



Keeping Children Safe and Learning in a Pandemic: Education, Conflict and COVID-19



The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the education of more than one billion children and youth worldwide.¹ Children in humanitarian settings are experiencing the compound crises of a public health emergency and additional barriers to their opportunities to learn, develop and thrive. School systems have responded in varying ways but children in crisis settings face unique challenges.

Joumana, 12, is learning to read at the IRC center in North Lebanon. PHOTO CREDIT: ELIAS ELBEAM / THE IRC

In response, the IRC has responded in nimble and innovative ways to continue reaching the families we serve in the face of school closures and other disruptions. These adaptations account for conditions within each context but all share the same goal: ensuring the right of every child to a quality education, even in a pandemic. By reaching some of the most marginalized and vulnerable students in the world, these innovations have the potential to help these children through this immediate crisis and guide us toward a more inclusive, effective and prepared global education field once the pandemic is over.

➤ Using Media to Support Caregivers: Ahlan Simsim

Ahlan Simsim (“Welcome Sesame” in Arabic) provides learning and early childhood development (ECD) support to young children and their caregivers in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. Launched in early 2020 and developed in partnership between the IRC and Sesame Workshop, Ahlan Simsim is comprised of both mass media and direct service content for engaging children and caregivers. While the mass media content was always intended to reach children from a physical distance, this program’s direct service component had to be changed in response to the pandemic. Outreach to provide parents with ideas for playful, stimulating interactions with their children originally intended to be relayed at in-person gatherings such as home visits are now shared with caregivers via platforms like WhatsApp or by phone. Lessons on foundational literacy, numeracy and social-emotional learning originally designed for children in classrooms have been changed into 5-10-minute videos, with each lesson’s complementary activities distributed to caregivers for incorporation in the home.



Children playing Omweso in the Bidi Bidi refugee settlement in Uganda. Omweso is a board game commonly played by children and adults in the East Africa region.
PHOTO CREDIT: MIKE MINA / IRC 2021

➤ Paper-based learning packets for learning through play at home: PlayMatters

Working with more than 800,000 refugee and host community children across Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda, PlayMatters supports the development of cognitive, creative, social, emotional and physical skills in children using learning through play. Originally designed for the classroom, the pandemic forced PlayMatters to pivot and convert its content for distribution to children and their caregivers at home. The program developed a series of paper-based home learning guides tailored to young and primary school-aged children, their caregivers and educators. Guides for children and caregivers recommend daily routines and fun activities and suggest ways that caregivers can turn daily interactions into teachable moments. Those designed for educators provide guidance on how to check in with families remotely and ways they can support their own well-being during this challenging time.



PHOTO CREDIT:
AIRBEL / IRC 2021

➤ Reaching kids by radio: Audioclass and Play Well

Millions of children in Colombia have been impacted by COVID-related school closures.² That number includes about 460,000 school-aged Venezuelan children, of whom about 260,000 were out of school even before the pandemic began. This combination of COVID closures and pre-existing access challenges for Venezuelan students calls for a response that is versatile and able to reach these young people where they are. The IRC has developed a radio program called Play Well designed for children ages 3 to 12 with a focus on developing social-emotional

learning skills. While this work has been concentrated in Colombia, the IRC plans to expand Play Well to additional countries once it has been honed. The IRC is also currently developing a new program called Audioclass, which will aim to provide engaging educational content across a variety of platforms including radio, mobile phones, smart phones and tablets. Primarily relying on audio but also including video and interactive content, Audioclass works directly with Colombian educators to create lesson plans that can be distributed and accessed by students beyond school buildings and classrooms.

➤ Training ministries from a distance: IAQY

Even before COVID-19, the IRC's Improving Access to Quality Education in Yemen (IAQY) program grappled with the challenges of operating in a society beset by acute public health crises. In response to school closures in Yemen, the IRC has doubled-down on its systems-strengthening focus and incorporated a self-learning approach. Working with Ministry of Education officials, the IRC's Amman-based coaches have trained teacher trainers remotely in Yemen on SEL, classroom management and community engagement. The trainings are typically conducted via Zoom and delivered to individual or small, socially-distanced groups of Ministry officials. Coaches also coordinated with trainers to distribute paper self-learning packets that students can use at home with minimal supervision. In partnership with the IRC's Health Unit, Education colleagues have also leveraged community engagement networks first developed in response to Yemen's cholera epidemic to spread awareness about COVID-19 and public health protocols to limit its spread.

➤ Cracking the digital divide for students in Lebanon: Partnering with Tabshoura

Schools and non-formal learning centers across Lebanon remain closed due to COVID-19 lockdowns, impacting both Lebanese and Syrian refugee students. To ensure that students across Lebanon continue learning, the IRC partnered with the local NGO Tabshoura to adapt literacy, numeracy and retention support materials into digital formats and then distribute them to parents using platforms like WhatsApp. Teachers and tutors also maintain weekly check-ins with parents and children to ensure they are receiving and completing instructional materials.



PHOTO CREDIT:
MUHAMMAD SIDDIQUI /
IRC 2020

➤ Partnering with parents and community leaders to safely re-open schools in Cameroon: PEACE

With the Protective and Adaptive Education Approaches for Children in Emergencies (PEACE) project, the IRC is building on its relationships with seven schools in remote, rural communities in the far north of Cameroon to provide COVID kits. These kits include handwashing materials and face masks for students and school personnel. PEACE is also working through networks it helped build between educators and community parents to meet these challenges. Part of this response has included the IRC, in consultation with parent-focused and community-based associations, shipping water to schools where running water is not available to ensure that proper hygiene protocols can be implemented to stop the spread of COVID-19 and other communicable diseases.

➤ Broadcasting in Balochistan: TEACH

The TEACH program provides adolescent girls living in rural communities of Pakistan's Balochistan region with educational content. Even before the pandemic, this was a particularly hard cohort to reach because Balochistan is a vast and largely

rural terrain with very limited infrastructure and where there is a strong tendency of adolescent girls to stay home rather than go to school. TEACH works with local content partners to develop lessons featuring characters and storylines specifically relatable to those living in this part of Pakistan and distributed via radio. These lessons focus on literacy, numeracy and essential life skills. Three lessons play on the radio each week; their runtime is 20 minutes and each lesson is played twice. Radio lessons are supplemented by the program's engagement with about 16,000 caregivers across the region. TEACH uses robocall technology to reach these caregivers by phone and inform them about the timing and focus of each lesson so that they can spread the word within their community about upcoming lessons.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 OECD. (2020). School education during COVID-19: were teachers and students ready? <http://www.oecd.org/education/coronavirus-education-country-notes.htm>
- 2 UNICEF. (2020). COVID-19 and Children. <https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/>