

Beyond the Lost Year:

Five Ways to Improve
Education for the Most
Vulnerable in 2021



COVID-19 has disrupted the lives of everyone around the world. The impact of the virus and resulting lockdown measures have not been felt equally, however, with children experiencing perhaps the largest disruptions to their day-to-day lives. **In April** of this year, 91% of students—approximately 1.6 billion—were out of school, compounding what was already a dire situation. Prior to COVID-19, an extraordinary number of children—**more than 250 million**—were already out of school. These young people were **overwhelmingly concentrated** in fragile and conflict-affected settings (**more than 50% at 127 million**). Refugee children are **five times more likely** to be out of school than their peers.

Nine months since the start of the pandemic, the exact numbers of students who are no longer in school is difficult to measure, but experts predict that **10 million of the most vulnerable children** will never return. The learning losses that come with children not being in school have the potential to **last a lifetime**—extending well beyond this lost year. And while vaccines are beginning to rollout and the end of continued worldwide disruptions may be in sight, we all—from the international community to local school districts to individuals—have a responsibility, as well as an opportunity, to not only stop the bleed in learning over the course of these next few months, but to ensure that learning systems and structures are built back better to reflect the lived experiences of children around the world, particularly in already-struggling fragile and crisis-affected contexts.

COVER: Keyriya Yasin, age 12, attentively follows class instruction and takes notes.

BOTTOM: A child spends time in a Safe Healing and Learning Space in Deh Surkh, Qala-e-Naw.





Here are five ways to enhance the education experience for the most vulnerable children starting in 2021:

1. Prioritize Social-Emotional Learning.

Acquiring core foundational academic skills such as literacy and numeracy require a holistic approach. Recognizing that children are learning within different environments and are impacted by the stress of the pandemic, **social-emotional learning (SEL)** must go hand-in-hand with traditional academic instruction. This includes helping children focus their attention, name their emotions, resolve conflicts peacefully, set goals, practice perseverance, manage their behavior, and develop and maintain

PHOTO: Syria, a mother of three, talks about how the Sesame Street program has helped her children. The family has been living in Arzaq refugee camp since July 2016.

positive relationships to help them learn and succeed in school. For example, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) is working with partners in Lebanon to reach an estimated 300,000 primary school-aged students with **500 animated mini-lessons** on SEL which can be accessed at home during school closures. The lessons actively engage parents and help children develop the skills needed to identify and manage their emotions.

2. Make Tangible Strides to Lessen the Digital Divide. At least a third of the world's children

are unable to access remote learning, yet when we think of how to change this, we often stress the importance of improving access to a strong internet connection or a reliable laptop rather than creating solutions that are fit for their circumstances. Instead of assuming children and their families will find ways to access a single model, educators can ensure learning materials are available in multiple forms across a range of platforms. This can include sending lessons via Whatsapp, hosting weekly support calls, partnering with local radio stations for audio lesson plans, and more. For example, the IRC is providing **paper-based learning guides** to be used at home in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda, complete with suggestions for play-based activities that children and their caregivers can do that promote reading, math and SEL.

3. Recognize and Address How Gender Inequality Impacts Education.

Because of gender inequality, **girls remain more at risk** of dropping out of school than boys, with many never to return. Gender stereotypes colliding with the economic stress brought on by **COVID-19 has left many girls shifting their responsibilities** to unpaid labor within the home as well as **pushing them to generate income** outside of it. With **more than 20 million** secondary school-aged girls estimated not to return to school after the crisis has passed, all international, national and local response plans and accompanying funding must recognize the different experiences between girls and boys and provide assistance accordingly. For example, in Pakistan, as part of **Leave No Girl Behind**, small-group learning has been adapted, emphasizing the use of community-based female tutors so that girls can continue to learn close to home in a way that accounts for COVID-19 precautions and other, more entrenched barriers.



4. Support the Well-Being of Caregivers and Teachers. The pandemic has left parents around the world experiencing burn out, with women in particular reporting **increased anxiety and depression**. This year has also been incredibly **difficult for teachers** who have had to adapt lesson plans and teaching methods for remote instruction, aid children with the trauma stemming from COVID-19 and its aftershocks, find new ways to reach children with disabilities, and more--all with increasingly less financial support and often, their own struggles. For children to grow, the entire learning ecosystem needs support. Schools should focus on providing concrete activities, guidance, messages, and tips for parents', caregivers', and teachers' well-being.

5. Consider Complements. While traditional schools remain closed, support can be given to flexible alternatives that can allow children to safely interact with peers and learn through small-group, in-person opportunities. Remedial tutoring, such as in **Lebanon** and **Niger**, and community-based education programs in families' homes have been shown throughout crisis contexts to provide predictable, nurturing environments that can help children catch-up, engage in quality learning opportunities, and heal from the consequences of crisis in a safe space.

Crises provide an opportunity to disrupt the status quo so that more children can access critical educational materials and support services, all while their teachers and caregivers feel empowered and equipped to better the learning experience. While crisis-affected children are currently experiencing a “double emergency,” if we commit to their futures, it may in fact prove to be a turning point to improve the education that is their fundamental human right.

PHOTO: IRC hygiene promoter Sohalia Khaliqi provides training and critical information about COVID-19 in Herat, Afghanistan.