

Early Childhood Development

IRC Jordan

Ahlan Simsim & Play to Learn



For millions of children across the Middle East, conflict and crisis have marked some of the most formative years of their lives with displacement, chaos, and violence. Currently, more than 52 million children in the Middle East are in need of humanitarian assistance¹. Conflict and displacement can negatively impact children's intellectual and social-emotional development and threaten long-term economic prosperity, health and well-being. These children are at high risk of failing to reach their full developmental potential. In Jordan, for both the refugee and host communities, prioritizing early childhood development (ECD) is a crucial issue that must continue to be advocated for to garner both financial and institutional support for sustained impact at the national level.

AHLAN SIMSIM & PLAY TO LEARN

In 2018, the MacArthur Foundation committed \$100 million to Sesame Workshop and the IRC to support children impacted by conflict and crisis in the MENA region, launching Ahlan Simsim. In 2019, the LEGO Foundation joined this bold commitment, awarding an additional \$100 million to bring the power of learning through play to children in Lebanon and Jordan, as well as in Bangladesh, through the Play to Learn project. These high-quality early childhood interventions are aimed at improving children's social-emotional and intellectual development, as well as offering programming for caregivers including tips and tricks to aid in their child's development beyond the classroom. The programs offer solutions in partnership with local actors and government ministries to some of the most critical developmental challenges we see today.



Ahlan Simsim/Play to Learn programs reach children across Jordan in partnership with local NGOs and government ministries

CONTEXT

While the geopolitical context in Jordan has remained relatively stable compared to many surrounding countries, the country is host to over 700,000 registered refugees (675,000 from Syria). The most recent Jordanian census estimates the total number to be closer to 1.3 million². Nearly 50% of these refugees are under the age of 17, with over 225,000 of them under the age of 11. While the Jordanian government announced ambitious plans for the country's economy following the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR notes that early childhood development, education, and youth intervention remain vastly underfunded. The Ahlan Simsim/Play to Learn projects are committed to providing crucial services for vulnerable

Average age of children who drop out of the Jordanian education system is **11 years old**.

Only **13% of children** attend an early childhood education program

¹ <https://unicef.org/mena/reports/humanitarian-action-children-middle-east-and-north-africa-2023>

² <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/syrian-refugees-pushed-brink-zaatari-refugee-camp-turns-10#:~:text=Amid%20competing%20global%20crises%2C%20humanitarian,675%2C000%20are%20registered%20with%20UNHCR>

children and their caregivers across Jordan and are working more diligently than ever to continue to implement, improve, and advocate on behalf of children.

PROGRAMMING

IRC's ECD programs are designed and adapted to meet the distinct needs of children and families in Jordan with social-emotional learning and learning through play at the core. These intentional, tailored program models support children's development, facilitate instructors' professional development, and bolster parental engagement and caregiver well-being.

Since the start of the Ahlan Simsim project, ECD programs have **reached over 849,000 children and caregivers** in Jordan.

Programs IRC has designed and delivers with partner community-based organizations (CBOs) in Jordan include:

- **Ahlan Simsim Families:** a modular and flexible program targeting caregivers of children 0 to 8 years. The program convenes groups of caregivers to discuss topics related to child development, play and parenting, with tools and activities for follow-up.
- **Ahlan Simsim Friends:** a modular and flexible program targeting children 3 to 8 years old, this program can be implemented for as little as six hours and can be included in a wide range of settings in partnership with any sector that programs for caregivers or children. The program includes activities on social-emotional learning and other crucial subjects and includes worksheets, storybooks, and videos, and is designed to include children with disabilities.
- **School Readiness/Remedial program:** programs developed with the Ministry of Education focused on social-emotional learning among other subjects. The Readiness Program aims to prepare children for successful entry into primary school while the Remedial Program addresses learning loss. The Readiness program is also implemented by CBO centers to extend reach of the program into more remote areas.
- **Mobile Service Units:** a collaborative effort with CBOs to bring Ahlan Simsim activities and technical support to vulnerable families in difficult to reach places. While parents participate in caregiver sessions, and engage with other Ahlan Simsim content supporting the growth and development of their child, these mobile units provide services to children including learning difficulty/disability diagnosis and references to services for proper support, and edutainment corners featuring a variety of toys and technology-based activities for children.

Alongside service delivery is the locally-produced Arabic-language version of *Sesame Street*, also titled *Ahlan Simsim*, designed specifically for refugee and host community populations by Ahlan Simsim/Play to Learn partner Sesame Workshop. These programs bring together the Ahlan Simsim mass media content and the critical needs on the ground for an immersive child- and caregiver-centered experience. Ahlan Simsim/Play to Learn also manages and curates content on Instagram and Facebook for easy, online access to information and activities that complements the show and direct services.

"The program was a significant opportunity, and because of it, life came back to our house. I always wanted my children to enjoy their life and discover themselves, and **here I am, discovering myself with them.**" – Sulaima, mother of 2

SCALING & SUSTAINABILITY

Underpinning the approach of Ahlan Simsim is partnership with local actors to influence national systems that govern and deliver ECD in order to scale up access to ECD services and impact to ensure sustainability long term. The Jordan ECD team continues to work with governmental entities to improve the situation of ECD through systems-focused efforts and consistent advocacy. Despite difficult circumstances, including the COVID-19 pandemic, partnerships between IRC and key government ministries in Jordan have made remarkable progress in furthering pathways to scale with significant portion of reach thus far achieved through scaling pathways.

Active partnerships for scale in Jordan include:

- **Ministry of Education (MOE):** Focuses on improving provision of and access to social-emotional learning and learning through play resources that complement in-classroom and remote learning activities to expand quality early childhood education resources across Jordan for both students and teachers for KG2 and grades 1-3. Collaboration with the MOE included a two-week School Readiness Program to prepare children for the academic year emotionally, socially, and academically, and a Remedial program, addressing learning loss.

- **Ministry of Health (MOH):** Focuses on providing ECD tools and materials for primary health clinic providers and midwives and integrating them into well child visits to promote ECD in the community via this integration into the health sector. The collaboration has created a bevy of resources and trainings for health care providers to increase their knowledge on healthy child development between ages 0 to 5 years. Additionally, Playful Learning Corners – physical play spaces – have been installed in health clinics.
- **National Council of Family Affairs (NCFA):** Focuses on ensuring a standard of quality care in daycare services – institutional and home-based – run by the Ministry of Social Development. The partnership has developed a Quality Management System for certification, licensing, and in-service training for daycare staff placed in care of children ages 0 to 5 years.

Alongside active partnerships with the above listed government ministries, national advocacy efforts aim at ensuring wider coordination and prioritization of ECD, vital to successful systems-wide shifts. ECD advocacy progress in Jordan have included coordination with the NCFA for a national workshop centered on the Nurturing Care Framework³, bringing together key stakeholders working in the ECD space. This contributed to centralizing ECD efforts and identifying the major challenges to reaching children and their caregivers, as well as co-developing solutions. In addition, in working with community-based organizations in the south of Jordan, IRC has cultivates key ECD advocacy champions promoting the importance of ECD with other locally acting organizations and governing bodies.

RESEARCH & LEARNING

To understand impact and quality of implementation of programming in Jordan, we have conducted multiple research studies. We also continually monitor program implementation for both CBO-implemented services and scaling pathways. In Jordan, impact evaluations are in progress on the showing of the *Ahlan Simsim* TV show in Ministry of Education-run classrooms to understand the impact of mass media, as well as on the phone-based remote version of the Reach Up and Learn home visiting program, adapted to the COVID-19 context. Through these research studies as well as other analysis of monitoring and learning data, our team is understanding alternative ways of reaching vulnerable children and their caregivers and contributing to the field of knowledge for ECD in humanitarian and development settings.

99.7% of caregivers were satisfied with the effect of Ahlan Simsim services on their role as parents/caregivers	Mass Media Evaluation WHO: Children 5-6 years WHAT: We aim to understand the impact of viewing a prescribed dosage of the <i>Ahlan Simsim</i> TV show on a range of social-emotional skills. This study could provide solid evidence that it is possible to effectively reach and teach children through media in crisis contexts in a cost-efficient manner at scale.	Phone-Based Reach Up & Learn Evaluation WHO: Caregivers of children 0-3 years WHAT: We aim to understand the impact of a phone-based early childhood development program on caregiver skills and well-being. Home-visiting programs have historically been effective in humanitarian contexts and, we hope to examine the effect of an alternative tool that is more accessible and cost effective.
100% of caregivers would recommend Ahlan Simsim programs to friends, family, or neighbors		

WHAT'S NEXT

As current *Ahlan Simsim* funding is coming to a close at the end of 2023, IRC and partner Sesame Workshop look toward sustainability, as well as understanding the persistent and emerging needs in the MENA region. In Jordan, we understand that generating the interest and investment in ECD remains a top priority for effective policy change and financial backing as the need, relevance, and demand for ECD services in Jordan remains high. The coming years will be focused on leveraging the progress already made backed by research and learning, while continuing to support local actors in our shared mission of helping children across Jordan develop and thrive in a holistic and healthy way.

For more information on the *Ahlan Simsim* initiative, contact Heidi Rosbe, heidi.rosbe@rescue.org

³ <https://nurturing-care.org/nurturing-care-in-humanitarian-settings/>