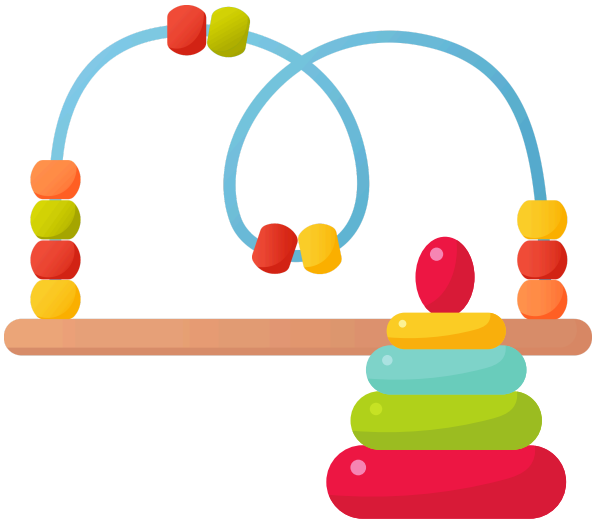


WHAT'S POSSIBLE? ADVANCING EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOUR CHANGE IN EDUCATION KNOWLEDGE BRIEF SERIES

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

unicef

SOCIAL + BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

November 2024

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SNAPSHOT



Education Goals

Advancing the role of ECD for young children to develop cognitive, emotional, and psychosocial skills that are essential for timely enrolment and retention, mental well-being and learning achievement in the early primary years.



SBC Interventions

Positive deviants; empowerment of CSOs and CBOs; frontline worker training; parent engagement and support, social mobilisation; institutional partnerships, community engagement, shifting beliefs and attitudes about the potential of ECD, efficiency, and equity in primary school.

This brief is part of a series about social and behaviour change in education. It is meant to make you think out of the box, reflect, ponder, and get inspired about the potential that social and behaviour change in education presents to ensure every child can learn in a safe and enabling environment. Rather than being a guidance per se it provides a snapshot of programmatic thinking and case examples, as well as a collection of resources, which you can use to continue exploring and unleashing the potential of Social and Behaviour Change in Education!

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Proficiency in foundational learning skills is essential for deeper learning in both primary and secondary school. Early Childhood Development is a key opportunity to capitalize on a critical developmental period to enable future academic success and address the foundational learning crisis. In their earliest years, children form more than 1 million new brain connections every second **– an astounding pace that is never repeated at any other phase of life.** Children who fall behind from the beginning rarely catch up with their peers and gaps persist. Consequently, children may be promoted to higher grades year after year, without the ability to engage meaningfully in more complex academic challenges as they grow.

The pre-primary education systems also hold an immense potential to tackle gender inequalities and address harmful social and gender norms and stereotypes before they are absorbed by the youngest learners – hence creating the grounds for changing deeply rooted social systems that uphold inequalities.

While early childhood development is integral to the development of foundational learning through pre-literacy and pre-numeracy and socio-emotional skills, it is not universally recognized as such. Moreover, the correlation between early childhood development and early schooling is overlooked in many countries, and especially in low-income countries.

Across Sub-Saharan Africa

0.3%

of education budgets are spent on pre-primary education

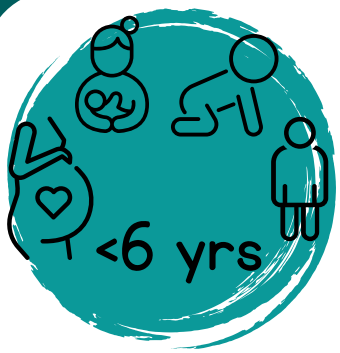
In low and middle income countries

70% **of 10 year-olds**

are unable to understand a simple written text

There is a perceived fadeout in the face of poor-quality primary education, which masks the sustained value of early learning gains, especially as an equaliser for the most vulnerable children. In addition, lack of intentional alignment between the early childhood development sector and the primary education sector leaves too many young children unprepared for primary school, delaying the acquisition of foundational learning skills and competencies. ECD requires collaboration across different ministries e.g., health, education, child protection, social welfare, which makes it difficult to coordinate data collection and service delivery. At the same time, effective coordination across these sectors is paramount for the continuity of care and development for children from birth to age 8.

The learning crisis speaks directly to the urgent need to understand that early learning and development are an integral part of foundational learning.



Do Early Childhood Interventions Have Lasting Effects?

Later Life Effects... ● Significant ● Not Significant ◯ No Evidence

	6-12 yrs Primary	13-17 years Adolescent	18+ yrs Adult
Nutrition	● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●
Early Stimulation	● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ●
Health	● ● ● ●	● ● ●	●
Social Protection	● ● ● ● ●	● ●	

Physical development

Cognitive development

Language

Socioemotional development

Schooling

Employment

Data from the World Bank Group

WHAT'S POSSIBLE?

A Social and Behaviour Change (SBC) approach to education can facilitate a better understanding of why children are left behind, out of school, not learning, experiencing violence, racism, stigma, or exclusion in and around schools. SBC is a means by which to identify and address the social and behavioural determinants that influence children's learning, access to, and experience of education starting with ECD. By effectively identifying and targeting social and behavioural barriers at all levels of the education system, SBC can provide strategies for addressing the identified challenges through a whole-systems approach and measure the effectiveness of education systems in creating an enabling, safe, and equitable learning environment for every child.

Adopting a social and behaviour change approach to education means tapping into a thus far under-used potential for enabling the education sector to overcome both educational and social challenges and barriers that cause distortion of educational outcomes at a big societal cost too. Moving into this space also means contributing to results in other areas such as advancing gender equality, disability inclusion, violence prevention, and preventing harmful social and gender norms and stereotypes that may be reproduced in and through education systems.

"Build trust before you build capacity." [1]

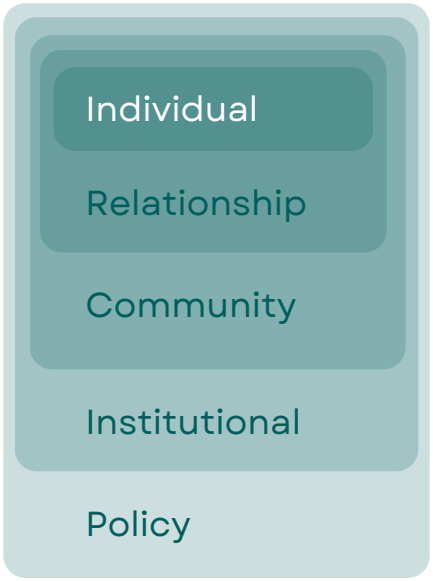
LET'S PLAY!

This knowledge brief illustrates how using social and behaviour change approaches can advance ECD and improve foundational learning. The brief offers innovative and proven insights on how to support young children to develop cognitive, emotional, and psychosocial skills that are essential for well-being and learning achievement in the early childhood and primary years by using an evidence-based approach to learning through play.

The examples show interventions that apply across the socio-ecological framework, and effectively integrates the individual, caregiver, community, and institutional/teacher level support for early learning. Developmental processes that shape these learning experiences also seek to influence attitudes towards and use of play in early childhood development with the goal of advancing foundational learning outcomes. Learning through play helps children develop five crucial skills that can improve the quality of their learning - physical, creative, cognitive, social, and emotional. It can also help them recover from the exposure to traumatic events caused by conflict and other adverse experiences and build their resilience.

[1] Quote from an interview with a key informant

Socio-ecological Model



Play is one of the most important ways in which young children gain essential knowledge and skills. Play for early learners is social, interactive, and iterative, as well as physically, verbally, and mentally engaging. Despite numerous studies and more than 100 years of educational theories demonstrating the causal relationship between play and learning, play is still not commonly accepted as a legitimate approach to learning.

Attitudes towards learning through play: Learning through play is too often shrouded in misconception and misunderstanding by caregivers, parents, and educators. Practitioners and parents often do not recognize the value of play as a process of learning, especially if they are narrowly focused on academic skills alone. Play is not commonly understood as a means by which children learn in pre-primary or primary settings and even less so as children age and move up in grades. As a result, play is not given sufficient focus in early learning curricula and in particular not in later curricula even though play aligns critically with how children learn.



PlayWorks



Learning beyond Classrooms

PLAYWORKS! 'PLAY IS LEARNING' [2]



Fundamental numeracy and literacy skills needed to learn complex concepts later in life are most effectively developed through play in the earliest years. Studies show that "children demonstrate their most advanced language skills during play, and that these language skills are strongly related to emergent literacy."
Children's free play correlates with the **roots of mathematical learning 46% of the time**.

Recognise the problem

Founders of PlayWorks observed that young children in the highest-poverty communities in the United States were rarely afforded opportunities to move or play during the time they were supposed to be learning. They also observed that significant disparities based on class, race, disability, and gender prevented access to safe spaces for young children to play.

Initiate community dialogue

In response to the deficit of access to space and time for play, PlayWorks' founders collaborated with leaders of early learning centres, schools, and youth to **co-create** a programme defined by a shared vision for safe, healthy, and inclusive play. In every community they began with a community engagement process to collectively diagnose what's needed to create a more **enabling environment** for children to learn through play.

Promising practices

[2] Quote from an interview with a key informant

Promising practices

"Put people at the centre of the strategy; partnerships go further when they are centred around the question of: what is it that's going to serve your need in our work together?" [3]

Identify positive deviants: Influencers and agents of change

Importantly, the intervention engaged people beyond teachers to deliver the programme. Young adult national service volunteers, student volunteer "Junior Coaches," and paraprofessionals brought the effects of **peer influencers** and **positive deviants** onto the playground. By modelling positive behaviours such as kindness, inclusion, belonging, and power-sharing with children, they influenced other teachers, caregivers, and adults who sought to experience a constructive, healthy relationship with children.

Dispel misconceptions; Build a supportive environment

The results speak to the benefit of using social and behaviour change strategies in education: evaluations showed increased emotional and physical safety, increased healthy, rigorous physical activity, and increased focus on academic activities for children, as well as recovered instructional time for teachers. As an outcome of engaging teachers, adolescent coaches, young adults, and paraprofessionals in shifting school culture through non-violent conflict resolution, statistically significant decreases in bullying were realised.

Develop a diffusion strategy; engage a coalition of actors

"Lack of systems thinking and systems awareness is often a major roadblock to change. Sometimes we must embrace the complexity of working collaboratively across sectors." [4]

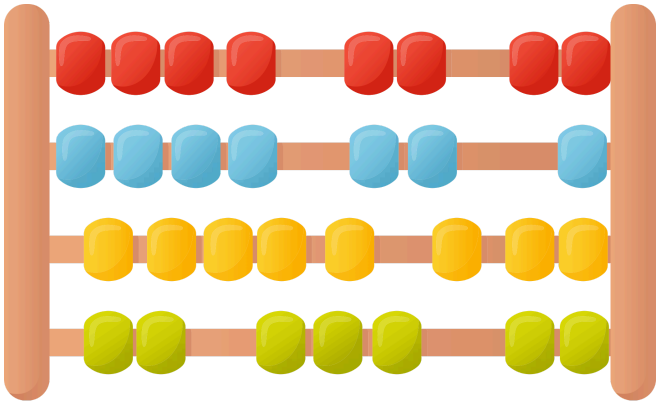
[3] Quote from an interview with a key informant
[4] Quote from an interview with a key informant

Promising practices

To institutionalise learning through play at the systemic level, UNICEF collaborated with the Lego Foundation to codify a set of enabling strategies that support the implementation of play-based approaches in early care, early learning, and early primary settings. Strategies include resourcing training on child development for caregivers and early childhood educators, ensuring quality in service provision, collaborating with Ministries to embed child-centred learning into policy, and engaging non-state actors in robustly financing the early childhood development sector.

> *"We need a systems approach to change behaviours of several actors, including parents, teachers, and district officials." [5]*

The case illustrations captured here are community-level strategies specific to high-poverty communities in the United States, yet there are exemplary efforts in **Nigeria**, **Jordan**, **Bangladesh**, and **Tanzania** where interventions are leveraging play-based curriculum aligned with broader, comprehensive efforts to transform education policy and practice at the legislative level.



[5] Quote from an interview with a key informant

Promising practices

LEARNING BEYOND CLASSROOMS



Expanding access to playful learning through remote delivery

"There is no time in a child's life more important than their first five years, when their brain is rapidly developing and most sensitive to its environment. We know that repeated exposure to trauma can inhibit brain development with long-term repercussions, but we can mitigate these effects through quality early childhood development and nurturing care." [6]

Recognise the problem

Conflict and crises have displaced 36.5 million children, marking the highest number since World War II. Alarmingly, only 31% of these children have access to pre-primary education, meaning millions are growing up without crucial learning opportunities during their most critical developmental years. In the Middle East, the Ahlan Simsim ("Welcome Sesame" in Arabic) programme - the largest early childhood intervention in the history of humanitarian response - is transforming early childhood development by blending educational media with direct family support, bringing playful learning to millions of displaced children.

[6] Sherrie Westin, President, Sesame Workshop

Promising practices

Empowering Families and Children Through Play

Ahlan Simsim and Play to Learn are two pioneering initiatives by Sesame Workshop, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and BRAC, funded by the MacArthur and LEGO Foundations. These multi-year projects address gaps in early childhood development (ECD) for displaced children by combining beloved Muppet characters, localized media, and both remote and in-person services. Reaching families in homes, schools, and community centers, they provide nurturing care and early learning to children affected by crisis. The ultimate goal is to make play-based ECD programming a vital part of every humanitarian response. i
One example is Mohammed, a six-year-old Syrian refugee in Lebanon who, during the COVID-19 lockdown, joined IRC's Remote Early Learning Program. Through regular calls with teachers and educational videos from Ahlan Simsim, Mohammed built literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills. His parents, supported with play-based activities, became central to his learning.

Key Learnings and Impact

The findings from the Ahlan Simsim program reveal the powerful impact of combining educational media with early childhood development (ECD) services, particularly in crisis settings where traditional in-person schooling isn't available. Research conducted by NYU Global TIES for Children demonstrates that this innovative approach significantly boosts children's language, numeracy, and social-emotional skills.

In Lebanon, the 11-week remote preschool program integrating playful educational media, produced results comparable to a full year of in-person preschool, showing immense potential for remote learning in challenging environments like pandemics, conflicts, or rural areas. The Ahlan Simsim TV show also had a substantial impact on children's social-emotional development, helping them

Promising practices

recognize emotions and apply coping strategies; a vital skill for long-term success, especially for children facing adversity. These studies not only underscore the effectiveness of media-driven early learning programs but also highlight how engaging caregivers in their children's education can enhance both child development and family well-being. Ahlan Simsim's approach is now paving the way for scalable, culturally relevant ECD solutions in humanitarian contexts, offering hope for better learning outcomes and lifelong positive impacts for children worldwide.

Insights

This brief gives an insight to how SBC approaches are being used to help align strategies and programmes across early childhood development and education. Advancing this work further we can also improve the measurement of social and behavioral results specific to sectors such as early childhood development, particularly given its causal connection with foundational learning in primary school.

Using a social and behaviour change approach can inform programming on ECD by understanding and addressing barriers to ECD uptake as well as guide effective implementation of ECD programming through identifying how positive and playful behaviour can advance learning outcomes and give children a better chance to reach their full potential.

The success of the two case examples above rely on applying approaches that involve stakeholders across the socio-ecological model, for example by not only involving teachers but also peers, youth and community members tapping into community capacity and agents of change. The socio-ecological model displays the complex interplay between the individual, parents/caregivers and family, community, institutional/societal, and policy and systems

level. Education systems encompass all levels of the socio-ecological model, which can be leveraged in creating holistic interventions across sectors and stakeholders. Key elements of a social and behaviour change approach to ECD include developing an enabling environment for early childhood services through community mobilization, as well as cross-sectoral collaboration to share accountability for early childhood development and education strategies to enhance foundational learning and decrease learning poverty.

RUN WITH THE INSIGHTS AND CHANGE THE WORLD!

A larger body of literature and research amplifies the key elements of good social and behaviour change processes that are needed and useful to advance early childhood development, including:

- Engaging and supporting parents and caregivers to understand the value of playful learning activities at home and enrolling their children in early childhood programmes.
- Engaging early childhood educators in understanding the many ways that structured and unstructured play help children develop foundational literacy, numeracy, emotional and psychosocial skills.
- Identifying the cognitive, social, and structural determinants for bridging quality early childhood development and early primary education.
- Engaging a diverse group of stakeholders - including and especially children and adolescents - in redefining healthy, trusting relationships with adults and peers that increases safety in, around, and through school.
- Supporting a shift in the way teachers engage with all children, and particularly by creating an enabling environment for children who are being marginalised
- Promoting schools as a tool for transforming society by mainstreaming positive behaviours and norms.

RELATED TOOLS AND RESOURCES

- Tackling Gender Inequality from the Early Years
- Connecting the Dots on Early Childhood Development: Fostering data availability and use through country profiles
- Positive Parenting Toolkit
- The Little Book for Parenting Programs: Applying Behavioural Science to Increase Caregiver Engagement
- Learning through Play
- Power of Playful Parenting
- Playful parenting Serbia Video
- UNICEF Early Childhood Development Vision
- Sesame Workshop
- Ubongo Kids
- UNICEF Nigeria's Foundational Learning Strategy Brief
- BRAC Play Lab Model Bangladesh
- Early Childhood Matters: Behavioural Insights, Ideas and Action for the Early Years
- Education, Children on the Move, and Inclusion in Education
- Early Childhood Education Accelerator
- Data Must Speak
- Everybody Wants to Belong
- Early Childhood Accelerator Resource Site
- Self-management interventions for reducing challenging behaviours among school-age students: A systematic review
- Impact and Implementation Findings from an Experimental Evaluation of Playworks: Effects on School Climate, Academic Learning, Student Social Skills and Behavior
- Early Childhood Development UNICEF vision for every child
- Right to Play Annual Report on the Power of Play
- The relationship between access to pre-school education and the development of social-emotional competencies: Longitudinal evidence from Peru
- Social-Emotional Learning and Academic Achievement: Using Causal Methods to Explore Classroom-Level Mechanisms
- Early Childhood Education Impact Evaluations for the Middle East and North Africa: Summary of workshop discussions for Morocco

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Learn about building social change
Learn about SBC Impact on SDG4
Guidelines for Community Engagement and Social Accountability in Education