What do we know (so far) about remote delivery of early childhood development (ECD) programs in settings affected by crisis and conflict?

A conversation between research and practice

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The COVID-19 pandemic pushed the global ECD community to test ways to remotely reach children on a new scale, creating an environment in which new evidence is constantly generated. This webinar, hosted by ECDAN, facilitated an engaging conversation between panelists, hosts, and audience participants, including about 150 people from more than 20 countries. Speakers engaged in the LEGO Foundation-funded Play to Learn Project offered a variety of perspectives on this growing body of evidence from displaced communities in Bangladesh, Lebanon, and Peru.

To begin, Lucy Bassett summarized key findings from a rapid review of research evidence: (1) remotely delivered ECD services can increase reach and engagement, yet the use of technology can also deepen inequitable access or outcomes due to a lack of electricity, internet, or mobile devices in humanitarian settings; (2) evaluations of remote programs show positive impacts on knowledge and capacity for adults, caregiver responsiveness, and a variety of outcomes for children; and (3) remote services work best as a complement to, not replacement for, in-person ECD services.

Three implementing agencies—BRAC, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and Sesame Workshop—offered evidence generated from their work delivering ECD services remotely to families affected by crisis and conflict.

Sakila Yesmin discussed the design and findings from BRAC’s Pashe Achhi model, a phone-based psychosocial support and ECD program designed for use in Cox’s Bazaar, Bangladesh, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The program includes weekly phone conversations between a skilled facilitator and a caregiver-child pair. Monitoring data indicate that this program improves some child outcomes, ECD knowledge of caregivers, and mothers’ mental health, highlighting the important role ECD programs can play not only for children but for all members of the family.

Diala Hajal and Lina Torossian from the IRC shared evidence from a qualitative study of caregiver and facilitator experiences of remote learning and discussed how they are exploring remote measurement of child outcomes in Lebanon. They highlighted concerns expressed by families around adjusting to using a phone with their child and questions they had about whether a remote program could effectively deliver social and emotional components, and commented on the added challenges for families living in crisis-affected contexts, such as limited space or multiple children in the room at once. They also detailed an innovative remote adaptation of the International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA) tool, originally developed by Save the Children, for in-person use. This adaptation could expand the possibilities for monitoring and evaluation of remote ECD services in settings where in-person assessment is not possible.
Carolina Casas from Sesame Workshop shared lessons from the Juntos Es Mejor project in Peru. As mass migrations from Venezuela have disrupted children’s education, Sesame Workshop responded with a multi-modal approach in Peru: a Jardín Sésamo plug-in device (the Intel NUC) that broadcasts its own free local Wi-Fi signal and a Sésamo Chatbot that provides content to caregivers via WhatsApp. Leveraging the extensive library of Sesame content, both modalities allow children on the move to access fun, familiar content in key locations their families need to use anyway (like a cash transfer point). Lessons learned from the project included an emphasis on regular content updates, taking advantage of opportunities to collect data whenever possible, and the importance of securing local technology providers.

The webinar closed with a discussion between panelists and the audience on three open questions:

1) What evidence gaps are most relevant for improving the quality of our practice in humanitarian settings?
2) How can we improve equity of access, reach, and impact for families affected by conflict and crisis?
3) What should we learn next about how best to combine in-person and remote ECD services dynamically?

Listen to the webinar recording for the full discussion and see the full audience insights here.

Audience insights

What words describe the needs that remotely delivered ECD services address? What is most important to achieving equitable access for remotely delivered ECD services?

Key takeaways from the discussion

- The basic infrastructure that enables remotely-delivered ECD services (electricity and internet) aren’t readily available for families affected by conflict and crisis. We need solutions that improve community-level access to electricity and internet, as well as family or facility-level educational technology solutions. This also provides opportunity for civil society or governments to engage with the private sector.
- Evidence from research and practice agree that user-centered design creates successful programs. Understanding how families and facilitators use existing technology and making sure to trial new technology can help maximize the unique opportunity that remotely delivered ECD programs offer to personalize content, pedagogy, and timing in order to increase impact.
- The sector could benefit from design processes that integrate multiple equity parameters simultaneously (like Universal Design for Learning). Currently, many of our programs design for just one or a few considerations, like gender, disability, poverty, displacement, low digital literacy, or low literacy. Our design needs to take an intersectional approach that better reflects people’s lives and identities.
- Real-time data, including analytics from technology, qualitative studies, and monitoring data, are extremely powerful at the pilot phase. Understanding at early phases of a pilot the nature of access at physical locations, technology use within families or households, reach, and engagement can inform improvements that can be taken as a pilot rolls out, rather than needing to wait until the end.

To continue the conversation or to be added to related listservs, please contact:
Anjuli Shivshanker
Senior Director, Program Monitoring and Evaluation, International Impact, Sesame Workshop
anjuli.shivshanker@sesame.org