

What is the role of Learning through Play in acute humanitarian response? Synthesizing Evidence

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Background

PlayMatters (PM) designed and implemented adaptations to its core programming to respond to various crises, including the COVID-19 health pandemic (formal school closures) and the Northern Conflict in Ethiopia (emergency response and accelerated education programming). Adaptations were based on accessible research on Learning through Play (LtP) and active learning methodologies, education in emergencies, and teacher professional development, though there is a dearth of evidence on LtP in acute emergency contexts. Through iterative learning processes, each intervention generated learnings that contributed to implementation refinement as well as the development of a synthesized PM Emergency Package.

Evidence Sources

This evidence synthesis draws from a variety of sources, including program monitoring and accountability data, staff reflections, and research and learning studies. Publicly available reference documents can be found at www.playmatters.org/publications.

Key Learnings

1. Learning Through Play in Emergencies is **Important**



2. Learning through Play is **Feasible and Desired** in Emergencies



3. Learning through Play Requires and Enables a **Safe Physical and PsychoSocial Environment**



4. Learning through Play is Strengthened with **Teaching Aids and Learning Manipulatives**



5. Learning through Play Can Be **Applied in Diverse Ways**



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Key Learnings

Learning Through Play in Emergencies is Important

Global evidence suggests that LtP can support children's holistic learning outcomes, and is especially relevant to mitigate the negative effects of exposure to trauma for crisis-affected children.¹ LtP can support children's holistic skills development, even in crisis contexts. Caregivers reports that home learning packets helped target children's literacy and numeracy skills during school closures.² Teachers reported improvements in a variety of skills through improved lesson acquisition, including literacy skills, numeracy skills, communication skills, collaborative skills, and motor skills.³ Moreover, teachers, government actors, parents, and students themselves described the value of LtP in bringing a sense of enjoyment to learning, excitement for education, and a renewed sense of normalcy and hope amidst challenging circumstances.⁴ These outcomes can also be mutually reinforcing across settings, with parents reporting increased communication skills developed at school supporting positive parent-child interactions,⁵ highlighting the value of integrated programming when feasible.

Learning Through Play is Feasible and Desired in Emergencies

LtP, when defined as active teaching and learning methods that integrate guided playful activities, can work in a variety of crisis contexts. Implementation experience reveals that LtP can work in various physical spaces (homes, community safe spaces, non-formal learning spaces, schools) with myriad profiles of trained adults (teachers, caregivers, community leaders, social workers/child protection officers).

When schools are closed – because of conflict, climate crises, health pandemics, or other crises – adults can facilitate guided playful learning activities in homes, community spaces, and non-formal or temporary learning spaces. Home-/community-based facilitated LtP activities, such as through the home learning packets, particularly amidst formal school closures, provides a safe space for children to be secure and out of danger.⁶ Additionally, parents were motivated by the learning benefits of home-learning packets to help mitigate learning loss. In temporary learning spaces, home learning packet activities engage children to relieve stress, minimize reminders of conflict, and target their creativity.⁷ Simple LtP activities can also be easily integrated into other life-saving activities, such as in Child Rights Clubs with vulnerable children for targeted MHPSS, resulting in improved communication skills and sociability.⁸

1 Yogman, M., Garner, A., Hutchinson, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2018). The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children. *Pediatrics*, 142(3), e20182058. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-205>

2 PM COVID Emergency Response Post-Distribution Monitoring Survey Data

3 PM ERM Learning through Play Promising Practices Study

4 Ibid

5 PM ECCE Outcomes Harvesting Study

6 PM COVID Emergency Response Post-Distribution Monitoring Survey Data

7 PM ECCE Outcomes Harvesting Study

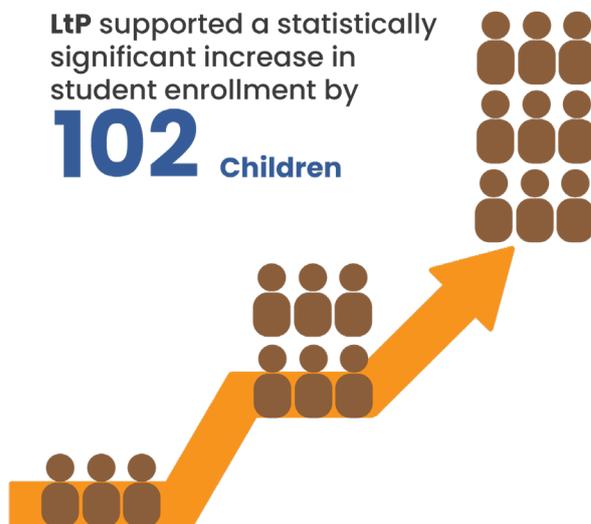
8 PM ERM Routine Monitoring and MHPSS Assessment

When a formal learning system is in place, whether it be by government or by non-formal accelerated or accredited systems, LtP can supplement the recovery process, including amidst fragility. LtP practices can take place in open-air classrooms, in temporary learning spaces, or in formal classroom blocks so long as children's basic safety is protected.⁹ When coupled with strong foundational inputs such as school feeding programs and safe and equitable WASH facilities, there is opportunity for stronger teaching practices that facilitate children's holistic skills development.¹⁰

Some examples of LtP in practice include the incorporation of role play pair and group work, and the integration of songs.¹¹ The integration of such LtP activities engage children in the teaching and learning process and contributes to improved school enrollment, attendance, and retention in schools.¹²

LtP supported a statistically significant increase in student enrollment by

102 children



Data Source: PM ERM Multi-Sectoral Implementation Study

Learning Through Play Requires and Enables a Safe Physical and Psychosocial Environment

Ensuring the protection and safety of children is critical. Utilizing relevant and contextualized assessment tools are critical for understanding the physical needs in schools and classrooms. In conflict-affected settings, this may require considerable repairs to address issues such as mass graves, bullet holes, broken glass, and remnants of explosives. Children cannot and should not be learning in environments that pose a risk to their safety. However, such infrastructural support can have positive impacts on LtP by increasing children's motivation to attend school and restore a sense of normalcy and hope.¹³ Particular attention to the needs of female learners, such as through the provision of menstrual hygiene management kits and spaces and the inclusive rehabilitation of spaces for children with disabilities is critical. Additionally, integrated multi-sectoral programming can bring children to initially enroll in school, while LtP complements such interventions to support student attendance, retention, and engagement.¹⁴

Additionally, a psychosocial environment that strengthens the relationship between adult and child through LtP can facilitate additional opportunities for LtP integration.

9 PM LtP in Accelerated Education Study; PM ECCE Outcomes Harvesting Study; PM ERM Learning through Play Promising Practices Study

10 PM ERM Multi-Sectoral Implementation Study

11 PM ERM Learning through Play Promising Practices Study

12 PM ERM Multi-Sectoral Implementation Study

13 Ibid

14 Ibid

For example, teachers, students, and parents all share the valuable benefits of LtP for creating a sense of caring and nurturing between teacher and students.¹⁵ Through LtP, teachers include all children regardless of sex, ability, and displacement status, through praise and participation. When students enjoy their teacher, they not only appear happier and report increased well-being but are also more engaged in classroom activities, reducing the burden of lesson delivery for teachers.¹⁶ Additionally, this strengthens positive classroom management practices that are responsive to trauma and emotional dysregulation more common in crisis-affected contexts.¹⁷

Learning Through Play is Strengthened with Teaching Aids and Learning Manipulatives

The intentional use of teaching and learning materials (TLMs) as teaching aids facilitate student engagement and strengthen lesson delivery. Some foundational materials are needed to facilitate additional use of TLMs, including but not limited to textbooks and other basic scholastic materials like exercise books and pens. Teachers have also reported that some basic teaching materials, such as markers/markers and paper are important for their creation of additional visual aids.¹⁸

The use of TLMs requires creativity on the part of the facilitator to conceptualize and prepare the proper aids, most often utilizing locally-available and recyclable materials. Even with more prescriptive guided LtP activities like those found in the packets, activities may need to be contextualized based on available materials and feasibility, either by the implementing organization or by the facilitator based on their local reality.¹⁹ In formal learning settings, TLMs have been observed through handmade posters and visual aids (e.g., poster of the body for a hygiene lesson), models (e.g., replicated structure for a cultural heritage lesson), and hands-on manipulatives (e.g., stones or dried fruit seeds for counters in a mathematics lesson).²⁰ When possible, manufactured TLMs, such as LEGO Six Bricks can also be utilized in classrooms to bring about excitement for lessons and be used to build numeracy and literacy skills.²¹

Learning Through Play Can Be Applied in Diverse Ways

LtP can look differently across settings with a few core characteristics. When adults intentionally plan and deliver LtP activities, LtP can have a greater impact on children's holistic learning. LtP activities that target specific skill domains or lesson objectives support learning acquisition and can help reach learning goals, whether that be ensuring sustained progress for school readiness, curricular delivery, or remedial catch-up.²² LtP also facilitates the delivery of other cross-sectoral messaging, such as

15 Ibid

16 PM ERM Learning through Play Promising Practices Study; PM LtP in Accelerated Education Study

17 Ibid

18 Ibid

19 Ahlan Simsim Northwest Syria Earthquake Response Implementation Learning

20 PM ERM Learning through Play Promising Practices Study

21 PM LtP in Accelerated Education Study

22 PM COVID Emergency Response Post-Distribution Monitoring Survey Data; PM ERM Learning through Play Promising Practices Study; PM LtP in Accelerated Education Study

critical WASH, targeted MHPSS, and child protection messages.²³ Moreover, in formal lessons, LtP can be used across subjects and grade levels, ranging from pre-primary through primary school across subjects.²⁴ LtP can also be integrated into accelerated education programs to help with covering condensed curriculum with a deeper understanding of broad topics through more engaging content acquisition.²⁵

Despite such promising implementation of LtP, integrating LtP activities can be challenging. Peer learning opportunities, particularly through school-based continuous professional development, is both desired and supportive of teachers' uptake of LtP. Teachers frequently requested additional training and more opportunities to deepen their knowledge and skills.²⁶ When CPD mechanisms were in place, teachers were able to discuss implementation challenges, troubleshoot and brainstorm ideas for how to integrate LtP into their lesson, and created TLMs together.²⁷ Similarly, parents appreciated calls and advice from teachers in implementing the home learning packets, underscoring the value of peer support to strengthen LtP implementation.²⁸

Conclusion

Through a variety of evidence sources across implementation modalities and myriad crisis responses, it is clear that LtP is relevant and valuable in emergency contexts. LtP can be applied in homes, in non-formal spaces, and in formal classrooms to mitigate learning loss and facilitate children's holistic skills development. LtP can be implemented in diverse ways but evidence points to core components of a safe physical and psychosocial environment, the integration of teaching aids, and intentional planning and preparation.

To learn more about PlayMatters, go to www.playmatters.org or contact Anne Smiley, Deputy Project Director, Research & Technical, at Anne.Smiley@rescue.org

This evidence brief was developed by Jonathan Kwok and designed by Manasi Sambhus.

23 PM COVID Emergency Response Post-Distribution Monitoring Survey Data; Ahlan Simsim Northwest Syria Earthquake Response Implementation Learning

24 PM ERM Learning through Play Promising Practices Study

25 PM LtP in Accelerated Education Study

26 PM ERM Learning through Play Promising Practices Study

27 PM LtP in Accelerated Education Study

28 PM COVID Emergency Response Post-Distribution Monitoring Survey Data