

Early Childhood Development at the International Rescue Committee



The mission of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) is to help people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover and gain control of their future. Our vision is to empower those caught in crisis through high-impact programs and the sharing of our ideas. Throughout IRC's 84-year history, education programs have been an essential part of the IRC's response in supporting people affected by conflict.

As a core component of our vision, the IRC's integrated early childhood development (ECD) programming ensures that from pregnancy throughout early childhood, children are receiving appropriate healthcare and nutrition, tended to by nurturing and consistent caregivers in a safe and supportive environment, developing essential cognitive, language, motor and social-emotional skills through play and early learning opportunities.

Why Our Work Matters

As identified by the **Nurturing Care Framework**, a collective early childhood roadmap authored by the WHO, UNICEF, World Bank, and other partners, optimal early childhood development requires five essential components: good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, security and safety, and opportunities for early learning. This lays the foundation for not only individual health, academic success and well-being, but also more stable, peaceful and prosperous societies.

Almost **one in four children are living in a conflict or disaster zone, and a total of over 250 million children have been identified as at risk** for being unable to reach their developmental potential. From birth to age 3, the brain develops faster than at any other time, forming up to one million new connections every second. By age 5, up to 90 percent of a child's brain has already developed. Despite the urgency and significance of this time between pregnancy and early childhood, children and caregivers in crisis and conflict settings often do not have access to adequate health and nutrition; they may live in situations of violence and insecurity; experiences of displacement and stress may restrict caregivers' abilities to provide responsive caregiving; and children often lack regular opportunities to engage in developmentally appropriate play and early learning activities.

Although evidence shows that early childhood interventions are both essential and effective, they remain severely underfunded. Globally, ECD accounts for just over 3 percent of development assistance going to crisis-affected countries, with only a sliver of that specifically allocated for nurturing care and pre-primary education; in humanitarian assistance, only 2 percent of funding is dedicated to ECD. The limited funding that does exist is thinly spread and poorly coordinated, limiting the accessibility and efficacy among the various sectors necessary for implementation and delivery of services.

Because the most important foundations of adult life and future learning are built during this period, adversities in early childhood carry consequences that reverberate through the rest of an individual's life and as well as impact larger community goals of social cohesion, resilience, and equity.



What We Do

Beginning in 2015, ECD became a key focus of the IRC's work with the overarching aim of improving young children's cognitive, language, motor and socio-emotional skills. Each ECD intervention is informed by and initiated with an analysis of the local resources, culturally grounded practices and behaviors, and preexisting systems and supports for ECD before being tailored and adapted to the local context. During the adaptation process, the IRC works in tandem with the affected populations as well as human-centered designers to develop, test and improve interventions for maximum uptake, engagement and impact. Through a variety of different program models, the IRC is currently working together with partners to support millions of children in the Middle East, East Africa, Latin America and South Asia. Underpinning these models is a commitment to strengthen local, national, and international stakeholders' prioritization and investment in high-quality ECD programs that embed nurturing care in crisis and conflict response, leading to a humanitarian sector that is better able to meet the needs of young children and families who have been affected by displacement.

Our child-facing program models aim to improve the socio-emotional and cognitive outcomes of children directly.

Through Preschool Healing Classrooms and Play and Learning Spaces, the IRC's child-facing program models encourage children's agency by entrusting them to learn in a way that suits them. These program models aim to provide spaces in which children, regardless of what their gender, nationality, religion, ethnic identity or interests may be, can shine and lead their own learning. Trained teachers and caregivers guide the children in these supportive and safe spaces as they learn not just literacy, art, math, exploration, and peace but also the fundamental socio-emotional and cognitive skills that are indispensable for healthy development. Using play-based learning activities and underpinned by a dedication to non-discrimination, these child-facing models directly empower children as they learn to cope, grow, and thrive even in conflict and crisis settings.

Our family-facing program models target specific skills and outcomes for caregivers that we know, if achieved, will better set the child on track for improved cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes.

The goal of all our family-facing program models is to build nurturing and caring relationships between caretaker and child, from pregnancy through early childhood. Within our home-visiting, family-facing models, parenting programs such as Reach Up and Learn, Flexible and Modular Responsive Care Interventions, and Families Make the Difference provide caretakers with helpful resources, facilitate play-based learning activities, and offer informative guidance to caretakers on nurturing care. Home visitors and facilitators in these programs rely on developing trusting relationships between themselves, the caretakers, the children, and the communities in which they work. During crises wherein physical access is constrained, the IRC also developed the Gindegi Goren model through which crucial information regarding healthy early childhood development and responsive caregiving behaviors are disseminated remotely via Interactive Voice Response calls and SMS messaging.

Conclusion

Together, these child-facing and family-facing program models serve to increase reach and resilience to ensure that children receive support in crisis and conflict settings. Investments in early childhood have already been proven to be one of the most effective strategies for improving the long-term economic, health, and social well-being of both individuals and their broader societies.

By supporting Early Childhood Development, we can not only mitigate the immediate and long-term damages of conflict and crisis but also empower children to flourish through continued support and nurturing care no matter where or in what situation.

For more information on ECD and our programs, please contact [**ECD@rescue.org**](mailto:ECD@rescue.org).

ENDNOTES

- 1 World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, and World Bank Group, "Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development: A Framework for Helping Children Survive and Thrive to Transform Health and Human Potential" (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2018), <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/272603/9789241514064-eng.pdf>.
- 2 "Nearly a Quarter of the World's Children Live in Conflict or Disaster-Stricken Countries," accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/nearly-quarter-worlds-children-live-conflict-or-disaster-stricken-countries>.
- 3 "Early Childhood Development," World Bank Group, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/earlychildhooddevelopment>.