

Ahlan Simsim as a model for strengthening nurturing care through national health systems

Integrated health services provide promising opportunities for reaching children and their caregivers to support early child development.

Research shows that a child's early years—particularly between birth and age five—are critical in determining outcomes later in life. Nearly four in ten young children around the world are not developmentally on track, a marker of early inequality that can set the child on a lifelong course of disadvantage. The impact of prolonged stress and adverse experiences during these early years can have serious negative consequences, of particular concern for the close to 500,000 children across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in need of humanitarian support. Fortunately, early childhood development (ECD) guidance can have a significant effect on reducing or reversing harmful impacts of adversity, providing children the support they need to learn, grow, and thrive. National health systems present a critical entry point for reaching young children and their parents and an important, yet often untapped, opportunity to provide holistic services to promote nurturing care.



191.2M
of children in the **MENA region**



of which **1 in every 4** are
in need of humanitarian action

The context in the country of Jordan underscores both the opportunities and challenges for greater alignment between national health systems and ECD programs to improve millions of lives. A 2022 UNICEF Syria Crisis Humanitarian Situation report called attention to the 2.4 million people across Jordan—both Syrian refugee and host community members—who are in need of humanitarian assistance. More than half of that population are children, with 1.6 million children in Jordan facing grave risks to their health and development. The Jordanian government recognizes this need and is committed to ensuring ECD for all children via the National Strategy for Human Resource Development (HRD) 2016–2025 that positions ECD as one of its four central pillars. The HRD Strategy calls for a comprehensive approach to policies and programs for children from birth to eight years old.

In Jordan, 83% of mothers' access postnatal health care visits in Jordan within two days of delivery and 86% of children ages 12-23 months receive all basic vaccinations. However, an estimated 39% of children are not developmentally on track. Primary health care presents a promising route to reaching a majority of families nation-wide with critical ECD information. As standard protocol, health clinics offer wellness checks about physical growth, vaccinations, hygiene, breastfeeding, and diet, but traditionally they have not addressed other

key areas related to a child's cognitive growth, behavior and social-emotional wellbeing.

Through the Ahlan Simsim initiative, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Sesame Workshop, and the Ministry of Health (MoH) in Jordan partnered to develop an innovative approach to delivering nurturing care services to families. As a result, the partners launched a new ECD-Health Integration Program which aims to both improve caregiver knowledge to support children's holistic development and strengthen the existing national health system's services. The program equips nurses and midwives in health clinics to deliver vital age targeted ECD information to caregivers and interact with children in ways that support social emotional development and early learning.

Program Design and Delivery

In program co-design consultations with nurses and midwives, the IRC and MoH learned that during primary healthcare visits caregivers often ask questions about child behavior and development that nurses and midwives do not feel equipped to answer. Feedback from nurses and midwives revealed that MoH health center staff were not trained on how to address cognitive and social-emotional development concerns, or provide support for caregivers to handle challenges such as tantrums, fights with siblings or peers, and child discipline.

The IRC worked with the MoH to meet community demand to design and tailor ECD training for nurses and midwives as well as developed physical resources such as milestone posters and a dialogue tool to guide conversations with caregivers and their children during appointments. The program also established “playful learning corners” (see image 1) which were installed in clinic waiting rooms for children to engage in developmentally supportive and playful activities.

The playful learning corners serve to reinforce the information provided by health workers to caregivers including the importance of play and strengthen the connection between caregivers and their children.



IMAGE 1

Through the ECD-Health Integration program, regularly scheduled well-child visits at public primary health clinics incorporate tips and resources on **child behavior, social emotional development, the importance of play in a child's holistic development**, and other aspects of child development. **The ECD-Health Integration program** works in partnership with **Ministry of Health** to understand context-specific needs and co-develop tools and training for health care providers to meet these needs.

To extend support to caregivers beyond their child's appointments, the IRC and MoH in Jordan are also piloting an ECD automated messaging service in some centers. During well-child visits, nurses and midwives ask caregivers if they would like to enroll in the service that features a WhatsApp chatbot that sends messages with activities and tips tailored to their child's age group by year, for children ages 0 to 6 years old. This service allows for caregivers to continue engaging with resources aimed at improving their child's development at home and at their own convenience.

Preliminary Results

Between August 2022 and February 2023, the IRC and MoH trained **112 nurses and midwives** to implement this program. The program launched in 19 health centers and has since expanded to 103 health centers, representing roughly 20% of centers across the country. Once fully scaled by the end of 2023, we expect these activities to reach all children in Jordan who access healthcare centers for check-up visits and caregiver consultations.

As of April 2023, the program has reached an estimated **35,000 caregivers** and **50,000 children**. Based on birthrates and coverage of national health clinics estimated at 60% country-wide, we anticipate a reach of approximately **150,000 new children each year**. Preliminary data in **19 centers** shows that about **95% of caregivers said they were satisfied with child development services**.

“One of the participants didn’t know how to play with her children. But after coming to an appointment [that incorporated the ECD content], she played with her children and told us the following day about her experience. She said her son reacted positively, and became more social and happier, and this impacted her husband as well.”

—midwife, Jordan

In the follow-up survey, half of caregivers remembered the nurse or midwife providing helpful advice on parenting during their visit and **83% felt the health worker midwife had listened to them during their last well-child visit, an important qualifier for strengthening caregiver wellbeing and the resulting engagement with their children**.

And for the 282 caregivers who signed up for automated follow up messages, **220 (78%) remain active users of the services**, regularly requesting and receiving at least one activity message per week.

[The health providers] told me that I should be talking and babbling with my daughter. I got to know that making eye contact with her is vital for her development. Then I started noticing the reflection of what I am doing on her.

“Before the training, I did not know how to answer questions from parents [on ECD], and now I can answer with such great confidence. I wish I had these skills when my own children were young because it helps change behaviors for the better.”

—midwife, Jordan

Through qualitative interviews, nurses and midwives provided insight into their experience being trained on the program’s content, resources, and reflected on working with caregivers during appointments using these tips. Ministry staff have also expressed their excitement over the program’s contribution to their services.

In addition to positive feedback, nurses and midwives have also provided insight into their adaptations to the program, including printing copies of the tips, labeled by topic, and putting them in paper pockets on her wall for caregivers to read and take home. Another health worker printed and framed a tip of the week to display in her consultation room for caregivers to read during visits. These practical adjustments will be factored into future iterations of program design.

After piloting this program in Jordan, a similar approach is now being developed with Ministries of Health in Iraq and with IRC and NGO partners in Northeast Syria. As of March 2023, the program was launched in Iraq with training and materials dissemination.

“Through health education, people have become aware that childcare is not only vaccination... [Parents] became more aware of the importance of growth and development.”

—midwife, Jordan

Learnings & Conclusions

Parents and caregivers consistently seek advice on how to support their children's holistic development. But all too often current health system service packages are not built to address these concerns. The ECD-Health Integration programming by the IRC, Sesame Workshop and MoH in Jordan demonstrates that working with health care providers can successfully increase access to holistic ECD support for children, meeting the demand from parents and caregivers.

Through learnings from this program so far, the IRC recommends the following observations and actions for programmatic and policy stakeholders seeking to leverage health services to support holistic child development:

- **Child development interventions delivered within the health system are possible in Jordan.** Health system actors including nurses and midwives can effectively share and promote child development and caregiver well-being messages that reduce access barriers for disadvantaged groups and in crisis-affected areas.
- **Supporting health workers to advance nurturing care is beneficial for women, children, and workforce development.** To complement their training on children's physical health, training for health workers on holistic child development to answer common caregiver questions about social emotional learning and early education can support vital early childhood outcomes. Current health workforce capacity and needs should be assessed to tailor training and resources.
- **Programs should be co-designed in partnership with local communities and service providers from the start.** ECD interventions should be shaped by health service providers themselves to both identify the problem and design contextualized tools while maximizing population reach. During implementation, collecting program monitoring and feedback from health workers and caregivers is essential to ensuring that services are appropriate, easy to implement, and meeting demand.
- **Governments can match community demand for child development by drawing upon proposed solutions like Ahlan Simsim programming.** Ministries of Health should include promotion of caregiver wellbeing and holistic child development in planning, policies, and financing to ensure high-quality programs to support caregivers and children are prioritized and implemented at scale.



IMAGE 2

"[The Ahlan Simsim ECD Health Integration program] filled a vacuum. It covers areas such as mental health and social-emotional learning for children and parents, and enhanced midwives' skills when working with parents. It's a program that addresses childcare and counseling both inside and outside the home."

—Head of Child Health Department at Ministry of Health, Jordan