwanda: Boston College & FXB Rwanda's Sugira Muryango

Sugira Muryango (SM) is a home-visiting model to support playful parenting to promote ECD and prevent violence through active coaching and father engagement. Boston College & FXB Rwanda are currently scaling SM to 10,000 households across three districts in Rwanda via the Inshuti z'Umuryango social protection workforce. Local buy-in and government commitment are vital ingredients needed for long-term sustainment of SM. To achieve this, a Collaborative Team Approach is employed, referred to as the Promoting Lasting Anthropometric Change and Young Children's Development (PLAY) Collaborative, to promote multilevel buy-in across the ECD delivery system in Rwanda. The ultimate goal of the PLAY Collaborative is to create a community of practice among ECD stakeholders to reinforce knowledge-sharing and problem solving, while understanding barriers and facilitators to stakeholder engagement and long-term sustainment.

PROGRAMMING DURING THE PANDEMIC

COVID-19 adaptations include increased use of technology like WhatsApp to share information, support training, and engage community stakeholders. Given the reliance on face-to-face meetings to support PLAY Collaborative activities, increased partnership with government partners has been critical for ensuring SM processes adhere to government mandates regarding COVID-19 including smaller meeting groups, provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), and following of social distancing protocols, etc.

Serbia: UNICEF Serbia's ECD Training Package

In Serbia, UNICEF leads a playful parenting programme grounded in evidence-based ECD training approaches including key components of the Care for Child Development approach that support parents to provide nurturing care and engage in play and communication with their young children. As part of the programme, UNICEF focuses on building the capacity of front-line workers to support and empower parents to provide their children with nurturing care, including playful parenting, and strengthening multisectoral ECD policy formulation and financing.

PROGRAMMING DURING THE PANDEMIC

During COVID-19, a strategy central to the scale up approach involves leveraging linkages with both the national and local government's agenda and relevant community stakeholders for a stronger impact and a more prominent voice for playful parenting. This includes (i) aligning and integrating nurturing care and playful parenting within the government's agenda and key priority areas and (ii) enhancing a sense of ownership across sectors by working with government partners to integrate ECD and parental support into national and local plans and policies across relevant sectors. In a period when national attention was on COVID-19 infection rates, vaccination rates, and other pandemic related challenges, UNICEF was attentive to the government's needs and worked to pick the right time to advocate for parenting support. When the government elevated the prioritisation of mental health protection on their agenda, UNICEF intensified the conversation on playful parenting to promote the 'caring for the caregivers' component of the program. From here UNICEF developed a blended training package with live

sessions and asynchronous content to better meet the needs and schedules of the service providers involved. Tapping into these existing linkages with the government and stakeholders will ensure continued buy-in and support for nurturing care and playful parenting, as well as their successful integration into services and programmes.

Zambia: UNICEF's Care for Child Development

In Zambia, UNICEF is working to scale up quality services for younger children and families, including strengthening counselling/support for parents using the Care for Child Development (CCD) approach. The program aims to support the operationalization of the Nurturing Care Framework, including playful parenting at both the national and local levels. By strengthening delivery of ECD services, engaging in policy work, and leveraging communications to propel social and behavioural change, UNICEF drives programming building on existing entry points and services. Building on work on the integration of ECD into the national health and other sector strategic plans and existing maternal and child health services, work in this important area has already begun.

PROGRAMMING DURING THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed enormous new stressors on children and parents, further underscoring the need for quality ECD service delivery. Moving forward, UNICEF will continue to support the government in its efforts to develop a national cost multi-sectoral ECD policy and strategic framework, which will include key support to parents so they can provide nurturing care, including playful parenting to their children. This framework will guide investments and programming for ECD through both government and non-government providers by outlining key strategies, roles, and responsibilities of each sector. UNICEF will also incorporate operational/budgetary considerations to ensure measurable progress towards quality ECD service delivery that promotes children's optimal development in Zambia. The integration of ECD into policies, plans and programmes will not only elevate the importance of nurturing care and playful parenting but will also facilitate its movement to scale.

What's next?

There is an immediate need for scaling up parenting interventions that provide parents with the resources, guidance, and practical tools to manage the complex challenges of parenting through a global pandemic and beyond. As we move programs to scale, special attention must be given to how to preserve fidelity and quality of parenting interventions at scale. Through the implementation research on the Playful Parenting Initiative, FHI 360 uncovers ingredients to successfully scale up that help shape learning across organisations. The five experiences above offer a window into how programs are infusing critical elements of scaling up across distinct country contexts. Moving forward, we hope these learnings serve as a guiding blueprint for pathways to scale for the ECD community to reimagine parenting programs, especially in light of a global pandemic, and ultimately reach more children with learning through play.

References

ECDAN. (2022, February 10). Playful Parenting in a Pandemic: Pathways to Scale for Global Programs - ECDAN. ECDAN. <https://ecdan.org/playful-parenting-in-a-pandemic-pathways-to-scale-for-global-programs/>

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This article is an offprint from **ARNEC Connections**, which is published annually by the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC).

ARNEC covers a large geographical area, totalling more than forty countries in the Asia-Pacific region. This publication is one of the many ways for our network to share interesting and new knowledge for cross-country learning.

Within the pages of ARNEC Connections, you will find unique initiatives from the region, field experiences, and research summaries.

ARNEC Connections is a publication for ECD professionals by ECD professionals. All articles are contributed by individuals who are ARNEC members and/or are working within the field of early childhood.

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